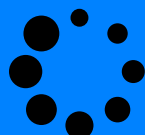


AN-ICON



AN-ICON Studies in Environmental Images

Issue №2

Year 2023

→ Immersions and Dives:
From the Environment
to Virtual Reality

Edited by Roberto P. Malaspina,
Elisabetta Modena, and Sofia Pirandello

Editorial Board

Editor in Chief
Andrea Pinotti,
Università degli Studi
di Milano

Managing Editor
Federica Cavaletti,
Università degli Studi
di Milano

Assistant Editors
Pietro Conte,
Università degli Studi
di Milano

Assistant Editors
Roberto Paolo Malaspina,
Università degli Studi
di Milano

Editorial Staff

Fabrizia Bandi,
Università degli Studi
di Milano

Alessandro Costella,
Università degli Studi
di Milano

Rosa Cinelli,
Università degli Studi
di Milano

Anna Caterina Dalmaso
Università degli Studi
di Milano

Margherita Fontana,
Università IULM - Milano

Giancarlo Grossi,
Università degli Studi
di Milano

Elisabetta Modena,
Università degli Studi
di Milano

Scientific Committee

Sofia Pirandello,
Università degli Studi
di Milano

Giuliana Bruno,
Harvard University

Gordon Calleja,
University of Malta

Mauro Carbone,
Université "Jean
Moulin" Lyon 3

Francesco Casetti,
Yale University

Ruggero Eugeni,
Università Cattolica
del Sacro Cuore – Milano

Kurt W. Forster,
Yale University

David Freedberg,
Columbia University

Vittorio Gallese,
Università degli Studi
di Parma

Dario Gamboni,
Université de Genève

Gertrud Koch,
Freie Universität Berlin

Pietro Montani,
Sapienza Università
di Roma

Catrin Misselhorn,
Universität Stuttgart

W.J.T. Mitchell,
University of Chicago

Antonio Somaini,
Université Sorbonne
Nouvelle – Paris 3

Victor Stoichita,
Université de Fribourg

Caroline van Eck,
University of Cambridge

Kitty Zijlmans,
Universiteit Leiden

AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images

Issue 2

Year 2023

an-icon-journal@unimi.it

<https://riviste.unimi.it/anicon>

Creative direction & design FIRM.GS

ISSN: 2785-7433

AN-ICONOLOGY

History, Theory, and Practices
of Environmental Images



UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO
DIPARTIMENTO DI FILOSOFIA
"PIERO MARTINETTI"



AN-ICON has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. Grant agreement No. 834033 AN-ICON. The project is hosted by the Department of Philosophy "Piero Martinetti" – Department of Excellence at the State University of Milan.

04

Introduction. Immersions and Dives: From the Environment to Virtual Reality, Vol. 2, no. II (2023)

by Roberto P. Malaspina, Elisabetta Modena, and Sofia Pirandello

12

I wish we could grab your image and touch you: A Sensory Approach to Laure Prouvost's Work

by Valentina Bartalesi

38

How Digital Hybridization Creates New Performance Practices:

56

The Case of Alternate Virtuality Games

by Anthony Bekirov and Thibaut Vaillancourt

Inhabiting the Museum: A History of Physical Presence from Analog to Digital Exhibition Spaces

by Anna Calise

Digital Heterotopias in the Metaverse:

The (g)Ender Gallery by Cat Haines

by Margherita Fontana

74

110

Laure Prouvost's *Deep See Blue Surrounding You: An Immersive Environment Made of Objects*

by Stefano Mudu

91

Techniques and Poetics of the Submarine in Film: A Pretext

for an Archeology of Immersion

by Elise Jouhannet

127

What to Do in/with Images? The (Virtual) Hand in Augmented and Virtual Reality

by Julia Reich

144

I Stalk Myself More than I Should: Online Narratives to Disrupt and Investigate *Interveillance* and Digital Bodies Politics

within Centralised Social Media Platforms

by S()fia Braga

156

...Or We Will Do Without the Theatre. Challenging the Urban Space, Drafting a New City Map Through Performances

THE ITALIAN JOB – Job N. 3, Lazy Sunday (2022)

by Alice Volpi by Emilio Vavarella in Conversation with Sofia Pirandello

166

Contents

Introduction

Immersions and Dives: From the Environment to Virtual Reality, Vol. 2, no. II (2023)¹



ROBERTO P. MALASPINA, Università degli Studi di Milano – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2372-789X>

ELISABETTA MODENA, Università degli Studi di Pavia – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9582-4875>

SOFIA PIRANDELLO, Università degli Studi di Milano – <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4477-9199>

<https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/22449>

Introduction Vol. 2, no. II (2023)

The present volume *Immersions and Dives: From the Environment to Virtual Reality* of the journal *AN-ICON: Studies in Environmental Images* is divided into two issues, each one dedicated to a specific thematic analysis, originated by the same conceptual core. The volume reflects on the concept of immersivity, which has become increasingly prominent in many different fields, including contemporary art. The constant reference to immersive experience is redefining the boundaries of artistic practice

Keywords

[Immersion](#)

[Dives](#)

[Performance](#)

[Virtual reality](#)

[Augmented reality](#)

¹ This essay is the result of research activity developed within the frame of the project *AN-ICON. An-Iconology: History, Theory, and Practices of Environmental Images*. AN-ICON has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No. [834033 AN-ICON]) and is hosted by the Department of Philosophy "Piero Martinetti" of the University of Milan in the frame of the project "Dipartimenti di Eccellenza 2023-2027" sponsored by Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca (MUR). The authors Roberto P. Malaspina, Elisabetta Modena, and Sofia Pirandello equally contributed to this paper.

To quote this essay: R. P. Malaspina, E. Modena, S. Pirandello, "Introduction: Immersions and Dives: From the Environment to Virtual Reality, Vol. 2, no. II," *AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images* [ISSN 2785-7433] 2, no. II (2023): 4-11, <https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/22449>.

and fruition, highlighting the complex relationships between art, environments, and human perception.

The first issue of the volume, *Immersions*, discussed the recent “immersive trend” as applied to artistic perceptual dynamics and to display design. Through a perspective that combines both history and theory of art, *Immersions* provided a broad and heterogeneous mapping of the many uses of this concept, exploring it in different historical contexts and methodologies of analysis.

The second issue, *Dives*, shifts the conceptual focus to action. Diving, understood as a preparatory and essential movement of immersion, becomes a metaphor for investigating in particular those artistic practices that have engaged in various bodily forms with immersive environments. *Dives* also includes a non-peer-reviewed section devoted to contributions by artists and independent researchers who present their strategies to dive into immersive spaces and environments, in order to physically explore them.

Dives

Performances mark identities, bend time, reshape and adorn the body, and tell stories.²

This issue focuses on performance art, as the practice that has best addressed and interrogated the relationship between body and space. Indeed, performance art has proven to be a privileged investigative tool for understanding the ways in which this connection evolves and changes, even in the contemporary arena. One of its main characteristics is to transcend a specific material medium, in order to rather explore the complex meanings generated

2 R. Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (2002) (London-New York: Routledge, 2013): 28

by the various encounters between bodies, spaces, artists, and audiences (think of the foundational practices by Marina Abramović, Joseph Beuys, Wolf Vostell, FLUXUS, Viennese Actionism, or about the work of theatre groups such as Environmental Theatre and Richard Schechner's Performance Group). The 20th-century avant-garde performance artists disrupted the notion of art as "artefact" typically associated with artistic creation, and paved the way to new forms of practice that resisted aesthetic interpretations based on the traditional division between subject and object.³ Furthermore, since its inception, performance art has challenged the passive nature of the fruition of the artwork, developing other immersive dynamics in the space/scene in which the artist moves, questioning the role of the spectator and of spectatorship in general.⁴ For example, according to Erika Fisher-Lichte, the presence of the public has the power to actively modify the performative space,⁵ which every time results in a different event depending on the people who take part in it. Performance, therefore, has the capacity not only to activate and redefine a space, but above all, as stated by Richard Schechner, to create a system for the interweaving of art and everyday life that artists such as Allan Kaprow promoted.⁶ Ultimately, "performance exists only as actions, interactions, and relationships"⁷ with the complex ecosystem of objects, bodies, subjects, and technologies that inhabit the space activated by it.

Recently developed media such as Virtual and Augmented Reality seem to resonate strongly with such characteristics: they function exclusively in relation to the

3 E. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (2004) (London-New York: Routledge, 2008).

4 C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London-New York: Verso, 2012).

5 Fischer-Lichte, E., *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (2004) (London-New York: Routledge, 2008).

6 A. Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments, and Happenings* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1966); A. Kaprow and J. Kelley, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

7 R. Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*: 30

user and their operative space, concealing at the same time the material nature of the medium, which becomes increasingly transparent.⁸ In so doing, they generate “an-
icons,” namely images that present themselves either as immersive environments to be explored or as objects within the physical space.⁹ These so-called “new” digital technologies seem to adhere to the sole dimension of action, leading their users to a constant daily performance. In order to properly work, they have to include the user’s gestures and behavior, as well as the human skin and the retinal surface.¹⁰ Consider the widespread practice of experimenting with AR filters, both artistic and otherwise. In this case, playing with a virtual addition could have ambivalent consequences: on the one hand, it could lead to performative forms of political resistance or identity expression;¹¹ on the other hand, it could induce body dysmorphia and facilitate the incorporation of advertising.

Being portable and wearable, they show a tendency towards miniaturization as well as innervation, which transform a concrete context into a responsive and intelligent environment,¹² and the human body into a technical one. In this respect, Andy Clark famously stated we all are natural born cyborgs.¹³ The reference to the cyborg, however, seems to satisfy more a fascination for science fiction than the need for a deep investigation of the actual intertwining between the technical and the biological. The studies on performance art could help understand the way

8 J. D. Bolter, R. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000).

9 A. Pinotti, “Self-Negating Images: Towards An-Iconology,” *Proceedings*, 1, no. 9, 856 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.3390/proceedings1090856>.

10 M. Carbone, *Filosofia-schermi: Dal cinema alla rivoluzione digitale* (Milan: Cortina, 2016).

11 R. Malaspina, A. Pinotti, S. Pirandello, “Emerging, Filtering, Symbiosing: Experiences in Augmented Art,” *VCS. Visual Culture Studies* 3, no. 4 (2022): 101-126; S. Pirandello, *Fantastiche presenze: Note su estetica, arte contemporanea e realtà aumentata* (Milan: Johan & Levi, 2023).

12 E. Crescimanno, “Software e design: i media digitali nel quotidiano,” in G. Matteucci, ed., *Estetica e pratica del quotidiano*, pp. 137-148 (Milan-Udine: Mimesis, 2015).

13 A. Clark, *Natural-Born Cyborgs: Minds, Technologies, and the Future of Human Intelligence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

the animate engages with the inanimate, based not on the paradigm of the implant but more on the one of relation. Interaction is preferred to assimilation, as claimed by the anthropology of material culture.¹⁴

Dives addresses the contemporary discussion between these latest digital technologies and performance art practices, considering the transformative consequences on both sides. If, on the one hand, these technologies have an inevitable impact on artistic actions and practices, on the other hand, it is art itself that invests the means it uses with new meaning and cultural and political awareness. How has a new technological paradigm dictated a reconfiguration of the concepts of body and space, their interaction, and the artistic disciplines that study them? How much and what kind of space is there for the human body in technological and immersive environments? Can we speak of an excessive delegation of the body to technology? Can the proliferation of immersive digital technologies be read in continuity with the perspectives that characterized performance in the 20th century, or does it herald a new way of interacting with and acting upon space? Is the performative dimension of the user more or less dominant than in the past?

In trying to respond to such questions, Valentina Bartalesi's text opens the volume with a contribution that explores immersiveness in Laure Prouvost's work, emphasizing the connection between her environments and films. The paper demonstrates that immersion in her moving images arises from the mixture of various strategies, including layered visuals, word-image relationships, montage, and non-human bodies as sources of sensory knowledge. The study employs a theoretical framework involving "system

14 L. Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind: A Theory of Material Engagement* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016).

aesthetic,” Munsterberg’s psychology, and haptic vision, while also tracing Prouvost’s art-historical lineage.

The text by Anthony Bekirov and Thibaut Vailancourt investigates cross-media storytelling in Alternate Virtuality Games (AVGs). In fact, AVGs like *This House Has People in It* and *Ben Drowned* involve a horizontal relationship between creators and participants, extending beyond art institutions. They offer immersive experiences unconstrained by time or space and can be seen as liminal experiences, akin to anthropologist Victor Turner’s concept. These games empower 21st-century spectators to challenge societal norms by gaining agency and criticising our relationship with digital devices in an information-controlled society.

Anna Calise’s analysis delves into those technological advancements and changing epistemological paradigms which influence museum displays and their relationship with visitors’ bodies. It highlights the role of artistic intuition, technical innovations, and philosophical ideologies in shaping museums and discusses how visitors’ bodies adapt to evolving epistemological norms, contributing to shared ideas of art and knowledge in society.

Margherita Fontana examines the potential of interactive online spaces in order to challenge heteronormative structures. She analyzes in particular *g(Ender Gallery)*, an artwork created in Minecraft in 2021 by Cat Haines, showcasing how the platform can serve as a playful yet critical arena for questioning gender norms and exploring trans* experiences.

In *Techniques and Poetics of the Submarine in Film: A Pretext for an Archeology of Immersion* Elise Jouhannet considers the history of underwater cinema, including precinematic elements like 19th-century public aquariums, to reveal a shared desire to immerse audiences in aquatic experiences and image materiality. This fascination

with underwater themes, extending into modern media like Virtual Reality, underscores water's central role in redefining and "archaeologizing" the concept of immersion in art.

Stefano Mudu writes about Laure Prouvost's art, as respect to how it immerses viewers in intermedial installations blending various objects from diverse origins. Her works create indeed eccentric atmospheres, erasing hierarchies between observers and observed. Using Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), this paper analyzes Prouvost's project at the 58th Venice Biennale, *Deep See Blue Surrounding You*, as a hyper-enactment, which invites viewers to construct non-linear narratives within interrelated objects/images.

Julia Reich's essay explores acting within images in AR and VR art, emphasizing the role of the (virtual) hand in creating immersive experiences. It discusses three forms of actions involving the hand: as a stage, a symbiotic contact zone, and a designing hand. Through artworks by various artists, it illustrates how the (virtual) hand facilitates immersive interactions in the virtual realm, blending distance and closeness.

Referring to her own artistic practice, Sofia Braga's contribution reflects on the ambiguous nature of centralized social media platforms, which offer connectivity but also commodify personal data. Braga critically questions whether artistic engagement within these platforms can be considered an efficient strategy to avoid the ubiquitous surveillance culture.

Alice Volpi examines urban design through theatrical perspectives. She suggests to experiment with navigating and designing cities, incorporating randomness and external direction to transform urban spaces into theatres.

The interview with Emilio Vavarella closes the volume. By answering questions on his work *Lazy Sunday*, part of *THE ITALIAN JOB* series, Vavarella faces themes

like artistic legitimacy and virtuality. The artwork involves a 12-hours movie shot with a 360° camera, filming one ordinary summer day of the artist. Viewers could experience it through a Virtual Reality headset in January 2022 in Casa degli Artisti in Milan, which turned the residency into a shared, immersive experience.

The editors of the volume and the AN-ICON project would like to thank Pirelli HangarBicocca, Giovanna Amadasi, and Roberta Tenconi for their essential contribution to the organisation of the conference “Immersed in the Work. From Environment to Virtual Reality” (Milan, June 13th -16th 2022), a seminal occasion of reflection for the development of this thematic double issue.

I wish we could grab your image and touch you: A Sensory Approach to Laure Prouvost's Work



VALENTINA BARTALESI, Università IULM – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8596-4014>
<https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19767>

Abstract

This contribution investigates the notion of immersiveness in Laure Prouvost's production, critically questioning the relationship between the environments designed by the French artist and the short film projected in them. More specifically, an attempt will be made to demonstrate how the activation of a sense of immersion depends on the fact that Prouvost's hypermedia installations act as both environments (*ambiente*) and settings (*ambientazione*). This study demonstrates how the immersive condition that the artist's film performance activates, while undoubtedly relating to the environmental context in which they appear, springs from a spectrum of strategies that Prouvost's moving images orchestrate. These include the layered and plastic quality of the moving image; the relationships between word and image within intermediary storytelling; the montage as a critical tool; and, more precisely, bodies that are not necessarily human as the locus of sensitive knowledge.

A theoretical framework that intersects the notion of the “system aesthetic,” Hugo Munsterberg’s prodromal psychological theory and multiple forms of haptic vision-resonance will define the guidelines of the argumentation, in parallel with tracing an inseparable art-historical genealogy to comprehend Laure Prouvost’s research.

Keywords

[Laure Prouvost](#)

[Immersion](#)

[New media](#)

[Haptic perception](#)

[Film studies](#)

To quote this essay: V. Bartalesi, “I wish we could grab your image and touch you: A Sensory Approach to Laure Prouvost’s Work,” *AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images* [ISSN 2785-7433] 2, no. 2 (2023): 12-37, <https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19767>.

When we move by night at the speed of desire
With you at the wheel my limit goes higher
Just turn me on, you turn me on
You are my petrol, my drive, my dream, my exhaust.¹

Introduction

In November 2022, French-born artist Laure Prouvost, born in 1978, inaugurated her solo exhibition *Laure Prouvost: Above Front Tears Our Float* at the National Museum in Oslo.² As the exhibition constitutes an extraordinary summa of Prouvost's practice, a brief analysis of it allows one to enter the artist's universe(s). Like many of Prouvost's interventions, *Above Front Tears Oui Float* boasts a properly spatial dimension. Described as an "immersive installation containing film, sound, performance, sculptures, textile and text,"³ the exhibition takes up invading the Light Hall of the museum. Emerging from a dark corridor, the visitor enters an ethereal reinterpretation of a 19th-century panorama with light-coloured floors and water vapour banks simulating the clouds' rush. The dream of floating on the celestial vault is heightened by a herd of ornithological and marine sculptures blown in Murano glass and scattered among the clouds. A monumental tapestry celebrates the great theme of migrations, dear to Prouvost,⁴ while a painted zoomorphic cave offers

1 L. Prouvost, <https://www.reiffersartinitiatives.com/en/exposition/laure-prouvost-you-are-my-petrol-my-drive-my-dream-my-exhaust/>, accessed September 20, 2023.

2 Cfr. "Laure Prouvost. *Above Front Tears Oui Float*, November 5, 2022-February 12, 2023," The National Museum of Oslo, <https://www.nasjonalmuseet.no/en/exhibitions-and-events/national-museum/exhibitions/2022/laure-prouvost/>, accessed May 3, 2023.

3 "Laure Prouvost. *Above Front Tears Oui Float*," NOBA! Access Art, November 2022, <https://noba.ac/en/exhibition/laure-prouvost-above-front-tears-oui-float/>, accessed May 3, 2023.

4 The theme of migration underlies the environmental installation *Deep See Blue Surrounding You / Vois Ce Bleu Profond Te Fondre* presented in 2019 at the French Pavilion during the 58th edition of the Venice Biennale. See L. Prouvost, M. Kirszenbaum, *Laure Prouvost: Deep See Blue Surrounding You: vois ce bleu profond te fondre* (Paris: Flammarion-Institut Français, 2019).

soft cushions for lying down surrounded by a ceiling of soft stalactites and excrescences.

Two are the generating elements of this celestial ecosystem. The first is related to the already Freudian and Surrealist theme of the dream, which is not coincidentally among the topics most extensively treated in immersive experiences in virtual reality.⁵ The second coincides with the founding role of the short film projected onto a screen of imposing dimensions. The short film *Every Sunday, Grandma* (2022, 7' 17") immortalises the flying experience of the elderly Celine. A similar phenomenon is reflected in the second environment of the exhibition-work. In a descending movement, the viewer lands in an anthropic landscape marked by the slime of the sewage pipes from which the artist's voice resounds. An archetypal lexicon of Prouvost's work, consisting of buckets, pipes, serpentines, tentacular elements, metal grids, debris, glassy zoomorphic sculptures, and iPhone-headed anthropomorphic figures punctuate this cataclysmic space. At the dividing line between reality and fiction, a structurally blurred boundary in the artist's production, paper baskets raised from the ground hold Virtual Reality headsets. Wearing them, the visitor would take over a duplicate of the Norwegian environment, now colonised by a banquet of sirens that invite levitation. With Celine, who does not fortuitously tell of dreams, the user floats in the ether from afar. However, this activation does not end in creating a "cinesthetic subject," as Vivian Sobchack aptly put it.⁶ Instead, and this is precisely the

5 For a recent and comprehensive essay on the subject see G. Grossi, *La notte dei simulacri: Sogno, cinema, realtà virtuale* (Milan: Johan & Levi, 2021).

6 As Sobchack notes "We might name this subversive body in the film experience the *cinesthetic subject* – a neologism that derives not only from cinema but also from two scientific terms that designate particular structures and conditions of the human sensorium: *synaesthesia* and *coenaesthesia*. Both of these structures and conditions foreground the complexity and richness of the more general bodily experience that grounds our particular experience of cinema, and both also point to ways in which the cinema uses our dominant senses of vision and hearing to speak comprehensibly to our other senses." V. Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 2004): 67.

turning point of the discourse, the immersive dimension correctly highlighted in Prouvost's work stems from a specific mechanism. In particular, that of the spatial translation of the sense of immersion generated by the short film and materialised by a hypermedia and intermediary system of works that extends the limits of the projection screen.⁷

From *ambiente* to *ambientazione*: Prouvost and “system aesthetic”

Numerous syntagms have been formulated to classify Prouvost's research.⁸ This polysemy is undoubtedly (and evidently) connected to the stratified nature of her praxis. From the second half of the 2010s, Prouvost's research presents certain recurring characters, fully evident in *Above Front Tears Our Float*. These include: the environmental dimension of the work; the almost systematic use of elements that function as displays and allow the artist to organise the exhibition space in terms of visibility and invisibility; the use of short films, inserted in the form of screens or projections; the coexistence of pictorial, sculptural, graphic artefacts, and even architectural structures.

It is possible to describe Prouvost's works in terms of multimodal, multimedia and possibly post-media environments.⁹ However, it is necessary to disambiguate the meaning attributed to each category, which has been pivotal since the late 1960s and even more systematically

7 This issue, part of a very long tradition, was recently addressed by E. Modena, *Nelle storie: Arte, cinema e media immersivi* (Rome: Carocci, 2022): 31-32.

8 Carlos Kong speaks about “immersive installation,” C. Kong, “Laure Prouvost, *We would be floating away from the dirty past* (Haus der Kunst, Munich),” *esse arts + opinions* 89 (2017): 84-85.

9 The reference is certainly to the “postmedial condition” as theorised by R. Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999).

since the 1990s. Consider the “Experiential Turn” codified by Dorothea von Hantelmann.¹⁰

First, by pointing out the meaning of the term environment, here adopting two distinct, though interrelated, definitions. In its broadest sense, the noun environment generically designates “the circumstances, objects, or conditions by which one is surrounded.”¹¹ It is no coincidence that Oliver Grau, author of one of the first systematic efforts to trace a genealogy of virtual art, claiming that “the suggestive impression is one of immersing oneself in the image space,” connected it with the experience of accessing a variably enclosed artificial space.¹² Immersion, a phenomenon punctually cited by Grau concerning the notion of the virtual, occurs first and foremost within an environment with its spatiotemporal coordinates, whether material or electronic. Entering an environment requires an act of immersion and surfacing, as Giuliana Bruno has extensively demonstrated in her latest research.¹³

In the environment, as with the “an-icon” theorised by Andrea Pinotti, one enters and comes out with the body, crossing the “threshold of the image” in inverted directions.¹⁴

Adopting a *lectio facillior*, it could be said that the immersive potential of Prouvost’s works depends on their presenting a 360° environment that surrounds the visitor. Although correct, such an interpretation risks being biased, simplifying the artist’s discourse. Therefore, within

10 According to von Hantelmann: “Every artwork produces some kind of (aesthetic) experience. But as I would like to argue, from the 1960s onward, the creation and shaping of experiences have increasingly become an integral part of the artwork’s conception.” H. von Hantelmann, “The Experiential Turn,” in *On Performativity*, vol. 1 (Vineland: Walker Art Center, 2014), <https://walkerart.org/collections/publications/performativity/>, accessed May 5, 2023.

11 “Environment,” in *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2023), <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/environment>, accessed on May 3, 2023.

12 O. Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003): 3. The topic has been highlighted in E. Modena, “Immersi nell’irreale: Prospettive an-iconiche sull’arte contemporanea dall’ambiente alla realtà virtuale,” *Carte Semiotiche* (2021): 71-72.

13 G. Bruno, *Atmospheres of Projection: Environmentality in Art and Screen Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

14 A. Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell’immagine: Da Narciso alla realtà virtuale* (Turin: Einaudi, 2021): xv, passim [my translation].

a logic not of contradiction but of integration, the second part of the definition attempted above must be examined.

Consider the heterogeneous themes Prouvost's work has been interrogating for at least a decade. It is certainly no coincidence that the artist's concerted settings probe the realms of dreams, water, flight¹⁵ and even cataclysm. In the heterogeneity of the phenomena enumerated, a presupposition unites them, making them optimal for tracing multiple genealogies of immersiveness.¹⁶ Those conditions *ideally* (or even concretely) envelop the users' body and simultaneously determine a significant variation in their perceptive and peripersonal sphere.

Secondly, it is fundamental to conceive them within the semantic shift, particularly effective in the Italian language, from the notion of *ambiente* (environment) to that of *ambientazione* (setting). The term "*ambientazione*," coined in the early 1960s as a derivative of the predicate "*ambientare*," designates "a narration or representation."¹⁷ Namely, it signifies the environment in which the story takes place, whether described verbally or artificially recreated. Prouvost's environments function as enveloping devices insofar as they constitute settings or rather narratological systems.¹⁸ The sculptures, paintings, drawings, tapestries,

15 In an orientation already entirely shaped by the invention of the Internet, Pierre Lévy already recorded the dual experiential level that characterises the experiences of immersion in water or flight: "Between air and water, between earth and sky, between soil and summit, the surfer or parachutist is never entirely there. Leaving the soil and its support, he rises into the air, slides along interfaces, follows vanishing lines, is vectorized, deterritorialized." P. Lévy, *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age* (New York-London: Plenum Trade, 1998): 43.

16 For a survey of the topic in ideological terms, see: A. Giomi, "Immersion as Ideology: A Critical Genealogy of Immersivity in Digital Arts, Aesthetics and Culture," *Azimuth: Philosophical Coordinates in Modern and Contemporary Age* 20, no. 2 (2022): 197-215.

17 "Ambientazione," in *Vocabolario Treccani* (2023),

<https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/ambientazione/>, accessed May 3, 2023.

18 On the relationship between narration, immersion and the hypertensive, we refer to one of the (revisited) classics of literature on the subject: M.-L. Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2015).

objects, and the overall display that configure them operate as props or clues projected from the filmic narrative.

To understand the specificity of this aesthetic mechanism, it is not necessary to turn, at least in the very first instance, to the theorisations elaborated on Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR) and Mixed Reality (MR) – media with which Prouvost has systematically experimented. Instead, it should be assumed that the moment when the work of art as an environmental system was not only “invented” but most properly theorised represents a crucial research ground.

In this respect, the notion of “system aesthetics,” postulated by the art theorist Jack Burnham on *Artforum* in September 1968, proves to be an excellent source for Prouvost’s practice.¹⁹ Although elements make Burnham’s proposal undoubtedly problematic – including the association initially proposed between such aesthetic and military strategies – two assumptions concerning immersiveness must be highlighted.

The first relates to the configuration of such a system. In the wake of Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy’s formulation that a system represents a “complex of components in interaction,” Burnham writes:

the artist is a perspectivist considering goals, boundaries, structure, input, output, and related activity inside and outside the system. Where the object almost always has a fixed shape and boundaries, the consistency of a system may be altered in time and space, its behavior determined both by external conditions and its mechanisms of control.²⁰

19 J. Burnham, “Systems Esthetics,” *Artforum* 7 (1 September 1968): 30-35. Caroline A. Jones has already provided a precise analysis of the text and its evolution: C. Jones, “Caroline A. Jones on Jack Burnham’s ‘Systems Esthetics,’” *Artforum* 51, no. 1 (1 September 2012), <https://www.artforum.com/print/201207/caroline-a-jones-on-jack-burnham-s-systems-esthetics-32014>.

20 J. Burnham, “Systems Esthetics:” 32.

For Burnham, the system is environmental insofar as it reflects the action of the historical, socio-economic, and cultural framework in which the work arises, generates, and, at least partially, undergoes. The second point pertains to the condition, which can be qualified as embodied and multimodal, of such a system experience. Analysing works by Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Carl Andre, Les Levine, Allan Kaprow and especially Hans Haacke, Burnham stated: “Sight analysis diminishes in importance for some of the best new work; the other senses and especially kinesthesis makes ‘viewing’ a more integrated experience”²¹ (the reference here is to Andre’s celebrated *Floor Pieces*). Alternatively, in this case referring to Levine: “Here behaviour is controlled in an aesthetic situation with no primary reference to visual circumstances.” As Levine insists, “What I am after here is physical reaction, not visual concern.”²²

It should be said that the immersive vocation of Prouvost’s works resides in their dual vocation as environmental systems: an enveloping space; a system of the individual units (artefacts, objects, and architectonic display) that configure the system environment (*ambiente*) as a setting (*ambientazione*), a system whose logic transcends the material boundaries of the work, seeing its narrative core in the projections of short films set up by the artist. Unlike Burnham, in Prouvost’s hypermedia installations each component, albeit integrated into the system-environment, also possesses its autonomous existence. Moreover, as already mentioned, a pre-eminence on the inventive exists. Indeed, the film performances shot and edited by Prouvost structurally shape her hypermedia systems, as this contribution tries to demonstrate.

21 Ibid.: 34.

22 Ibid.

Participation or projection? Historical-artistic sources on a subtle dilemma

At this point, the theme of immersion and its phenomenology hinges. Prouvost's production does not designate a *stricto sensu* interactive art since only in a few cases it involves complex interaction on the visitor's part. Yet, and in terms that are in some ways all too general, it is also true that Prouvost's practice shares those theoretical assumptions that Nathaniel Stern identified within interactive installations, whereby "with enter, for example, we move-think-feel the making of bodies of meaning, together."²³ The plexus constituted by the predicates "move-think-feel" – which, however, could also easily be applied to the experience, for example, of a minimalist structure – captures the specificity of Prouvost's discourse and, in this case, of its immersive vocation, based on a form of knowledge that is ideologically, as well as physiologically, corporeal.

Inscribing Prouvost's research within the so-called participatory art framework requires clarifications closely linked to the question of immersivity. Undoubtedly, a collaboration between the artist and the performers systematically occurs in her short films. However, the social collaboration postulated by the relational aesthetics of Nicolas Bourriaud at the end of the 1990s²⁴ and differently in the early 2000s by Claire Bishop²⁵ seems to be transposed by Prouvost into the relationship between the living being (human or non-human) and image, mediated by the display device.

In this sense, Bishop's observations on participatory art pondered in the wake of Jacques Rancière,

23 N. Stern, *Interactive Art and Embodiment: The Implicit Body as Performance* (Canterbury: Gylphi Limited Book, 2014): 4.

24 N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), trans. S. Plaesance, F. Woods (Paris: les presses du réel, 2002).

25 C. Bishop, *Participation* (London-Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006).

would seem significant: “in calling for spectators who are active as interpreters, Rancière implies that the politics of participation might best lie, not in anti-spectacular stagings of community or the claim that mere physical activity would correspond to emancipation, but in putting to work the idea that we are all equally capable of inventing our translations.”²⁶ It will be necessary to deepen the functioning of such an unavoidable linguistic process that makes an enveloping environment (the hypermedia installation conceived by Prouvost) an immersive entity, starting with some art-historical observations.

The immersive vocation of Prouvost’s research must be connected to the anthropological and art-historical sources the artist refers to, directly or indirectly. Sources, moreover, which appear potentially numerous. It would not seem rash to claim that the most ancient precedent alluding to the dual “installation” and kinematic connotation of Prouvost’s work is the Upper Palaeolithic cave, a space extensively recurrent in her production. As a lithic sacellum, the prehistoric cave develops on an intricate geological plan delineated by a maze of halls, corridors, and diverticula. Of this proto-cinematographic apparatus²⁷ and immersive space *ante litteram*, Prouvost experiments, even unconsciously, with the dual dimension of enveloping environments and of immersion-producing devices. In the first case, the artist creates hypermedia palimpsests, in which graphic signs intersect pictorial, drawing, collage, objects and screens of various sizes. So, it is the case of the luxuriant caveat of *Farfromwords*, a reinterpretation of a 19th-century Panorama resulting from the seductive short film *Swallow* (2013),²⁸ or of the “rocky” wall with which the

26 Ibid.: 16.

27 Among the most pioneering readings on the subject see: M. Azéma, *L’art des cavernes en action*, 2 vols. (Paris: Errance, 2009-2010).

28 L. Prouvost et al., *Laure Prouvost: farfromwords: car mirrors eat raspberries when swimming through the sun, to swallow sweet smells ...*, (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2013).

Venetian itinerary closed. In the second case, Prouvost exploits the agency of the moving image that is projected, or instead materialised, in a cohesive network of artefacts, entities and people (the performers and the public).

From a medium-archaeological perspective, which places one of its most remote anthropological sources in the sanctuary cave, Prouvost's practice finds in the 19th-century Panorama and, above all, in the more modern halls equipped with seats and rows of screens a spectrum of different models united by a not dissimilar principle: that of defining a space of images acted out in movement and connoted on an atmospheric level. However, it would be misleading to assume that Prouvost's primary reference lies in "installation art."²⁹ More precisely, Prouvost's work places the spatialisation of filmic language (and video clips) as a systematic strategy since the early 2000s.³⁰

In this case, the relationship between moving images and display present in numerous works by Prouvost would only be fully comprehensible with the filmic structures realized by Nam June Paik, Dara Birnbaum and John Latham³¹ since the late 1970s. Particularly in the case of Birnbaum (a precedent not explicitly mentioned by Laure Prouvost), it is possible to find both the use of a lightning-fast alternating montage punctuated by captioning on black backgrounds – in one of the frequent lemmas in Prouvost's practice and style – and the construction of structures that intend the screen as a sculptural component

29 According to Bishop, "An installation of art is secondary in importance to the individual works it contains, while in a work of installation art, the space, and the ensemble of elements within it, are regarded in their entirety as a singular entity. Installation art creates a situation into which the viewer physically enters and insists that you regard this as a singular totality." C. Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005): 6.

30 One of her first short films *Abstractions Quotidiannes* (2005) alternates frames of peripheral areas, monochrome backgrounds that shake the viewer's sensorium by bursting lightning-fast and capturing objects whose surface values are exaltes. See in this regard: L. Prouvost, "Abstractions Quotidiannes," *Lux*, <https://lux.org.uk/work/abstractions-quotidiannes/>.

31 The influence exercised by the British artist John Latham, a revolutionary spokesman for English conceptual art for whom Prouvost had worked as an assistant in South London, is expressed along multiple lines: L. Prouvost et al., *Laure Prouvost: Hit Flash Back* (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2016): 32.

intended to activate the surrounding space. Presumably, Laure Prouvost's attention to the filmic representation of the body agent sees a fertile breeding ground in the American research of the second half of the 1960s (think of Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Robert Morris and Lynda Benglis). At the same time, the artist's familiarity with theories on expanded cinema and filmic experiments developed in the feminist sphere is extensively noted on a philological viewpoint.

For those reasons, it is necessary to search for the origins of Prouvost's approach within a similar line of artists whose formal and political reflection on the space of the work stems from the moving image. A tradition already historicised through the essay *Expanded Cinema* published by Gene Youngblood in 1970. And which spans from the seductive short film *Fuses* (1967) by Carolee Schneemann³² towards the digital film *Pickelporno* (1992) by Pipilotti Rist,³³ passing through the homoerotic filmography of the feminist Barbara Hammer. In the wake of Godard, these artists have been constructing their narratives by extensively using close-up body parts in a lemma that was equally experimented with by Prouvost. In the case of Schneemann and Rist, the layered materiality of the film finds a further counterpoint in the construction of environmental installations aimed at rendering the experience of the film corporeal. Such a bodily vocation happens from an evocative point of view, for instance, with Schneemann's installation *Video Rocks* (1986),³⁴ which represents one of the most significant precedents of Prouvost's practice. This environmental installation, comprising a series of televisions, an imposing painted frieze and a path of fake stones modelled in

32 See in this regard: C. Schneemann, *Carolee Schneemann: Unforgivable* (London: Black Dog Publishing Limited, 2015).

33 Cfr. L. Castagnini, "The 'Nature' of Sex: Para Feminist Parody in Pipilotti Rist's PickelPorno (1992)," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 15, no. 2 (2015): 164-81.

34 C. Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003): 267.

ceramic by the artist, places its narrative fulcrum in the content transmitted: the bodily crossing of the stones. Although not verifiable on a documentary level, the knowledge of the environmental experiments on cinema conducted by the Dutch artist Jeffrey Shaw must be included.

Consider the monumental PVC dome of *Corporcinema* (1967), on which surface films were projected from the outside and visible from the inside. The underbelly of such an intracorporeal hall was saturated by the injection of inflatables, fumes, and smells, making the experience of watching audio-visual content altogether multimodal.³⁵ It would appear to be a similar tradition, and not necessarily one connected to the creation of practicable spaces – from Walter De Maria’s earthy rooms to Gianni Colombo’s *Spazio Elastico* (1967) or Franco Mazzucchelli’s giant inflatables and Piero Manzoni *Placentarium* (1961) – which interests Prouvost. Although the influence exerted by one of the founding figures of digital art such as Hito Steyerl, should in no way be underestimated, it should not be overlooked that while Steyerl’s immersive installations attest to a political component, Prouvost’s counterparts, where present, introject it on a sensory – and hence different – level.

Therefore, Prouvost’s research can stand at a crossroads between interactive, participatory, and relational art, only partially fitting into each category. The impression of being immersed in her works is determined by the peculiar phenomenon whereby, at the same time, Prouvost’s interventions act as environments and as settings for a narrative that happens elsewhere. According to the logic of the aesthetic systems mentioned above, this elsewhere has a fully recognisable positioning: that of the moving image. Experimenting with that pun so recurrent in Prouvost’s work, the dissimilarity between the notions of environment and

35 Cfr. J. Shaw, et al., *CORPOCINEMA: Photographic, Diagrammatic and Textual Documentation of This 1968 Artwork Presented in the International Exhibition “Discoteca Analitica”* (Fribourg: Fri Art Kunsthalle, 2019).

setting reveals itself to be substantial. If the short film were not projected and the viewer was to access the environment, she or he could likewise grasp its meaning. There is thus a bodily and sensorimotor immersion. The visitor enters an atmospherically connoted environment, as Böhme³⁶ and Griffero³⁷ put it, experienced by walking, sitting, lying down, listening, smelling, eventually touching.

For such an immersion to rise from being an eminently spatial affair to an aesthetic system of interacting components, the action performed by the moving image is pivotal. In this case, the storytelling provided by the short films, as will be seen below.

Theoretical Framework: in the (fictitious) wake of Münsterberg

Prouvost's storytelling has codified characters closely related to the artist's biography.³⁸ As Fanny Fetzer has already pointed out, in the events narrated by Prouvost, the boundary between reality and fiction, document and joke, becomes dangerously (and even ironically) blurred. Nevertheless, the proprium of her narrative does not lie in its content. More precisely, what Prouvost is interested in about the process of semiosis and its transmission pertains to the filmic configuration of the sensations of such a narrative, materialised in hypermedia settings. In this respect, storytelling constitutes an eminently sensual and sensory

36 G. Böhme, *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2013).

37 T. Griffero, *Atmosferologia: Estetica degli spazi emozionali* (Milan: Mimesis, 2017).

38 Laure Prouvost was born in 1978 in Lille, France. Winner of the French Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2018, contrary to the national approach of the prestigious award, Prouvost is first and foremost a European artist. Indeed, her French residence is limited in time, having moved to Belgium at thirteen and been academically trained in London. This apparently marginal information is helpful to highlight how, even for biographical reasons, language plays a crucial role in Prouvost's practice. Francophone by birth and Anglophone in adulthood, Prouvost systematically exploits her status as a bilingual subject, experimenting in an irreverent and humorous manner with the rhetorical figures of homonymy, homophony, alliteration, *jet de mot*, false friends, and grammatical error. See in this regard: Z. Pilger, "The Sun on Your Face," *Frieze*, no. 166 (September 24, 2014): <https://www.frieze.com/article/sun-your-face>, accessed May 3, 2023; L. Prouvost, K. Archey, E. Coccia, *Laure Prouvost: "ring, sing and drink for trespassing"* (Paris: Les press du réel, 2018).

strategy. It is certainly no coincidence that Prouvost's writings are punctuated by references to the unattainable desire to set up universes of "pure sensations."³⁹

In the history of Western philosophy and aesthesiology, the subject boasts an illustrious tradition stemming from the 19th-century notion of empathy.⁴⁰ An early attempt to systematise the imaginary sensations of contact arising from the experience of the representation of movement in the static, specifically pictorial image, is to be found between the second and third quarters of the 1890s with Bernard Berenson. Berenson's theories, for which it remains complex to establish a direct derivation from the works of Wölfflin and Lipps, had however a declared reference to the *Psychology* of William James.⁴¹ A lustre before Gertrude Stein, Bernard Berenson had been a student of James at Harvard University. Not coincidentally, it was at the Harvard Psychology Laboratory, founded by James in 1875 and rehabilitated in 1893,⁴² that the first systematic reflections on sensory perception, attention and emotions were developed.

From 1892, while the science of haptics was being invented on a theoretical and empirical level, Hugo Münsterberg was called upon to run the laboratory, one might say, an immersive space. In the rooms subdivided according to senses, as Giuliana Bruno has already punctually

39 Among the themes extensively investigated by Prouvost, there is an attempt to "grasp" the real in interacting and configuring through a body that feels. On several occasions, the artist asserts that she is not interested in processes of representation or "re-presentation" but instead in creating a world of pure sensations for the viewer, including, for example, "that sensation of sun or sensation of swallowing or walking" (L. Prouvost, Z. Pilger, "The Sun on Your Face"). In this sense, as the artist emphasizes in conversation with Fetzer, her environmental filmic performance invites us to critically rethink the tangible world that the individual inhabits (L. Prouvost, F. Fetzer, *Laure Prouvost and the Concept of Fantasy*: 208).

40 For a recent contribution on the subject see: S. Lanzoni, *Empathy: A History* (New Heaven; London: Yale University Press, 2018).

41 W. James, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), 2 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, 2012).

42 R.B. Evans, "Haptics in the United States before 1940," in M. Grunwald, ed., *Human Haptic Perception: Basic and Applications* (Basel-Boston-Berlin: Birkhäuser, 2008): 70-71.

investigated,⁴³ the empirical study of sensory perception was parcelled out in a registry of sensory rooms equipped with special instruments and measuring protocols.⁴⁴ In 1916, twenty years later, Münsterberg published one of the cornerstones of psychological theory on cinema, organising it around the four categories of “depth and movement,” “attention,” “memory and imagination” and “emotion.”⁴⁵

It is unlikely to assume Prouvost’s knowledge of the thought of Berenson, James, Stein or Münsterberg. Yet, it is suggestive to recognise a similar laboratory method in the analysis of the modes of the subject’s perception. A century later, Prouvost seems to return to the principles of film and its experience to immerse the visitors in their own narrative. Münsterberg had already revealed himself fully aware of one of the main perceptive problems connected to the filmic experience. Specifically, that relates to the “difference between an object of our knowledge and an object of our impression” in an awareness consequent to the presumed evidence that “the photoplay consists of a series of flat pictures in contrast to the plastic objects of the real world which surrounds us.”⁴⁶ Concerning the question raised by Münsterberg, for whom “we may stop at once: what does it mean to say that the surroundings appear to the mind plastic and the moving picture flat?,”⁴⁷ Prouvost seems to render this perceptual issue “systemic,” generating a short circuit in the statute of the image.

By turning on the environment, the viewer enters physically the setting of the short film. Here, Prouvost’s hypermedia systems fulfil the desire, first pictorial and then cinematic, to give body to movement and depth.

43 G. Bruno, “Film, Aesthetics, Science: Hugo Münsterberg’s Laboratory of Moving Images,” *Grey Room* 36 (2009): 88-113.

44 See in this regard: D. Parisi, *Archaeologies of Touch: Interfacing with Haptics from Electricity to Computing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2018).

45 H. Münsterberg, *The Photoplay. A Psychological Study* (New York-London: D. Appleton and Company, 2016).

46 H. Münsterberg, *The Photoplay*: 53-54.

47 *Ibid.*: 54.

The characters of the film performance, whether a fish, an iPhone, or a painted frieze, being reified in a sculpture system, act as projections of the moving image. Nevertheless, they occupy physical space mainly in a semi-static manner. The dormant status of such settings composed of rotating sculptures and sculptures that act as fountains, makes them resemble huge dioramas or photograms borrowed from a dream. What instead allows for a relevant exchange between the planar image transmitted by the screen and the environmental system in which it is projected are the rhythms of the body.

On this point, moreover, Münsterberg's early 20th-century observations prove prodromal. The Hungarian psychologist had identified three levels characterising the sphere of attention and its threshold. The first is related to the nature of attention, which is always embodied and multimodal. Two further stages, however, are implicitly associated with the notion of immersion. "If we are fully absorbed in our book," Münsterberg notes, "we do not hear at all what is said around us, and we do not see the room; we forget everything."⁴⁸ This phenomenon of evasion from reality and immersion in the fictitious narration for Münsterberg depends on specific psychological mechanisms. In describing them, the psychologist provides a pseudo-physiological (and intermedial) reflection on the experience of immersion. According to Münsterberg, as well as to Prouvost, the core of the experience of the work, be it a book, a sculpture, or a film, lies in the phenomenon and awareness according to which "we feel that our body adjusts itself to the perception."⁴⁹ In this regard, the psychologist compiles a practical reflection that can be applied to Prouvost's film performances and her settings:

48 Ibid.: 93.

49 Ibid.

Our head enters into the movement of listening for the sound, our eyes are fixating the point in the outer world. We hold all our muscles in tension in order to receive the fullest possible impression with our sense organs. The lens in our eye is accommodated exactly to the correct distance. In short, our bodily personality works toward the fullest possible impression. But this is supplemented by a fourth factor. Our ideas and feelings and impulses group themselves around the attended object. It becomes the starting point for our actions while all the other objects in the sphere of our senses lose their grip on our ideas and feelings.⁵⁰

From a psychophysiological issue, when read in Prouvost's work, attention becomes an immersive strategy through which the environment is rendered a sensorial, active, and immersive setting.

Activating immersion: a world of pure sensations

To be surrounded by the environment and to be swallowed up by the work and its space: the objects and artefacts that generate Prouvost's intermediate installations (*ambientazioni*) catalyse the attention and the sensorium of the visitor by constituting three-dimensional projections of the filmic narration.⁵¹ By inhabiting them, the viewer inhabits the meta-space of the film. More specifically, he covers it by adopting a logic of content fruition hypothetically based on Augmented Reality. In what terms does this happen? Due to a mechanism activated by the close relationship between the screen and the environment-environment (*ambiente-ambientazione*) derived from moving pictures. By

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ M. Roman, *Habiter l'exposition. L'artiste et la scénographie* (Paris: Manuella Éditions, 2019): 231; G. Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1970).

experiencing Prouvost's short films, the visitor stands on the threshold of the image.⁵² The audio-visual document introduces us to the artist's universe and to storytelling that represents the substratum of her practice.

The extension of the digital image distinctive of AR must be understood from this relationship. The logical principle probed by Prouvost seems to emulate the goals of the most futuristic "spatial computing technologies," which "assist our transition from a current flat or small-scale global data network to an emerging immersive global data ecosystem with spatial awareness and characteristics, conferring virtual properties to physical objects and vice versa, and augmenting our sensing and execution capabilities."⁵³

The short film represents the inventive motor of Prouvost's work. What conveys the transition from the moving image to three-dimensional space, acting precisely as "spatial computing technology," is the system of artefacts, objects and displays which, directly or indirectly exhibited by the filmic narration, materialise in the exhibition space. For this correlation to achieve the value of an "aesthetic system" and not of a static display, it is necessary for the setting to stage what Prouvost's short films aim to convey. That is an embodied conception of the relationship between image, storytelling, and user. In attempting to determine how this can happen, it will emphasise how this synesthetic dimension finds its place of invention on the screen and its place of multimodal projection in the setting.

Here we argue that the immersive matrix of Prouvost's filmic performances can be understood as arising from a plexus of factors, including the dual function of the screen; the editing of images; the typology of shots;

52 Cfr. A. Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell'immagine* (Turin: Einaudi, 2021).

53 S. Mystakidis, V. Lympouridis, "Immersive Learning," *Encyclopedia of Social Science* 3, no. 2 (2023): 396-405, <https://doi.org/10.3390/encyclopedia3020026>.

the selection of subjects; the linguistic element; the sound component.

The screen boasts in Prouvost the dual meaning of “interface,” according to Giuliana Bruno a “surface” that connects,⁵⁴ and of an Albertian window. Not a window hinged on a mono-focal perspective, but a mobile opening that, almost like a GoPro or the eye of a bird (an archetypal figure in the artist’s practice), frames reality, producing a kaleidoscope of views. The window screen leads into Prouvost’s sensorial universe. Shooting in the first person, first with a camera and since 2007 with an iPhone, Prouvost has made amateur films, editing her stylistic lemma.⁵⁵ The fact that the footage is often shot subjectively, with medium or low-quality frames, and changes in manual framing orientation heightens the remote participation of the viewer. Not only (and not so much) because according to McLuhan’s meteorology and otherwise Laura U. Marks’ “haptic criticism,”⁵⁶ such an image must be integrated perceptually by the viewer.

More specifically, through embodied simulation mechanisms, the visitor tends to activate a form of gestural simulation concerning the artist’s movements. The movements of the artist and the characters immortalised in the films – human and non-human beings touching and being touched, walking, crawling, dancing, jumping, licking, eating, swallowing, and swimming – are simulated on a neuronal level by the viewer.⁵⁷ This procedure is crucial

54 G. Bruno, *Surfaces. Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press: 2014): passim.

55 L. Prouvost, F. Fetzer, *Laure Prouvost and the Concept of Fantasy*: 208.

56 L.U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota: 2002): IX-XVII.

57 Cfr. V. Gallese, M. Guerra, *The Empathic Screen: Cinema and Neuroscience* (2015), trans. F. Anderson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 145-180.

to feeling immersed, on a perceptual plan, not in the environment but in the narrative.

The extensive use of close-ups of living beings and things with a specifically connoted texture favouring a “haptic” or “tactile” gaze to use two expressions of Rieglian ascendancy by Marks and Barker, respectively, respond to this objective.⁵⁸ Close-ups of touching fingers, devouring lips and teeth, pressing feet, as well as enlargements on the fleece of large cattle, shelled eggs, oozing viscous substances, and the smooth screens of smartphones – in a series of recurring frames in *Swallow* (2013) and *A Way to Leak, Lick, Leek* (2016) – reflect similar premises. Nevertheless, Prouvost’s aim is not to make the image’s content (i.e., the subject) *better seen* but rather to make it *felt* by the body. In this sense, the sequences of enlargements return a motor circumnavigation around the object. In the wake of Maya Deren and Gertrude Stein’s verbal “cartographies,” Nevertheless, Prouvost’s aim is not to make the image’s content *better seen* but to *feel* it by the body.”⁵⁹

The fact that the lemma of hands making things occupies a predominant role in Prouvost’s iconology reinforces the impression that the entire narrative is built on the mechanism of embodied simulation – for which, let it be remembered, the activity of the hands is a fundamental indicator. In the words of the prehistoric anthropologist Hellen Dissanayake, the “hands-on” ability constitutes one of the earliest faculties developed in the *Sapiens* species, linked

58 L.U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*: passim; J. M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 2009).

59 A. Michelson, “Bodies in Space: Film as a Carnal Knowledge,” *Artforum* 7, no. 6 (February 1969): 55-63.

to a dynamically embodied and even emotional knowledge of the surrounding environment.⁶⁰

It should also be emphasised that, in Prouvost's practice, such a process of body simulation is also activated by the image and its rhythms. Prouvost's montages often present a pounding rhythm. Generally, the narration alternates frames with black screens, often occupied by direct statements. Visitors must calibrate their attention to the qualities of these moving images as if they were holding an iPhone in their hands. This happens firstly by aligning oneself with their rhythm, as aforementioned above; secondly, by confronting the images of agent entities that act and wish to act on their user, as Gell⁶¹ put it. In this regard, the video installation *We Know We Are Just Pixels* (2014)⁶² proves crucial in showing how this dynamic of control and immersion takes on a disturbing tone. Exploiting the well-known alternation between moving images and utterances, the artist directly addresses her viewer, assuming the binary unit's point of view: the panoptic pixel would like to meet us, replace us, touch us, weigh us, and grasp our image. Additionally, Prouvost, who works primarily on and with digital images, frees the latter of their acting as mimetic imago. The black frames with statements – from which the artist derives paintings based on the same logic – do not display anything on a strictly iconographic level. The propositions transcribed in capital letters (the predecessors here are Birnbaum and On Kawara) announce actions that, being denied on an iconic level (they are substantially black monochromes), must be imagined by the viewer. At the same time, the sound component of the short films, in which the artist whispers stories of doubtful veracity, builds the discourse on consciously incorrect use of grammar and

60 E. Dissanayake, *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began* (Washington: University of Washington Press: 2000): 99-128.

61 A. Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

62 L. Prouvost, F. Fetzer, *Laure Prouvost and the Concept of Fantasy*: 208.

syntax, elaborates periods based on the crisis between French and English words and addresses her viewer in the first person, all contribute to the creation of storytelling that fulfils the main character of immersion. In this sense, in the words of Katja Mellmann, “The fundamental characteristic of aesthetic illusion is the mental state of ‘immersion’, that is, of having one’s attention caught by a stimulus which is not co-extensive with the actual situation but, for instance, only with a single object or action, or the content of one’s own imagination.”⁶³

Conclusion

The combination of the phenomena enumerated contributes to immersing the visitor in the storytelling unfolded by the short film. Prouvost composes three-dimensional settings triggered by the audio-visual image for this immersion process. From an observer of the film, the visitor becomes the protagonist of its environment setting. The factor linking this transition is the spectator’s synesthetic participation. How to describe it?

It is no coincidence that, although Prouvost’s environmental installations are always practicable on a sensorimotor level (and sometimes, as we have seen, present components with which one can also interact tactilely), these settings remain essentially projections – hence the difficulty in framing their practice in the realms of participatory, interactive, or relational art. By materialising it, they extend the projection plane of the moving image. They represent the environment in which, for immersion to occur,

63 K. Mellmann, “On the Emergence of Aesthetic Illusion: An Evolutionary Perspective,” in W. Bernhart, A. Mahler, W. Wolf, eds., *Immersion and Distance: Aesthetic Illusion in Literature and Other Media* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013): 65-88, 72.

the viewer must make an effort to imagine being part of the narration.

In an eloquent statement to this effect, Prouvost argued to Bina von Stauffenberg: “I am not showing you something, you have to imagine it.”⁶⁴ The multiple strategies aimed at soliciting the viewer’s embodied imagination are subject to what constitutes, to all intents and purposes, the immobile engine of Prouvost’s practice: desire, whose activation mechanisms the artist explores from a medial and multimodal point of view. In an interview with Natasha Hoare in 2017, the artist argued that “voice and seduction” do not represent tools but rather a “method to let you come into the work.”⁶⁵ By simultaneously listening to and reading conflicting subtitles, the visitor actively immerses himself in the performance’s storytelling: employing “their voice to articulate” and decode it, they finally “become the protagonist.”⁶⁶ This linguistic dimension is exacerbated by the latent will to satisfy the visitor’s egotistical drives: “my works are seductive,” Prouvost points out, “in the way they pretend you’re the only one they want to talk to.”⁶⁷

At the same time, Prouvost demonstrates herself completely aware of how integrating the plane of art with life constitutes a strenuous, if not even impossible, purpose. As the artist confessed to Zoe Pilger in an interview issued in 2014: “I know that I’m never going to fully grasp life in my art.”⁶⁸ Nonetheless, Prouvost identifies specific aesthetics and technical strategies capable, if not of fulfilling, at least of approaching such a utopian aim. It is precisely on this point that an immersive hypothesis hinges on moving images whereby “you can hint at the smell of

64 L. Prouvost, B. von Stauffenberg, “Laure Prouvost. An Interview:” 41.

65 N. Hoare, “Laure Prouvost on Seduction, Language, and Bodily Provocations,” *ExtraExtra Magazine* (2017), <https://extraextramagazine.com/talk/laure-prouvost-seduction-language-bodily-provocations/>, accessed May 3, 2023.

66 *Ibid.*

67 *Ibid.*

68 L. Prouvost, Z. Pilger, “The Sun on Your Face.”

lemons in a film with the image of a lemon being cut. The brain is capable of connecting elements quite quickly, especially with video.”⁶⁹

This perceptual mechanism, as well as having been the subject of analysis in neuroscientific circles,⁷⁰ appears consciously by Prouvost herself. The “video” represents for the artist an “amazing tool” precisely because of its “amplifying human sensations” innate aptitude, exploiting the “sensory memory” of the percipient subject and the reactivation of the “smells of our childhood.”⁷¹ Not only to amplify, but also to *spatialise* human sensations: this represents the secret factor of immersion in Prouvost’s *ambienti-ambientazione*.

69 Ibid.

70 A. Leaver, “Perception and Association of Visual Information in the Imagery of *IT*, *HEAT*, *HIT* by Laure Prouvost,” in I. Leaver-Yap, ed., *8 Metaphors (because the moving image is not a book)* (London: Lux, 2011): 71-73.

71 L. Prouvost, Z. Pilger, “The Sun on Your Face.”

How Digital Hybridization Creates New Performance Practices: The Case of Alternate Virtuality Games



ANTHONY BEKIROV, CHUV and IHM in Lausanne – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2754-5727>

THIBAUT VAILLANCOURT, Paris Nanterre; University of Konstanz – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3558-4961>
<https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19908>

Abstract

In this paper, we examine a new set of hybrid ludic practices utilizing cross-media narration that emerged with the rise of the Internet commonly called Alternate Reality Games. However, we propose to coin the term Alternate Virtuality Games (or AVG) as a way to distinguish these digital practices from their real-life counterpart. Viral online AVGs like *This House Has People in It* (Resnick, 2016) or *Ben Drowned* (Jadusable, 2010) are emblematic of a horizontal relationship between work and spectator, as well as performance outside of art institutions. The immersiveness of AVGs is unbound by the space and time of a specific happening, and is rather experienced by a multitude of agents at different times and places. This characteristic of being an extra-individual experience as well as being independent from institutions also places AVGs within liminal experiences such as studied by anthropologist Victor Turner.

As such, we analyze these hybrid games as a mean for the 21st century spectator to overturn societal status quo through newfound agency. These performing agents get into a subjective state where they can experience and criticize our relationship to digital devices in a society of information and control, without being subjected to it.

Keywords [Alternate reality game](#) [Liminality](#) [Digital studies](#)
[Mediatic event](#) [Subjectivation](#)

To quote this essay: A. Bekirov and T. Vaillancourt, "How Digital Hybridization Creates New Performance Practices: The Case of Alternate Virtuality Games," *AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images* [ISSN 2785-7433] 2, no. 2 (2023): 38-55, <https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19908>.

Introduction

Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) are a set of hybrid ludic practices utilizing cross-media narration that emerged with the rise of the Internet, and which fall under the type of performance where the spectators are the main performers. They are constructed as real-life treasure hunts, where the participants are guided by a puppet master in public spaces, through “rabbit holes,” i.e. hints distributed on social networks and/or websites. Similar to the artist who lays down the rules of the performance between themselves and the audience, the puppet master gives the players general instructions towards completing the game. However, whereas performance art is still closely dependent on the subjectivity of the artist, the puppet master’s (more subdued) role is solely to accompany the players in their experience.

ARGs have contributed to a less vertical relationship between work and spectator, as well as to bring performance outside of art institutions. Moreover, with the growth of social platforms online and especially YouTube, the term “ARG” has been used more broadly to refer to new *dispositifs*, which we call Alternate Virtuality Games (AVGs), such as *This House Has People in It* (Resnick 2016; *infra* THHP11) or *Ben Drowned* (Jadusable 2010).¹ They too are a kind of treasure hunts with well-hidden hints, but they are unique in that they are digital-native: they are strictly performed online and do not ask the players to go outside.

1 A. Resnick, “This house Has People in It,” 2016, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-pj8OtyO2I>, accessed July 14, 2023. Other notable AVGs include: A. Resnick, “Alan Tutorials,” 2011-2014, <https://www.youtube.com/@alantutorial>; “Unedited Footage Of A Bear,” 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2gMjJNGg9Z8>; “Pescop,” 2017-2019, <https://www.youtube.com/@Pescop>; “Poppy,” 2016-ongoing, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8JE00xTMBOqKs7o0grFTfQ>; “Catghost,” 2017-2019, <https://www.youtube.com/@CatGhost>; “Dad,” 2019-ongoing, <https://www.youtube.com/DadFeels>, which all start as YouTube videos; “TheSunVanished,” 2018-ongoing, <https://twitter.com/TheSunVanished>, which is played out on Twitter; “No Players Online,” 2019, <https://papercookies.itch.io/no-players-online>, which is primarily a videogame that can be found on indie video game sharing platform itch.io. All links accessed July 14, 2023.

The rabbit holes of AVGs are merged with the *dispositif* itself and are given as fictional devices. There is no apparent puppet master, nor apparent goal or treasure, other than finding new leads and new connections between elements of the “game.” The player/performer can thus view every aspect of their experience as part of said game. As such, AVGs are more akin to video games, as they tend to dissolve the object/subject dichotomy.

Therefore, the persona of the artist is no more presented as a demiurge welcoming the profane audience to their performance. To access and participate in the AVG, the spectator needs not go to a specific place where their experience is being validated: the work takes place through the digital interface. In the case of AVGs, there is no clear delimitation between the space allotted to the performance and the one allotted to “real life.” The immersiveness of AVGs is unbound by the space and time of a specific happening, and is rather experienced by a multitude of agents at different times and places. This characteristic of being an extra-individual experience as well as being independent of institutions also places AVGs within liminal experiences such as studied by Victor Turner. These performing agents dive into a state that mirrors our relationship to digital devices in a society of information – and control.

In this chapter, we will analyze the AVG apparatus through the socioeconomic and anthropological lens, in order to understand its role within society. We will see how it is not merely a leisurely game created for the entertainment of a few, but is a direct reaction to social anguish and provides leeway to greater agency for individuals. This participatory art form, thanks to its hybridity and plasticity, can be considered the epitome of our society’s relation to digital images – if not images in general.

Erasing The Artist

AVGs as we said above, are modelled after Alternate Reality Games, but reworked and made palatable to the average Internet user of the 21st century. They share in common the “This Is Not A Game” (*infra* TINAG) philosophy, that is, their decision to obfuscate their gameness to the players, and to present themselves as real events instead of fiction. But instead of asking players to go outside, out of the comfort of their own room like ARGs do, AVGs are treasure hunts that take place solely on the Internet through various platforms: forums, websites, social networks, YouTube and the like, etc. And because ARGs take place “in real life” and because real life is governed by social standards, there is always a moment where the organizers must signify to the players that they have achieved their goal – either that, or time has run out and the ARG is over. This moment almost never happens in AVGs, because the whole ordeal takes places “inside,” on the players’ computers, where the users are their own guide. The player in this case only deals with images, and not actual, real people in a real-life setting. As such, any image is subjected to scrutiny and doubt, any image can become a world of play. And we need to look into concrete examples to better understand how this world plays out.

One of the more emblematic AVGs is arguably *Ben Drowned: The Haunted Cartridge*, published between September 7 and 15 2010 by Alexander Hall on the paranormal board /x/ on the online discussion board 4Chan. Following the TINAG philosophy, Hall under the alias Jaudusable introduced the first part of his narrative by stating clearly that this was a true story. The narrative being one of a sophomore college student having been gifted an old Nintendo 64. Looking for old games to play, he finds a cartridge of *Zelda: Majorah’s Mask* at a garage sale. When

he boots it up, he discovers a save file titled “BEN.” When Jadusable tries to play, his actions are hampered by odd glitches as he is being shadowed by a corrupted version of the protagonist Link. Jadusable realizes the cartridge is haunted by the spirit of BEN, who starts haunting his computer as well. At the end of the story, BEN warns the readers that he shall haunt their computers too.

Ben Drowned first started as a forum thread. Soon, however, Hall started uploading videos on YouTube documenting glitches in the game. To be sure, these glitches were his doing, using a gameshark (a game-altering program) on a ROM of the game. Readers became involved in trying to solve what happened to the entity named BEN by analyzing the hidden clues within Jadusable’s writing and videos. *Ben Drowned* was not introduced as a game – which falls in line with the TINAG philosophy – but as the genuine account of a random gamer who finds himself confronted with peculiar, paranormal events. The idea that a cartridge could be haunted by the spirit of a deceased boy is of course ludicrous and should place the narrative among the fictional immediately – just as ARGs do when they present the players with an obvious fictional contract. But here is the catch: Jadusable did not present himself as a puppet master, nor did he present his videos as an ARG. As far as online users were concerned, he was a nobody lost in a sea of other uploaders. We unfortunately don’t have the place to dissect and analyze here the original comment section on the forum thread and the YouTube videos, but there were roughly two consensuses: 1) the game’s odd behaviour, although very unsettling, is probably just a one-in-a-million occurrence of bugs and malfunctions, and Jadusable is a highly superstitious person for whom this was the proof of a haunting; 2) Jadusable is a prankster and tries to capitalize on users’ curiosity and own superstitions. People tried to rationalize the odd events by classifying

them either under delusions or pure fiction. But there was no way to be sure. And so, there was a third category of spectators: 3) people who believed the cartridge really was haunted.

As much as *Ben Drowned* still owes a great deal to the ARG apparatus, it kick-started a more radical, virtual set of practices: without a puppet master, without narrative closure, where events are told in a chaotic fashion. Alan Resnick and Robby Rackleff's *THHP II Has People In It*, aired on AdultSwim and published on YouTube in March 2016, integrates these new elements fully. This short flick shows the supposed surveillance footage of a typical American suburban family, who experiences unexplained paranormal events, such as their daughter merging into the floor. The more curious watchers can click on the URL in the video description and access the website of a fictional surveillance camera manufacturer. A login page gives access to a secret file directory where one can find many more elements of the ARG.

THHP II is undeniably constructed as a meta-ARG. The apparatus is tentacular and offers a self-referential image of the mechanisms at work in its interpretation, as well as a cryptic statement on social issues. We can say *apparatus* in the full sense of the word, as a vector of subjectification that gives a form to the individual subject and regulates discourses and behaviors. As a network of goal-oriented elements, the apparatus mobilizes objects and techniques that will produce different subjectivities. In the case of *THHP II* this conditioning is moreover made explicit as the work makes interpretative mechanisms a theme.

Among the numerous theories on *THHP II*, many make mention of psychiatric afflictions. At some point during the short, we see a TV show called *Sculptor's Clayground* – which you can watch on YouTube – where

the presenter played by Resnick warns against a fictional pathology, Lynks disease. Resnick thus plays himself as the supposed puppet master by playing, ironically, the one person afflicted by Lynks disease: the disease of making connections. Besides, apophenia (a symptom of over-semantization of insignificant elements) or paranoia are frequently mentioned as typical phenomena in the resolution of ARGs. These altered states of perceptions are indirectly discussed in the work within the broader theme of public health, and are also given as the way to “play” *THHP II*. The Lynks disease relates as much to the narrative of the *THHP I*, as to the spectatorship and its ability to conjure meaning.

As we see, the AVG apparatus is a complex system of disassembled images – of which the actual extent is kept undisclosed – left for the spectator to make sense of. As the creators of AVGs withdraw themselves into obscurity, they give off the impression their work (their “game”) has seemingly appeared out of thin air and is thus shrouded in an apparent mystery begging to be solved. The form assumed by this type of media is already well within the realm of participatory performances, that is, the form of a quest for the player – however endless and fruitless this quest may be.

What is at stake in AVGs?

These sets of practices and *dispositifs* recently admitted into the field of academic research enable the reevaluation of different categories firmly anchored in our conceptual language. For instance, this is the case with the protean distinctions between subject and object. These distinctions establish the authority of the separate artistic subjectivity from a work of art as an external object – or at least as a shared subjective experience, and place the public as another subject. However, a *dispositif* such as

the one formed by *THHPPII* makes it possible to fully realize the aspiration to horizontality present in contemporary art and in performance art in particular. The participatory or interactive nature of an artistic performance feeds, as a shared experience, the desire to bring together the spheres previously mentioned. Thus, the subjectivity of the artist is brought into play, in a work in where the artists themselves participate as an active element, and in front of a public who can take part in it. Nevertheless, the institutional, academic, economic and psychological arrangements that direct the performance as an event remain dependent on an authorial, distinctive and elitist logic. The *person* of the artist and the people who constitute the public are linked by a spectral, spatio-temporal, even economic and sociocultural contract. The performance takes place in a space authorized as an institution or place of artistic validation, and in a given time, a duration that delimits it. It is in this system that an audience is expected, often selective or even exclusive because it responds to identifiable socioeconomic and cultural determinations. This subject-object-subject triptych, or artist-work-public, is precisely what is shattered in AVGs.

Concurrently to the abolition of these concepts comes the limitlessness of the work as a situated event, as a finished object or entity. Indeed, whether it concerns the person of the artist-creator-performer, the spatio-temporal, cultural and institutional location of an audience, and the duration of a performance, none of these limiting notions can then account for what is radically reticulated in an AVG. The generalized decentralization of what can still be attached to an artistic performance, in the case of AVGs, therefore produces a mutation and a displacement. Mutation, because we observe the spatio-temporal extensions of what can now differently be called a performance and a work. An AVG is neither finite nor situated. The space

of performance is no longer stratified by institutional and sociocultural criteria, but strictly technical and economic: anyone who has access to a screen provided with an Internet connection can now experience a continuously modified performance – and perform it. In these performances, the end of the production chain (“performing audience”) matters more than the beginning (“artist”). The “performing audience” being the only entity deploying the work and the apparatus, the availability of the AVG on the web can be described as virtual, no less real but less actual. Without institutional or curatorial validation, AVG apparatuses are only actual and therefore deployed when people perform them. The institutional space that hosted the performance becomes the space of the world as part of the computerized paradigm. The time of the performance becomes that of the duration of attention and of a “spectatorial” intervention which the work cannot, structurally, do without. There is, as in video games,² a work of art only deployed, by a ludic instance which determines it in a situated way, within singular spatio-temporal dimensions. It is therefore no longer a question of interactivity or participation, because these notions presuppose an irreducible distinction between autonomous subjects or entities. On the contrary, the proper names behind the said “work” as well as the people they designate matter as little as the “place” where it takes place. The performance in the AVG is that of subjective instances brought forth and delimited by the AVG apparatus. The fusion of the space of the world with the space of performance makes it possible to approach such practices under the horizontal and decentralized prism of new forms of subjectivation. As a paragon of a computerized audiovisual paradigm, the AVG highlights the precariousness of categories which are ultimately maintained

2 A. Bekirov, T. Vaillancourt, “Le jeu-vidéo, expérience-limite du sujet,” *Marges*, no. 24 (2017): 30-44, <https://doi.org/10.4000/marges.1255>.

only by cultural, moral and economic imperatives. Often unquestioned notions such as subject, object, work of art, or public are hence brought to a semantic limit when we speak about AVGs.

Opening the experience of performance by transposing it into spheres which, by definition, are foreign to the worlds of institutional art, would be the main decompartmentalization produced by AVGs as an operational notion. However, this does not amount to speaking of a degradation or dissolution of the quality of experience. Taking exegesis out of authorized and limited spheres to deploy it “outside” the institution amplifies, intensifies and multiplies the experience(s). This is no longer the role of educated and privileged observers forming an authorized audience, but becomes the generalized expression of a *modus operandi* and of a computerized *Weltanschauung* associated with it. More than a supposed “democratization” of performance art, AVGs allows us to see complex relations emerging from a computerized paradigm that constitutes new forms of attention, of thought and sensibility. Within a contemporary economy and ecology of attention,³ AVGs offer new elements to understand how our receptivity and our perceptual abilities are shaped by our media-technical environments. From this perspective, such arrangements allow us to analyze new processes of large-scale simulacra and stereotypes production, that ultimately are processes of subjectivation.⁴

3 Y. Citton, *The Ecology of Attention* (2014), trans. B. Norman (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

4 P. Klossowski, *The Living Currency* (1970), trans. D.W. Smith, N. Morar, V.W. Cisney (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017); P. Klossowski, *La Ressemblance* (Marseille: Ryôan-ji, 1984).

Computerized subjectivations and new apparatuses

To speak about *Weltanschauung* implies we need to consider the globalization of a computerized paradigm as a new cultural matrix and as a new communication and research model. Talking about a disarticulation of the instances at play in the institutional performance art also allows a critical return to the categories delineated by Benjamin.⁵ In the Benjaminian logic of a passage from religious and ritual art (unique original work) to art in its political function (reproduced work) comes the loss of the aura. However, this logic can be nuanced when we consider that the aura can, according to Latour & Lowe,⁶ migrate, and that a cult dimension remains present in intrinsically non-unique works, whether cinema, video game or AVGs. On the one hand, it seems to go without saying that the cult dimension of cultural productions does not disappear in a paradigm of technical reproducibility. Many fanatical behaviours, as much as fetishists ones, easily illustrate the blurring of a distinction between political and religious functions when we think about industrialized and reproduced works of art. On the other hand, in the paradigm of a political function of art, the subjectivating and ecstatic dimension of the relationship to the work only undergoes a regime change. Moreover, from the perspective of a reading of capitalism as religion, which Benjamin⁷ precisely affirmed, we can only speak of a transformation – of a technically assisted amplification – of the forms and places of worship. It matters

5 W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. M.W. Jennings, B. Doherty, T.Y. Levin, trans. E. Jephcott et al. (Cambridge MA-London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

6 B. Latour, A. Lowe, “La migration de l’aura ou comment explorer un original par le biais de ses fac-similés,” *Intermédialités*, no. 17 (2011): 173-191, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1005756>.

7 W. Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion,” in *Toward the Critique of Violence: A Critical Edition*, ed. P. Fenves, J. Ng (Redwood City CA: Stanford University Press, 2021): 90-92.

little whether we adopt the perspective of the spectacle where social relations are mediated by images,⁸ or simply that of a *Weltanschauung* produced by the extension of the information and societies of control. The challenge is above all to consider the permanency of logics of ritual – of initiation or worship – where the notions of unique work and institutional artist have disappeared.

This vestige of ritual is important because it opens up the analysis of individual and collective subjectivations, beyond distinctions abolished by the generalization of computerized apparatuses on a planetary scale. In other words, by decompartmentalizing performance practices and distinctions typical of the art world, it is a question of renewing a point of view and developing its consequences. These outline an anthropology in a computerized regime, which must take into account new attentional, cultural and economic data. By redrawing the contours of performance practices, AVGs present themselves as computerized devices that provide subjectivations specific to our contemporary era.

Apparatus or *dispositif* became a central notion in Foucault's work during his lessons at the Collège de France in 1977-1978. The term is used to describe a network of different elements generating subjectivities and behaviours.⁹ Foucault also describes apparatuses as networks of institutions, rules and laws, scientific, moral and philosophical statements. In other words, Foucault's attention is directed to power relations within broad networks.¹⁰ Hence, from our point of view, it becomes significant to integrate technological aspects of *dispositifs* in our analysis, as Agamben precisely does in a more recent text. In

8 G. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994): 47-90.

9 M. Foucault, *Security, territory, population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, trans. G. Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

10 M. Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, 4 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), vol. 2: 299.

What is an Apparatus (2009), Agamben enlarges even more the already wide Foucauldian definition of *dispositif* by including everything that has the capacity to capture and subjectify living beings' behaviours and discourse.¹¹ AVGs are also an opportunity to consider subjectivities produced by contemporary apparatuses in a less technophobic and reactive way than Agamben's analysis.

More extensively, this leads to new questions that could be answered with anthropological tools. From a subjectivation perspective on AVG performance, one could ask what remains of the rituals linked to the liminal spaces that Turner described, within the contemporary practices that interest us?

Reclaiming The Space Left Empty Inside Ourselves

British anthropologist Victor Turner stated that the distinctions between work and play that have been prevalent during the 20th century in Western societies are dependent on the industrialization thereof, and moreover, have cemented the separation of what is deemed "objective" and what is deemed "subjective."¹² Indeed, rather than abstract entities left to the scrutiny of metaphysicians, Turner displaces the discussion on subject and object towards sociological grounds. Building on and refining Arnold van Gennep's influential ideas on liminality in the rites of passage in tribal societies,¹³ he analysed the way globalized capitalist societies have given rise to novel subjectivities

11 G. Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays* (2006), trans. D. Kishik, S. Pedatella (Redwood City CA: Stanford University Press, 2009): 14.

12 V. Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology," *Rice University Studies* 60, no. 3 (1974): 53-96, 66 <https://hdl.handle.net/1911/63159.66>.

13 See for example his seminal book A. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage: A Classic Study of Cultural Celebrations* (1909), trans. M.B. Vizedom, G.L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

and where liminal spaces can be found in said societies. Liminality – the characteristic of being in an in-between state, to be on the *threshold* between two socially recognized subjectivities – usually pertains to pre-industrial social practices whose goal is to strengthen the cohesion among the members of a community: carnivals, Mardi Gras, coming-of-age rites, etc. all help create a sense of community, while at the same time reversing values, playing with the fringes of what is socially acceptable, albeit for a moment only.¹⁴ However, with the advent of the rationalization of the workplace in the 20th century came also the dissolution of the old separation between the working class and the nobility in favor of a new hybrid class of hard-working citizens who also enjoy leisurely pleasures in their free time.¹⁵ In this context, the notion of social fringe and reversal of values, in other words, liminality, becomes less adequate. A new concept was required.

This is what Turner proposed with the idea of liminoid phenomena. These liminoid phenomena are re-enacting the ancient rites of passage but without the presiding instance of community elders, without the need to be recognized by others. This is now in individual affair. Whereas the goal of liminal practices was to guide the individual through collectivity, liminoid phenomena take place within the individual's free time, in opposition to one's time spent at the workplace: "one *works* at the liminal, one *plays* with the liminoid."¹⁶ While the liminal still applies to environments where a figure of authority must be referred to in order to act, the liminoid is willed by the individual as a way to escape from the constraints of work. This is where sport, games, art and social critique happen. And because these liminoid practices are highly individualistic,

14 V. Turner, "Liminality, Khaballah, and the Media," *Religion*, no. 15 (1985): 205-217, 213-215.

15 V. Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid:" 66-67.

16 V. Turner, "Liminality, Khaballah, and the Media:" 216.

they enable what Turner calls the loss of ego.¹⁷ The “Self” which acts as the mediator or the “broker” between one’s and another’s actions becomes irrelevant. Since all participants of leisurely activities follow the same rules and embody these rules by their very actions, the Self is no longer needed to bargain about what can and cannot be done. Therefore, the liminoid encapsulates rather well the “Death of God” trope in our society: gone is the burden of a transcendent Being lurking over us, gone are the kings, and so are the authors. The creator as a demiurge is no more, but how do we fill the space left empty inside of us?

The easy way out is to fill this space with another set of liminal practices. This is easily observed in our neoliberal society where the line between work and leisure is blurred: the *gamification* of the workplace – such as providing devices for leisure like baby-foots or ping-pong tables to increase productivity – and the professionalization of gaming practices like e-sports or online streaming are two sides of the same capitalist coin.¹⁸ But another answer could also be to use this empty use as a playground for liminoid activities. And indeed, AVGs are eminently liminoid in that they do away with the author, and do so radically. As long as the artist or the creator appears as a guidance for the spectator into their work, the spectatorial experience is hampered by the presence of the Other. There is this element of outside-ness to performance art, where the performance can only be played out insofar as the artist is concerned. In Alternate Virtuality Games, “virtuality” is to be understood as reality constructed in terms of mediatic events, a collection of images assembled haphazardly by the individual player. As the player assembles images in

17 V. Turner, “Liminal to Liminoid:” 88.

18 M. Antonioli, “Le stade esthétique de la production/consommation et la révolution du temps choisi,” *Multitudes* 4, no. 69 (2017): 109-114, <https://doi.org/10.3917/mult.069.0109> ; A. Bekirov, T. Vaillancourt, “Esquisse d’une généalogie du romanesque, du point de vue du jeu vidéo,” in I. Hautbout, S. Wit, eds., *Jeu vidéo et romanesque* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2021): 117-130.

accordance with their own criteria (what makes sense to them), they become the *de facto* creator of one possible performance of the game. Here we see how the loss of ego is inherently part of the AVG experience: as the authoritative figure of the Author is absent, the player can now invest this role and progress towards a state of indistinctness between subject and object, between what is created and what is spectated. The rise of ARGs and more so of AVGs can thus be interpreted as the growing social need for liminoid phenomena, a need for agency in a world of where subjectivation is too often synonymous with subjection.

Conclusion: Beyond representation

Taking into account such apparatuses and practices implies new configurations and new focuses. Speaking about *Weltanschauung* draws a metaphysical point of view, and hence demands an ontology. To put it short, the ontology that underpins this *Weltanschauung* is an ontology of simulacra. This means that we are no longer in a regime of representation submitted to Reality as the only form of the Truth. There are of course numerous ways to escape from Platonism or empirical realism. The one underlined by AVGs is situated within a paradigm initiated by Nietzsche and described by Deleuze, Foucault and Klossowski, a way of paying attention to the effects generated by simulacra in many contexts. We can obviously consider post-truth tendencies and their political consequences as the dark side of such a *Weltanschauung* in which truth is no longer a dichotomous question. That being said, simulacra around AVGs also lead to virtuality in a narrower sense. If “virtuality” is to be understood as reality constructed in terms of mediatic events, then the production of reality is also a ludic

process in which everyone can take part notwithstanding their expertise.

Reality, understood as produced by mediatic events, opens new perspectives and new possibilities for subjectivation. Given the fact that the distinction between “the real world” and “the world of the image” is no longer valid, every aspect of life becomes a potential reality production through mediatic events as the only *milieu* within which we take place. From this perspective, redefining notions such as subject, object, artist or audience, is necessary in order to describe contemporary processes that no longer fit in a paradigm of representation and truth.

In that sense, virtuality and the effectiveness of images are the new reality. AVGs do “environmentalise” images in the way they force us to zoom out from the context of institutionalized art, and understand what is going on outside of it. Looking at image environments in larger digital contexts, we realize that the theoretical and often abstract categories like subject, object, artwork and audience – which are still rampant today in “canonical” artistic production – become less relevant to appreciate our relationship to images in the 21st century. The aesthetic, socio-political and psychological stakes in AVGs outline a new paradigm that can be applied to the sphere of institutional art and could hopefully render the rigid boundaries of their categories a bit more permeable.

Inhabiting the Museum: A History of Physical Presence from Analog to Digital Exhibition Spaces



ANNA CALISE, Università IULM – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2966-7613> <https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19907>

Abstract

From summer 2021 to spring 2022 the Nxt Museum in Amsterdam has run the exhibition *Shifting Proximities*, meant to investigate the ways in which global events and developments, mediated by technologies “are continually shifting the proximities between us, both literally and metaphorically.” This study wants to offer an account which, starting from this exhibition experience, addresses the temporal variations of the relationship between museums, visitors and their bodies, trying to investigate the extent to which technological developments, guided by changing epistemic paradigms, have contributed to influence display and curatorial choices and their relationship to the visitor’s body. In this interplay artistic intuition – intertwined with technical innovations – will prove essential to trigger institutional changes, together with philosophical undertakings of the political ideologies that inform power dynamics in the museum system. The visitor’s body, in its materiality and motion *habits*, will be seen as engaging in continuously changing ways with the museum space, mirroring the evolving epistemological paradigms of its times. Through an historical account of bodily practices and customs across museum spaces, this study aims to discuss the ways in which citizens’ *dives* through museum halls have been and are used to establish socially shared ideas of art and knowledge.

Keywords

[Museum](#)

[Visitor body](#)

[Technology](#)

[Exercise of power](#)

[Proximities](#)

To quote this essay: A. Calise, “Inhabiting the Museum: A History of Physical Presence from Analog to Digital Exhibition Spaces,” *AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images* [ISSN 2785-7433] 2, no. 2 (2023): 56-73, <https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19907>.

From summer 2021 to spring 2022 the Nxt Museum in Amsterdam has run the exhibition *Shifting Proximities*, meant to “explore human experience and interaction in the face of social and technological change.”¹ Beginning from the premise that “global events and developments, whether socio-political, technological or environmental, have a significant impact on how we communicate, how we move and how we live in the world”² the exhibition aimed to investigate the ways in which these “are continually shifting the proximities between us, both literally and metaphorically.”³

The museum presented eight artworks by different artists which allowed the visitor to experience the change in distance – or closeness – with others and with oneself, through the mediation of technological devices, at times transparent, others opaque.⁴ The key to the aesthetic experience inside the museum space, as we will see throughout this article, was the visitor’s body, and its motion. The knowledge required in order to fully dive into this exhibition had to do with one’s ability to move through space and interact with light, screens, cameras: media.

With this exhibition, the Nxt Museum becomes part of a series of museums which have structured their cultural paradigms around the idea of a *performative* rather than *informative* museology,⁵ one which stands in a more reflexive position towards its own operations, and admits to problematize the epistemological premises which underlie cultural and curatorial choices. In this line of thought the visitor’s body becomes an instrumental tool that guides a different kind of museological experience, which does not rely on vision⁶ as the main guiding sense, and encompasses

1 “Shifting Proximities,” Nxt Museum, <https://nxtmuseum.com/event/shifting-proximities/>, accessed May 15, 2023.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 J.D. Bolter, R. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1998).

5 B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “The Museum as Catalyst,” keynote address at ICOM Sweden conference “Museum 2000: Confirmation or Challenge?,” Vadstena, September 29, 2000, <http://www.michaelfehr.net/Museum/Texte/vadstena.pdf>, accessed May 15, 2023.

6 For a discussion on visuality cfr. N. Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (London-Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1983): 36; P. de Bolla, *The Education of the Eye* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); C. Otter, *The Victorian Eye* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008): 24.

the sensorium more widely, reinstating visit practices that can be dated to early museum history.⁷

This study wants to offer an account which, starting from this fairly contemporary yet not isolated new mode of *diving* into the museum, addresses the temporal variations of the relationship between museums, visitors and their bodies, trying to investigate the extent to which technological developments, associated and guided by changing epistemic paradigms, have contributed to influence display and curatorial choices. In this interplay artistic intuition – intertwined with technical and creative innovations – will prove essential to trigger institutional changes, together with philosophical undertakings of the political ideologies that inform power dynamics in the museum system. The visitor's body, in its materiality and motion *habits*, will be seen as engaging in continuously changing ways with the museum space, mirroring the evolving epistemological paradigms of its times.

The paper will begin by presenting the *Shifting Proximities* exhibition, and observing the topics it raises. Amongst these are the use of technology for artistic practices inside the museum space and the use of the body for aesthetic experience during the cultural visit. Moving from this case study, a wider theoretical and historical scenario will be discussed, trying to identify some key positions which can help to contextualize today's museum behavior within a more complex understanding of the use and discipline of the body within the museum space. Tony Bennett's and Douglas Crimp's use of the Foucauldian philosophical apparatus will prove extremely helpful to conceptualize how power systems and ideological stances can translate into behavioral etiquettes and technological artistic endeavors.

Parallely, an account of the change of the use of the senses and the body inside the museum space through time – addressing mainly shifts from the late seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century and then again in the late twentieth century – will help historicize museum

7 C. Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012): 136-146.

experiential habits with reference to changing epistemic paradigms. As human beings today dive into museum halls, what kind of influence is the environment surrounding them exercising on their physical bodies? And how are these experiences *used* to establish an idea of art and knowledge?

Shifting Proximities at Nxt Museum

Nxt Museum is a fairly recent institution, opened in early 2020 in Amsterdam North, the new upcoming neighborhood of the city, over the lake IJ. The area is already home to another important institution, the Eye Filmmuseum,⁸ and houses a number of art galleries and studios. NXT is part of those institutions which are resignifying the district, functioning as *symbolic references*⁹ which advocate for new urban agendas, impacting the city from a socio-political perspective. The area, originally “location of shipbuilding and other heavy industries [...] evolved into a hotspot for the creative sector since the 1990s and has been the [...] subject of active urban redevelopment since the 2000s.”¹⁰

As the website promptly declares:

Nxt Museum is the first museum in the Netherlands dedicated to new media art. We focus on art that uses modern tools to embody modern times. We believe that the tools used in artistic expression reflect the times we live in. That makes them the perfect means to understand contemporary complexities allowing us to recognise, relate and reflect on our realities.¹¹

The museum highlights how it is devoted only to new media art, the only kind of art capable of capturing and addressing contemporary times. It does not hold a permanent collection, directly curating and producing exhibitions which thematically address diverse issues. The building itself

8 Eye Filmmuseum, <https://www.eyefilm.nl/en>, accessed May 15, 2023.

9 F. Savini, S. Dembski, “Manufacturing the Creative City: Symbols and Politics of Amsterdam North,” *Cities: The International Journal of Urban Policy and Planning* 55 (2016): 139-147, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2016.02.013>.

10 Ibid.: 140.

11 Nxt Museum, <https://nxtmuseum.com/about/>, accessed May 15, 2023.

was designed and furnished in order to be able to cater for these kinds of programmes:

the space is built specifically to explore new media art [...] that expands technical possibilities and applications, is dynamic and unbound by form and that generates movement whether physical, mental or emotional. The space provides all the ingredients for these progressive art forms to grow, flourish and evolve. Nxt Museum is a place where creatives bring their visions to life.¹²

The technological capacity of the museum is fundamental to the identity of the space: it unlocks the creativity of the artists invited to exhibit, and enables the *motion* which qualifies the power of the aesthetic experience. Not unrelated, the whole museum is heavily sponsored by a giant of the tech industry, Samsung:¹³ “With a full technical Samsung set up including hi-tech hardware [...] integrated throughout the museum, we seek to enrich the experience for our visitors and extend our educational programme.”¹⁴

As aforementioned, the case study here analyzed is the exhibition *Shifting Proximities*,¹⁵ which directly investigated the concept of proximity and its change due to the engagement of technology. The exhibition purposely addressed the active dimension of proximity, creating experiential environments where visitors were called to, precisely, *activate* the artwork through their engagement. Overall the programme hosted eight different artworks,¹⁶ each designed by a different artist. Upon entering the museum, the visitor was invited to cross a door which led into a dark room, beginning a journey linearly dictated by the alternation of a series of smaller rooms, with information on the next artwork,

12 Ibid.

13 The topic of the connection between industries, infrastructures, technologies and artistic endeavors is a complicated one, which is not necessary to address in the present discussion. For an account which draws the relationship between infrastructure studies and digital media studies please cfr. J.C. Plantin, A. Punathambekar, “Digital media infrastructures, pipes, platforms and politics,” *Media, Culture and Society* 41, no. 2 (2018): 163-174, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443718818376>.

14 “Partnerships,” Nxt Museum, <https://nxtmuseum.com/partnerships/>, accessed May 15, 2023.

15 The exhibition was open from the August 29, 2021 to May 8, 2022.

16 The complete list of artists can be found in the exhibition page on the museum website: <https://nxtmuseum.com/event/shifting-proximities/>, accessed May 15, 2023.

and a series of bigger rooms, where the installations were hosted. In each introductory room the visitor was advised on how long to spend in the next room and given some generic information on a screen on the meaning of the following artwork. Among the various works two have been here chosen as interesting for the discussion at hand: *Connected* (Fig. 1) by Roelof Knol¹⁷ and *Zoom Pavillion* (Fig. 2) by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer.¹⁸

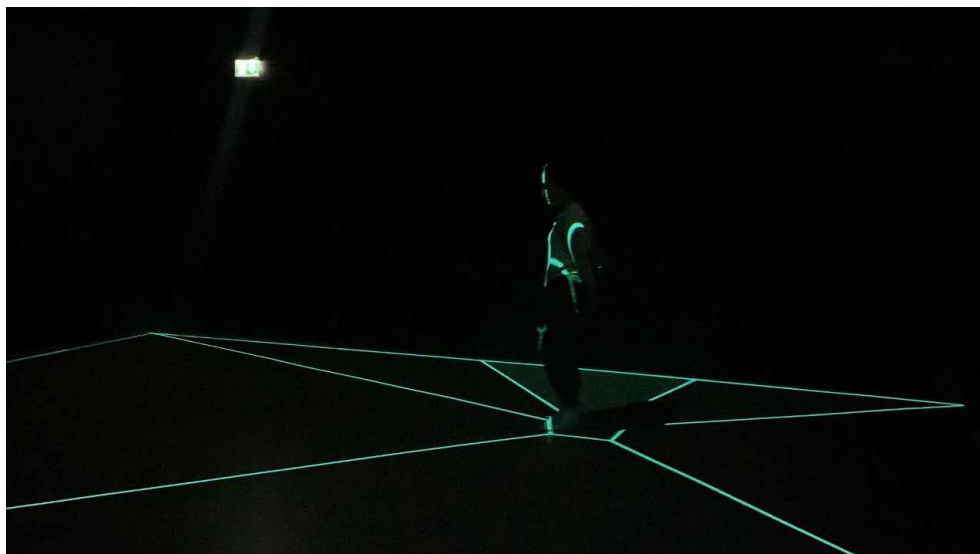


Fig. 1. R. Knol, *Connected*, 2022, view of the exhibition *Shifting Proximities* at Nxt Museum, May 2022.

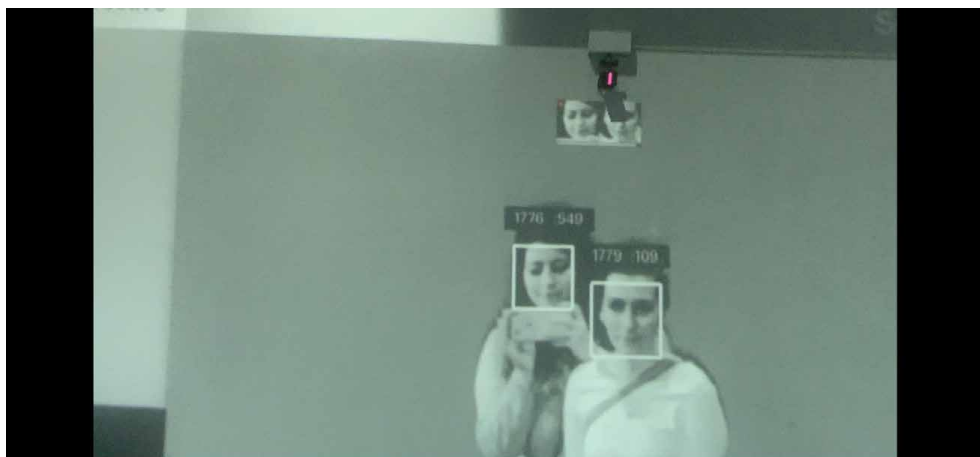


Fig. 2. R. Lozano-Hemmer, *Zoom Pavillion*, view of the exhibition *Shifting Proximities* at Nxt Museum, May 2022.

17 Amsterdam born, raised and based, Robert Knol is a new media artist and developer, who works with projection mapping, augmented reality and coding to design interactive- reactive experiences. His website can be accessed at <https://roelofknol.com/>.

18 Born in Mexico City in 1967, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer is a media artist working at the intersection of architecture and performance art. He creates platforms for public participation using technologies such as robotic lights, digital fountains, computerized surveillance, media walls, and telematic networks. For a more in depth biography see his website at <https://www.lozano-hemmer.com/bio.php>, accessed May 15, 2023.

*Connected*¹⁹ was the first installation of the exhibition, introducing the experience. The visitor was asked to join

in a ritual of connection. Each visitor is represented by an interactive visual projected on the floor. Together, they form new networks of connections between the visitors who will navigate through the exhibition. As personal space becomes shared space, *Connected* sets the tone of the exhibition by examining the type of space we inhabit.²⁰

Through one's own motion in the room, and activation of the interactive visuals that follow visitors around the space and connect them with other participants, the artwork activates. The emphasis on the role played by technology in building and tracing connections between people is evident, as is the dialogue between visitors, their bodies, and the devices used. It appears as the technological layer is already there, embedded in reality in an almost undetectable and natural²¹ way, yet it is through people's presence and motion that it manifests itself.

Zoom Pavillion, further into the exhibition path, is described by the artist on his website as

an interactive installation that consists of immersive projection on three walls, fed by 12 computerized surveillance systems trained on the public. The piece uses face recognition algorithms to detect the presence of participants and record their spatial relationship within the exhibition space [...]. The zooming sequences are disorienting

19 While audio-visual artist Roelof Knol designed the installation, he commissioned the sound design to sound-artist Marc Mahfoud.

20 "Connected," Nxt Museum, <https://nxtmuseum.com/artist/connected-roelof-knol/>, accessed May 15, 2023.

21 On the *naturalization* of technology in the environment cfr. R. Eugeni, *La condizione postmediale: Media linguaggi e narrazioni* (Milan: La Scuola, 2015): 46-47.

as they change the entire image “landscape” from easily recognizable wide shots of the crowd to abstract close-ups.²²

The technological layer appears, in this case, even more evidently than in the previous installation. Devices are surrounding visitors, and their activity is shown in real time on the walls of the room: they trace distance between visitors while picturing them, providing images which portray frontal representations and capturing motion from above. Realistic and more graphic and technical images are mixed in a random manner, conveying the message that our appearance can be translated into different visual languages, depending on who is looking. The problematic paradigm of surveillance²³ is exposed by the author in a way which uncovers the dialectic relationship between human beings and the technological ecosystem that surrounds them.²⁴

The two artworks, and the exhibition in itself, testify for a new way of understanding museum journeys in contemporary culture. One which assumes an embodied, extended, embedded and enacted²⁵ idea of cognition, granting a more participative nature to the aesthetic experience. In the museum logic, the visitor needs to be guided into an environment which elicits stimuli and activates a physical dynamic, one which anticipates a mediated – meaning media related – and technologized way of living art.

Surely this is the case of a single museological instance, clearly not representative of a pervasive and over-riding trend in museums policies. Yet it has been argued²⁶

22 “Zoom Pavilion,” Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, https://www.lozano-hemmer.com/zoom_pavilion.php, accessed May 15, 2023. As the website further specifies, Zoom Pavilion marks the first collaboration between artists Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Krzysztof Wodiczko. It was originally conceived for the Architecture Biennale in Beijing.

23 For an analysis of contemporary artistic projects which problematize the relationship between surveillance and facial imaging in today’s visual culture cfr. D. Borselli, G. Ravaioli, “Facing Power: Fotografia, partecipazione e tattiche di resistenza artistica nella sorveglianza contemporanea,” *VCS. Visual Culture Studies*, no. 5 (2022): 115-132, <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/922401>.

24 For an overview on the topic of surveillance and aerial view in relation to visual culture studies see A. Pinotti, A. Somaini, *Cultura visuale: Immagini sguardi media dispositivi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2016): 251-253.

25 A. Newen., L. De Bruin, S. Gallager, *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

26 D. Howes, “Introduction to Sensory Museology,” *The Senses and Society* 9, no. 3 (2014): 259-267, <https://doi.org/10.2752/174589314X14023847039917>.

that since the last two decades of the twentieth century, and onwards, there is a tendency that can be observed in museums towards a more body related and sensory engaged understanding and planning of the experience. One which encompasses different conceptions of knowledge, accepting also more horizontal and even possibly *humanizing*²⁷ epistemological stances. Engaging the body, from this point of view, seems to be in line with the idea of democratizing access to the museum. Instead of expecting visitors to possess the intellectual cultural capital²⁸ necessary to access the aesthetic elitarian museum experience, this curatorial account somehow *lowers the bar*, requiring epistemic grounds which have more to do with everyday experiences than higher education.

This shift, today as much as in museum history,²⁹ is related to the use of media: new technologies which are expected to increase accessibility. Yet, as much as in the past, the introduction of technological devices in museums comes with a conflicted debate which carries the weight of the discussion on the material conditions of technological production³⁰ and consumer culture³¹ debacles. Whilst these devices – and device hosting museums – are seen as attracting and engaging a wider public, the danger that they represent has to do with parallelly building a control system that collects data and works as a feedback accumulator:³² exploiting visitors under a false inclusivity

27 The idea of organizing museum experiences on humanizing premises to knowledge belongs to the Austrian physicist and museum director Otto Neurath, who operated in Vienna at the beginning of the twentieth century. For an account of his work and principles see F. Stadler, ed., *Encyclopedia and Utopia: The Life and Work of Otto Neurath*, (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996); O. Neurath, *Encyclopedia and Sociology*, ed. M. Neurath, R. Cohen (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1973).

28 P. Bourdieu “Three Forms of Capital,” in A.H. Halsey, ed., *Education: Culture, Economy and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

29 Neurath’s museum is also to be understood in a line of mediatized museums, institutions which employ media and technologies to make the cultural experience more accessible.

30 A. Barry, *Political Machines: Governing a Technological Society* (New York: Athlone Press, 2001).

31 T. Adorno, M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1947), trans. E. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1986).

32 A. Barry, *Political Machines*: 130.

pretense. Even more so in the era of big data³³ when the controlling potential of technology is ever more striking.

Further, this framework becomes more complex if enriched through the perspective, in museological literature, that has addressed the disciplining power of museums. Primarily since the last decade of the twentieth century, a number of authors have started applying the theoretical framework developed by Michel Foucault on *apparatuses* and discipline³⁴ to museum environments, highlighting the multiple ways through which these spaces have historically exercised their power on people. These accounts can help to conceptualize the relationship between epistemic premises, dominant ideologies, art, technologies and bodies.

Museums inhabiting bodies

While the discussion on the place and time where museums were born is still an open one, scholars seem to agree on the fact that, since the early days, museums have been meant to host people. Their *inhabited* nature is somewhat intrinsic to their identity, as renowned museologist Krzysztof Pomian points out in the introduction of his three volume publication *Le musée, une histoire mondiale*. When faced with the task of defining museums he qualifies them as “all the public collections of natural or artificial objects exhibited in a secular or secularized environment and destined to be preserved for an indefinite future.”³⁵ Inherent to the *public* character of museums and

33 V. Mayer-Schönberger, C. Kenneth, *Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work, and Think* (Boston-New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

34 While Foucault’s corpus is extremely wide and identifying the publications which most influenced the museological discourse would be a delicate and somehow futile effort, guiding concepts to the present discourse can be found by M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966) (London: Vintage, 1994); M. Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 2002). With reference to publications which directly address the author’s discourse on museums see A. Kauffman, “Manet, museum, modernism: Michel Foucault and modernist art history,” *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 22 (Jun 2020): 1-21; K. Hetherington, “Foucault, the Museum and the Diagram,” *Sociological Review* 53, no. 3 (2011): 457-475, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2011.02016.x>; B. Lord, “Foucault’s museums: difference, representation, and genealogy,” *Museum and society* 4, no. 1 (March 2006): 11-14, <http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/museumstudies/documents/volumes/1lord.pdf>.

35 K. Pomian, *Le musée, une histoire mondiale*, 2 vols. (Paris, Gallimard, 2020), vol. 1, “Du trésor au musée:” 47 [my translation].

their collections, and to the *exhibited* status they acquire, lies the assumption that their value is to be deeply connected with their appreciation by people. After all it is their being experienced by citizens which seems to have been the emancipatory factor which led to the shift from cabinets of curiosities to *museums*.³⁶ Inaugurating what German Bazin has famously defined the “museum age,”³⁷ when the beauty of objects which were before the privilege of a few became available to many.

While museums can be hence imagined as *born* to be inhabited, it is legitimate to wonder to what extent this relationship is reciprocal, and how museums themselves end up *inhabiting* their audience. Which environment is materialized through their existence and how this causally affects the people who enter it. Tony Bennett, in *The Birth of the Museum. History, theory, politics*³⁸ draws from the Foucauldian philosophical corpus, renownedly linking museums’ political and governmental ambitions to the semiotic organization of museum environments and the behavioral influence on the visiting public.

As the author argues throughout his work, ideological stances and conceptions of visibility heavily underline museums displays through history, influencing the structural conditions of *learning* in the museum space. The epistemic paradigm the museum is based on becomes actively governmental insofar as visitors inhabit the museum and in it perform the kind of behavior which will allow them to internalize what they are seeing. This entails also designing an environment which

deploys its machinery of representation within an apparatus which [...] is concerned not only with impressing the visitor with a message

36 As Pomian had already argued in a previous work, it is the phenomenological structure of collections which discloses the kind of relationship that is implied between the visible – the collected objects and how they appear – and the invisible – what these objects represent and which is meant to be conveyed to posterity. K. Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990). In the organizational dynamics which explicit the public destination of the museum can therefore be identified the change in scope and target which marks the passage from private to public collections.

37 G. Bazin, *The Museum Age* (New York: Universe Books, 1967).

38 T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London-New York: Routledge, 1995).

of power but also to induct her or him into new forms of programming the self, aimed at producing new types of conduct and self-shaping.³⁹

Shaping ones' habits and modes of behavior, especially in terms of conduct and appearances, emerges, in this reading, as one of the programmatic objectives of nineteenth and twentieth century museum policy, encouraging self-regulation and self-monitoring, making the museum a proper *reformatory of manners*.⁴⁰ As these words anticipate, a direct connection can be found historically between museum environments and displays, on the one hand, and the behavioral etiquette which is expected when entering the temples of knowledge, on the other. As Helen Rees Leahy writes in *Museum Bodies. The Politics and Practices of Visiting and Viewing*, during the nineteenth century there were well known guidebooks and periodicals, openly advising proper museum conduct.⁴¹ In 1832 *The Penny Magazine of The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*,⁴² prescribed the three rules which would guarantee enjoyment of the museum, whilst also ensuring not to trouble either fellow visitors or museum authorities. These included first "touch nothing," secondly "do not talk loud" and third "be not obtrusive,"⁴³ aiming towards a discipline of behaviors which directly addressed the use of the senses during the visit. Touching, talking, and obstructing – understood as physical disturbance of others – were heavily discouraged. As the pamphlet spells out "real knowledge

39 Ibid.: 46.

40 M. Henning, *Museums, Media and Cultural Theory* (Maidenhead UK: Open University Press, 2006): 13.

41 H. Rees Leahy, *Museum Bodies: The Politics and Practices of Visiting and Viewing* (Farnham UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2012): 7-8. As the author here specifies, these publications targeted readers which were deemed most deficient in techniques of self-restraint and attentive viewing. Amongst these mainly women and working-class visitors.

42 "The British Museum," *The Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* 1, no. 2 (April, 7 1832): 13-15.

43 Ibid.: 14.

[...] can only be obtained through self-discipline of the body as well as the mind.”⁴⁴

Acceptable behavior, moreover, contributed to ensure the success of the aesthetic experience:

the behavior of visitors to early museums [...] and art exhibitions [...] was scrutinized, not only for compliance with the institution's rules of admission, but also for evidence of aesthetic receptivity and cultural competence. [...] modes of walking and looking had to be re-tuned in accordance with changing practices of display and conditions of visibility – that is, the practical and discursive dimensions of seeing – within the institution.⁴⁵

This mode of behavior, far from being required since the beginning of museum history, was actually an innovation brought by nineteenth century policy. As Constance Classen widely addresses in *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch*,⁴⁶ museum habits regarding the use of the senses have not always been as binding and restrictive as *The Penny Magazine* would suggest. Especially touching artifacts, she argues, was a common practice during the late seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth century. Through the sense of touch, visitors were deemed able to enrich their experience, gain more information about the objects, and build a connection with their history. They were actively incentivized to navigate through the museum space, open glass cases and choose for themselves how to build their own cultural experience. Only since the beginning of the nineteenth century, for a number of reasons which span from practical concerns to ideological positions⁴⁷ – touch started to be identified with an unmediated and uncomplicated mode of learning⁴⁸ – freer exploration became prohibited inside the museum. “Touch what you like with the eyes, but do not see with the fingers” was the inscription which headed the Picture

44 Ibid.

45 H. Rees Leahy, *Museum Bodies*: 4.

46 C. Classen, *The Deepest Sense*: 136-146.

47 Ibid.: 137.

48 F. Candlin, *Art, Museums and Touch* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2010).

Gallery of the Bodleian Library of Oxford,⁴⁹ and the new norm.

On the one hand, as Bennett points out, museums are and always seem to have been governing apparatuses which start from specific epistemological conditions and build performative environments which are designed to condition the visitors. These, by abiding to a dictated etiquette and performing in a specific way, begin to internalize and embody a wider and complex ideological paradigm. Yet, history testifies to a more varied than expected body of bodily practices in museums, one which has shifted from a full hands on approach to a purely visual one and that is today reinstating a freer and wider sensorily encompassing set of habits. Intuitively, being free to use one's own senses, instead of being intimidated by the white cube aesthetic,⁵⁰ seems to represent a less coercive undertaking. By allowing the visitor to move at his or her own pace – and taste – through the museum, cultural institutions seem to be operating in a way which is more respectful of individual freedom. Yet, the issue might be that this kind of permissive behavior would enable a merely *positive*⁵¹ and in itself still heavily predefined conception of liberty, which alludes to the space for autonomy while representing a strongly defined set of possibilities. In this sense, the concerns expressed at the beginning with reference to the controlling power of new technologies, heavily employed in today's sensory museums – become ever more relevant. Perhaps by investigating the relationship between epistemic paradigms, technological and technical possibilities and art in museums further insight can be offered.

Technologies inhabiting art

Douglas Crimp, in *On the Museum's Ruins*, also follows in Foucault's step and qualifies the museum as an

49 C. Jr. Dickens, *Dickens's Dictionary of the Thames* (1893) (New York: Taurus Press, 1972): 153.

50 B. O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976).

51 For a critique of positive conceptions of freedom cfr. I. Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969): 118-172.

“institution of confinement” with its proper “discursive formation,”⁵² the discipline of art history. He operatively develops the archeological⁵³ analytical approach envisioned by the French philosopher, studying museums across time as institutions which carry, and enable, the historical *marks* of the “tables on which their knowledge is formulated.”⁵⁴ He argues for a strong and visible connection among museological logics, artworks, and the techniques that are used to produce them, emphasizing how an artwork, especially through the technology that was used to produce it, can unveil paradigmatic cultural and ideological shifts. The analytical framework offered by Crimp, therefore, seems to widen the discussion, yet at the same time also offer a more targeted viewpoint.

On the one hand the author himself remarks the connection between different time periods and ideological positions, also emphasizing how museum strategies and policies change decade after decade, debunking the presumed a-temporal logic which these institutions attempt to elicit.⁵⁵ On the other hand, Crimp directly addresses the connection between artworks and technology through time, remarking to what extent different techniques unveil significant aspects of the ideology of an era. It is in the technological possibilities which structurally impact the artwork that one can read the shifting historical and artistic perspectives.⁵⁶

If scrutinized through Crimp’s account, museums through time express their dominant positions not only by organizing their space and advising for a specific behavior, but also by exhibiting artworks which represent the ways in which technologies are changing reality and the way we perceive it. Read through this analysis, the

52 D. Crimp, *On the Museum’s Ruins* (Cambridge MA-London: MIT Press, 1993): 48

53 In Foucault’s account, an archeological analysis entails on the one hand being attentive to discontinuity, more than to linear developments, within the history of ideological paradigms; and on the other being focused on the materiality of the research object, which holds the parameters that should guide the research process. See M. Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*.

54 D. Crimp, *On the Museum’s Ruins*: 47.

55 Ibid.: 50. Differently from Bennett and Classen, Crimp offers an account which focuses more on the connection between ideology, technology and art, less with the overall museum organization and behavioral etiquette.

56 Ibid.: 58.

apparatus nature of the museum, understood in the Foucauldian sense, is even more evident: it spans from the wider epistemic meaning of the system of power to the somewhat lower and more down to earth level of the functioning of the technology employed.⁵⁷

Following this line of thought, it could be argued that different technologies call for different uses of the visitor's body throughout the museum environment. From artifacts kept in openable glass cases to aesthetic experiences structurally built thanks to technological devices, the role played by technology in shaping cultural experiences in museums is central. It changes, as Crimp would argue, together with the epistemic paradigms which characterize each epoch. As does the way in which these technologies impact the visitor body, and help mediate the museological experience which is taking place. As Helen Rees Leahy writes, citing de Bolla's definition of a customized "specific activity of looking"⁵⁸ within the space of the museum, "a successful performance of spectatorship therefore invoked and enacted a precise set of socio-cultural coordinates."⁵⁹

Except at this point in order to perform successfully as a spectator the visitor of the Nxt Museum has to engage with his or her own body, and not just *look*. What is asked in the museum space is to relate with the technologies which structurally support the artwork in order to live the experience, abiding to the aesthetic, technical and informational systems which are behind them. The socio-cultural coordinates which guide the performance are still invoked with the utmost precision, yet they call for an evident degree of motion, one which requires to engage with the technology. Without moving through the space, and activating the technology behind the installations, feeding it one's own data, the performance would not exist. Retracing Marcel Mauss's 1935 argument discussed

57 Cfr. R. Eugeni "Che cosa sarà un dispositivo: Archeologia e prospettive di uno strumento per pensare i media," in J.L. Baudry, *Il dispositivo: Cinema, Media, Soggettività*, ed. R. Eugeni (Brescia: La Scuola, 2017) for a breakdown of the different levels at which an apparatus can be understood to be operating: epistemic, situational, technological.

58 P. de Bolla, *The Education of the Eye*: 72.

59 H. Rees Leahy, *Museum Bodies*: 6.

in *Techniques of the Body*⁶⁰ Rees Leahy specifies how “the habitus of the practiced museum spectator is palpable in their demonstration of socially acquired and sanctioned bodily techniques within the exhibition; for example, standing at the ‘correct’ distance from the artwork, walking at a pace that is neither too fast nor too slow, and judiciously editing the number of artworks deserving their closest scrutiny.”⁶¹ In NXT the bodily behavior required to appreciate the artwork is not learned within the museum, but in real life. After all, the title of the exhibition, *Shifting Proximities*, recalls purposely how concepts of closeness and distance are actually changing in our society, due to technology. What is interesting if Mauss’s paradigm is used to interpret the experience of the visitor, is that the curators and artists engaged in the exhibition do draw on habits that visitors have developed⁶² in order to build the exhibition script,⁶³ yet these are customary to our technologically mediated everyday life.

Rather than as a liberating and emancipatory story, which sees the visitor’s body gradually being freed from physical inhibitions inside the museum space and incentivized to move in an experimental and autonomous manner, the history of physical presence through museum halls appears to be more linear than expected. Whilst it can be argued that different philosophical and epistemic positions have surely guided a change in experiential and bodily access to knowledge and collections – shifting from a more sensorial account in the early museum towards an exclusively sight dependent aesthetic visit throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century and then towards a more active bodily undertaking in the last fifty

60 M. Mauss, “Techniques of the Body,” trans. B. Brewster, *Economy and Society* 2 (1973): 70-88.

61 H. Rees Leahy, *Museum Bodies*: 6.

62 On media related cognitive habits cfr. J. Fingerhut, “Habits and the enculturated mind: pervasive arti-facts, predictive processing, and expansive habits,” in F. Caruana, I. Testa, eds., *Habits: Pragmatist Approaches from Cognitive Neuroscience to Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022): 352-375, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108682312.018>.

63 J. Noordegraaf, *Strategies of Display, Museum Presentation in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Visual Culture* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2004).

years – it is difficult to read these changes as other than changes in prescriptive accounts.

Perhaps the museum has in part ceased to actively discipline visitors, and operates more in an observant manner to contemporary experiential habits, mutuating from reality more than shaping it. Yet today's motion inside museums seems still heavily guided by ideologies, conceptions of knowledge and the technologies which inform them and our habits, leaving open the question whether art, within museums, can still represent a transformative and free space for creativity, or if it caters more to the – bodily – reinforcement of the status quo.

Digital Heterotopias in the Metaverse: The *(g)Ender Gallery* by Cat Haines¹



MARGHERITA FONTANA, Università degli Studi di Milano – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3824-6909>
<https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19764>

Abstract

At a time when the umbrella term “metaverse” seems to have monopolised the discourse on online social presence, this paper aims to explore the possibility of constructing interactive online spaces that challenge the hegemonic structures of heteronormative society. Before describing the metaverse as a futuristic scenario that catalyses technophobic fears, perhaps we can turn our attention to existing metaverses: one example is the sandbox video game Minecraft, which is characterised by great interactivity and manipulability. Therefore, by analysing the immersive and interactive artwork *g(Ender Gallery)* by artist Cat Haines, which was created entirely on Minecraft in 2021, I will explore how the platform can be used to build a playful ground and at the same time a critical arena of gender norms and a deep reflection on trans experience.

Keywords

[Metaverse](#)

[Minecraft](#)

[Gender studies](#)

[Feminist](#)

[Feminist art history](#)

¹ This article was written in the framework of the research project “AN-ICON. An-Iconology: History, Theory, and Practices of Environmental Images.” The project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 834033 AN-ICON), and is hosted by the Department of Philosophy “Piero Martinetti” at the University of Milan (Project “Departments of Excellence 2023-2027” awarded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research).

To quote this essay: M. Fontana, “Digital Heterotopias in the Metaverse: *The (g)Ender Gallery* by Cat Haines,” *AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images* [ISSN 2785-7433] 2, no. 2 (2023): 74-90, <https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19764>.

Introduction

Appeared for the first time in 1992, “Metaverse” is now an umbrella term that encompasses dystopian projections of future online social interactions and actually existing applications that allow users to communicate in real-time through avatars moving in virtual worlds. Setting aside the technophobic worries surrounding these scenarios, current modes of online presence give us valuable hints regarding political and anthropological tensions that inhabit such social spaces. In particular, the paper aims to illustrate digital strategies of subverting gender performance adopted by contemporary artists, as is the case of the *(g)Ender Gallery* (2021) by artist Cat Haines,² an installation and a performance set entirely on the video game platform Minecraft.

The theory of performativity, which provides gender with a new framework to interpret its cultural and social basis, paves the way for a new understanding of the “performative” possibilities disclosed by the digital manipulation of the virtual self. The “immersive internet”³ allows us to create a digital body in a new, seemingly borderless space accompanied by overgrown feelings that the age of fixed identities is finally over. However, this enthusiasm must be mitigated by the awareness that the digital space is inhabited by the same structures characterising our ordinary post-industrial reality.⁴

The reconfiguration of one’s identity by embodying an avatar through technologies such as head-mounted displays and tracking devices allows users to model and animate their doubles, giving rise to the so-called “Proteus effect.” Named after the elusive Greek deity who could

2 On her website, the young artist present herself as “a genderqueer trans girl, dyke, and academic/artist weirdo,” with a research centered on “autotheoretical investigation into [her] body and experiences as a post-surgically transitioned femme,” interrogating “concepts such as the trans body, sexual and gendered difference, and the intersection of [her] identities as a dyke and a trans woman.” See “cat haines,” <https://catemoji.github.io/>, accessed January 24, 2023.

3 D. Power, R. Teigland, eds., *The Immersive Internet: Reflections on the Entangling of the Virtual with Society, Politics and the Economy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

4 For a recent account of feminist subversion techniques in digital environments, see J. K. Brodsky, *Dismantling the Patriarchy, Bit by Bit. Art, Feminism, and Digital Technology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

change into many different forms, this phenomenon, formulated by Nick Yee, Jeremy N. Bailenson and Nicolas Ducheneaut, and fundamental to an anthropological study of online spaces, proved that avatar appearance changes online behaviour: we are not just “dressing up” as someone else, we *are* actually someone else, as if the characteristics of this constructed self could interact with our ordinary selves and contribute to our online persona.⁵ From a transfeminist perspective, online social spaces accessible through VR seem hostile to a female audience: evidence of this is the numerous cases of sexual harassment directed at “female” avatars.⁶ Moreover, their design is often based on a stereotypical representation of feminine and racialised bodies. Without falling into the temptation of equating virtual and real worlds, the same power structures are repeated, since the technology responsible for virtual worlds is the result of the same capitalist and patriarchal society that is responsible for the struggles of its members in a non-hegemonic position.⁷

Just as in the “real” world, strategies of hacking, distracting and subverting these structures also emerge in the virtual world, as in the installation on Minecraft platform (*g*)*Ender Gallery* by the artist Cat Haines. Here, Haines used the user-interactivity of the creative platform to construct digital representations of her own body, dismantling the “cissexist feminist art canon” while imagining a metaverse where transgender people could feel comfortable, safe and in control: a kind of digital heterotopia.

5 N. Yee, J. Bailenson, “The Proteus effect: The effect of transformed self-representation on behavior,” *Human communication research* 33, no. 3 (2007): 271-290, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.2007.00299.x>.

6 M. Ehrenkranz, “Yes, Virtual Reality Has a Sexual Harassment Problem. What Can We Do to Stop It?,” *Mic* (June 5, 2016) <https://www.mic.com/articles/142579/virtual-reality-has-a-sexual-harassment-problem-what-can-we-do-to-stop-it>; L. Blackwell, N. Ellison, N. Elliott-Deflo, R. Schwartz, “Harassment in social virtual reality: Challenges for platform governance,” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 3 (2019): 1-25, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3359202>.

7 For an in-depth study of the structurally gendered nature of new technologies, see C. Criado Perez, *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2019); with strict reference to virtual reality see J. Munafo, M. Diedrick, and T. A. Stoffregen, “The virtual reality head-mounted display Oculus Rift induces motion sickness and is sexist in its effects,” *Experimental brain research* 235, no. 3 (2017): 889-901, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00221-016-4846-7>.

An already inhabited metaverse: the case of Minecraft Universe

Since the *g(Ender) Gallery* by Cat Haines is completely built on Minecraft, it is worth saying a few words about the technological and cultural context in which the artist's operation is situated, namely the video game itself. The artwork has been conceived in the framework of the art residency program "Ender Gallery" sponsored by Mackenzie Art Gallery of Regina, Saskatchewan.⁸ Minecraft is a "sandbox" video game, meaning that the user is not limited to a set of activities or to certain purposes, but can freely interact with the almost infinite surroundings. Players, who can access the platform via desktop and since 2016 also via virtual reality, can voluntarily build all kinds of constructions, using textured cubes to be extracted from the procedurally generated 3D environments (in the technical jargon, "biomes"). The blocks, which are similar to a 3D version of the base unit of digital images, the pixel, have different physical properties: they can be used as they are found or actively transformed; construction is then achieved by placing blocks in a fixed grid pattern. Despite its "primitive" and pixelated blocky visual style, Minecraft is one of the best and longest-running games of recent times, precisely because of its interactivity.⁹ Another aspect worth highlighting is the simulation nature of the game: Minecraft is presented as a "natural" world, made up of ecosystems and populated by creatures that follow precise rules of development. However, as in nature, the combinations of materials are almost infinite, to the point that many players

8 The name of the art residency program "Ender," appears in the game in various meanings. The Endermen are a specific type of creatures – in the platform jargon the "entities" or, more specifically, "mob" i.e. "mobile entities" – that inhabit the Minecraft universe. The program is curated by Sarah Friend, Cat Bluemke, and Jonathan Carroll aims to develop Minecraft creative potentialities. For its inaugural year, it hosted, alongside with Cat Haines, the works by Simon M. Benedict, Huidi Xiang, and Travess Smalley. "Ender Gallery," Mackenzie Art Gallery, <https://mackenzie.art/experience/digital-art-projects/post/ender-gallery/>, accessed January 24, 2023.

9 Windows, which acquired the developer studio Mojang and the videogame itself, has recently released also a VR version of Minecraft, accessible through Meta Gear VR and Windows Mixed Reality headset. See "EXPLORE MINECRAFT IN VIRTUAL REALITY," Minecraft official website, <https://www.minecraft.net/it-it/vr>, accessed January 24, 2023.

do not need to concern themselves with the objectives of the video game's "Story" or "Survival" modes, but spend a lot of time shaping the biomes in which they live according to their tastes and needs. Surfing the net, it is very easy to come across real archives of the most incredible creations of users:¹⁰ there is even a series of computers, among which the most technically advanced is the Chungus 2 (Computational Humongous Unconventional Number and Graphics Unit), built entirely inside Minecraft, according to its rules.¹¹ They are functioning, self-reflecting machines, reinforcing the hypothesis that the sandbox game can be considered the first already inhabited metaverse. Minecraft "doesn't really feel like a *game*. It's more like a destination, a technical tool, a cultural scene:"¹² due to its manipulability, Minecraft has also been studied adopting an intersectional approach, underlining how gender politics interfere, for example, in the modding of avatars.¹³ The breadth of the Minecraft universe is also evidenced by the existence of a Wikipedia-like platform, consisting of more than 8000

10 M. Peckham, "The 15 Best Minecraft Creations (and Wildest Destinations)," *Time* (May 22, 2013) <https://techland.time.com/2013/05/23/the-15-best-minecraft-creations-and-wildest-destinations/>, accessed January 24, 2023; M. Tillman, "32 incredible Minecraft creations that will blow your mind," *Pocket-lint* (March 16, 2022) <https://www.pocket-lint.com/games/news/131364-incredible-minecraft-creations-that-will-blow-your-mind/>, accessed January 24, 2023.

11 "Ohm's 16-bit Minecraft Computer," YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KzrFzkb3A4o>, accessed January 24, 2023; "Ohmganessa," Minecraft Forums, August 5, 2011, <http://www.minecraftforum.net/topic/526445-my-alucpucomputer-progress-thread-video-and-worldsave/>, accessed January 24, 2023; K. Wickens, "Someone crafted a redstone PC in Minecraft to play Minecraft inside Minecraft," *PC Gamer* (September 9, 2022) <https://www.pcgamer.com/minecraftception-redstone-pc-chungus/>, accessed January 24, 2023; N. Armondi, "Minecraft giocato dentro Minecraft con Chungus 2, un computer di Redstone che viaggia a 1 Hz," *multiplayer.it* (September 8, 2022) <https://multiplayer.it/notizie/minecraft-giocato-dentro-minecraft-chungus-2-computer-redstone-1-hz.html>, accessed January 24, 2023; CodeCrafted, GIANT REDSTONE COMPUTER THAT PLAYS MINECRAFT IN MINECRAFT, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GwHBaSySHmo>, accessed January 24, 2023.

12 C. Thompson, "The Minecraft Generation," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/17/magazine/the-minecraft-generation.html>, accessed January 24, 2023.

13 Anderson, E., Walker, J., Kafai, Y. B., & Lui, D., "The Gender and Race of Pixels: An Exploration of Intersectional Identity Representation and Construction Within Minecraft and Its Community," *Proceedings of the 12th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (2017, August):1-10, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3102071.3102094>.

entries, compiled by users, which provides information on all aspects of the franchise.¹⁴

Having said that, it is interesting to note how the artist uses the inherent manipulability of the video game just described, on the one hand to represent the culturally constructed nature of gender performance, and on the other to ironically describe myths and prejudices regarding transgender bodies and experience. Indeed, Haines evokes the ideal of femininity as the result of a process of gender transition, offering a trans* narrative of gender identity and sexuality. Furthermore, the artist has a fruitful and critical relationship with the essentialist strain of feminism associated with the cissexist canon of “pussy art,”¹⁵ which is a stated point of reference I will discuss in detail later.

A digital heterotopia: the *g(Ender) Gallery* by Cat Haines

Haines’ *g(Ender) Gallery* can be seen as a traditional online exhibition that exploits the creative potential of the Minecraft universe: the artist’s setup combines a performance, an exhibition space with both iconic and textual works, and a social space designed to host discussions, meetings and parties. There is even an ice skating rink, which is not melting despite the sunny climate.¹⁶

First, visitors are welcomed in an informal atmosphere in a two-storey building where they can rest or refresh themselves (or their avatars). The facility has a large terrace with views of the surrounding landscape. One’s attention is immediately caught by a large blue phallus built

14 “Minecraft Wiki,” Fandom Games Community, https://minecraft.fandom.com/wiki/Minecraft_Wiki, accessed January 24, 2023.

15 This irreverent phrase refers to the art historical tradition of feminist art that deals with the female anatomy, especially the representation of the female genitalia, as a way to increase the empower women and rewrite history. Furthermore, Haines theoretically explored the relationship between difference feminism and trans studies in her master’s thesis entitled *Transmisogyny and the Abjection of Girlcock*. See C. Haines, *Transmisogyny and the Abjection of Girlcock*, MA dissertation (Regina: The University of Regina, 2021).

16 In this sense, it could be argued that Haines’ work perfectly fits in the strand of “playground” works, which is often attended by contemporary artists. For example, the word “playground” is interestingly adopted by Claire Bishop in her *Installation Art*, with reference to contemporary artist Carsten Höller. C. Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Routledge, 2005): 48.

into the wall of the mountain in front of it. It is here that the inaugural performance of Haines' work begins: the artist sets fire to it to make way for a monumental vulva, constructed from the artist's custom-made textures, created from photographs of her own genitalia (fig. 1). Even though the artist literally builds this biomorphic structure out of "pieces" of her body, it is not intended to mimic the artist's sexual organs. Its paradoxical monumentality, combined with the conspicuous performance, is indeed satirical in its intentions: its aim is to address the obsession with the trans* body, fetishism and objectification. The artist's gesture consists in the reappropriation of the same construction of her genitals: recalling her experience of undergoing surgery, she recalls that she had no choice as to her preferences for the external characteristics of her vulva, that there was "no lookbook" to choose from, meaning that the surgeon had to have in mind an idealisation of female genitals, which are in fact can be very different.¹⁷



Fig. 1 Minecraft customized block textures by Cat Haines.

To access the actual exhibition venue, visitors pass through this genital simulacrum and then through a vagina-like tunnel. Here the creations are presented in a more traditional way using Minecraft's design tools: in a space that at times looks like a fortress, the artist presents a selection of photographs that are highly relevant to her personal experience as a genderqueer, lesbian femme.

17 Excluding mainstream pornography, which tends to emphasize only certain stereotypical configurations, the lack of media exposure to female genitalia leads many women to view their own configurations as abnormal or aesthetically unpleasing. Speaking of "lookbooks" of female genitalia, in recent years there have been artistic and photographic projects that have highlighted female diversity in order to dispel the myth of the existence of a perfect form. See for example L. Dodsworth, *Womanhood: The Bare Reality* (London: Pinter & Martin, 2019); H. Atalanta, J. Whitford, *A Celebration of Vulva Diversity* (This is us Books, 2019).

They are drawn from the artist's social media and personal phone archive: their pixelated quality alludes their privateness and intimacy. During an interview,¹⁸ the artist declared that she took inspiration from the *Killjoy's Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House*,¹⁹ an art installation by Canadian artists Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue, displayed in October 2015 in West Hollywood. "Designed to pervert, not convert," the installation mocks the hell houses,²⁰ popularized in 1970s by the televangelist pastor Jerry Falwell Sr. This complex theatrical and immersive experiences were designed to shock visitors by showing after-death hellish scenarios, destined for those who had not fully embraced Christian faith in time. These kinds of disturbing experiences, thought to provide an alternative to the irreverent – and also queer – Halloween parades, often include sexophobic and transhomophobic content and propaganda against reproductive rights. In response to this cultural framework, the immersive installation by Mitchell and Logue was designed to provide a creepy transformative feminist experience. Interestingly, the work was criticized for its essentialist and allegedly trans-exclusive approach: the "Ball Busting" room in particular was considered potentially offensive and non-respectful of trans* people,²¹ since "involved two butch-dyke performers in plaid shirts smashing plaster of Paris balls modelled after truck nuts."²²

18 M. Grande-Sherbert, "Arts and (Mine)crafts," *the carillon* (March 25, 2021) <https://www.carillonregina.com/arts-and-minecrafts/>, accessed January 24, 2023.

19 A. Mitchell, C. McKinney, eds., *Inside Killjoy's Kastle: Dykey Ghosts, Feminist Monsters, and Other Lesbian Hauntings* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019).

20 I. Monroe, "Remembering When Evangelicals Tried to Exorcise Gays With 'Hell Houses,'" *Advocate* (October 26, 2016) <https://www.advocate.com/commentary/2016/10/27/remembering-when-evangelicals-tried-exorcise-gays-hell-houses>, accessed January 24,

2023; J. Zauzmer, "What's scarier than a haunted house? At Judgement House, it's eternal damnation," *The Washington Post* (October 30, 2016) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/10/30/whats-scarier-than-a-haunted-house-at-judgement-house-eternal-damnation/>, accessed January 24, 2023; T. Dart, "Welcome to a Texas hell house, where wayward Christians are scared straight," *The Guardian* (October 31, 2015) <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/oct/31/halloween-texas-hell-house-wayward-christians-scared>, accessed January 24, 2023.

21 kwazana, "Ball Busters and the Recurring Trauma of Intergenerational Queer/Feminist Life," *Bully Bloggers* (February 20, 2016) <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/author/kwazana/>, accessed January 24, 2023.

22 C. Hajjar, "Inside Killjoy's Kastle: Dykey Ghosts, Feminist Monsters, and Other Lesbian Hauntings: Allyson Mitchell and Cait McKinney," *c mag* (July 15, 2020) <https://cmagazine.com/articles/inside-killjoys-kastle-dykey-ghosts-feminist-monsters-and-other?fbclid=IwAR3pabo2gx1py4zV8gqBnn-Irj0JPMv2d0PdI6YqsVpXIWGE21IxcSLOE>, accessed January 24, 2023.

In this sense, Haines' installation can be read as a trans* response to Mitchell and Logue's piece, imagining a digitally enclosed space – the gallery – this time focused on trans* narratives and counter-narratives.

Cat Haines uses resignification techniques here: the case of the first photograph encountered in the virtual dungeon, entitled *Lesbian Wedding*, is very clear (fig. 2). The photograph is taken directly from her wedding album and portrays the artist and her then wife. This classic shot is then part of a narrative about gender and sexual orientation: in the artist's experience, also through the influence of lesbian mainstream pornography and popular culture, the idea of participating in the same narrative of lesbian relationship came before her self-identification as a trans* woman, recognising a lesbian intent in her relationship of that time.²³ In the book placed in front of the work of art, it is possible to read a text by the author explaining the profound meaning of the image:

The first lesbian wedding I attended was my own. I just didn't realize it at the time. It wasn't until many years later talking in bed at 2 a.m. with my wife about transition and life and living and changing and we realized we're wives and so we kissed our first kiss as wife and wife.



Fig. 2 C. Haines, *Lesbian Wedding*, 2012, courtesy of the artist.

²³ Haines quotes also the impact of the character Lisa a lesbian-identified man, portrayed by Devon Gummersall in the popular in US series *The L Word*, who appears during season 1 from episode 1.07: "Losing It" to 1.10: "Luck, Next Time."

Moving to forward in the gallery exploration, one encounters *Psychopathia Transsexualis 1892/2016* (fig. 3): the artist is here portrayed in her bathtub, smoking marijuana from a bong. The title of the image is inspired to *Psychopathia Sexualis: Eine Klinisch-Forensische Studie* by the German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing. Published in 1886, the book is recognized as one of the earliest systematic treatise of homosexuality: words that later came into use, such as “sadism,” “masochism” and the adjective “bisexual,” borrowed from botany, appeared here for the first time. In particular, Haines draws inspiration from one of the book’s several clinical studies. It is the account of a person who might today be called transgender, suffering from gout, who seeks relief from the pain by taking long hot baths while smoking hashish. During one of these baths, the person describes the sensation of finally feeling like a woman, of perceiving her body in a new configuration. This experience, more than a century old, resonates with the artist’s own: hence this kind of re-enactment, a break in the timeline, an unforeseen glitch between different epochs constructed through a bodily sensation.²⁴



Fig. 3 C. Haines, *Psychopathia Transsexualis 1892/2016*, 2016, courtesy of the artist.

24 R. Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, trans. C. G. Chaddock (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company, 1892): 207-208.

The exhibition ends with a hidden image that can only be accessed by crossing a threshold: this is not just a ploy to avoid breaking the nudity rules of the Twitch streaming platform, which broadcasts the social events held in the gallery, but a choice motivated by the sensitivity of the content shown. It is a classic mirror selfie of the artist after her operation, still with a catheter protruding from her genitals. It is certainly a powerful image: by separating it from the rest of the exhibition space, the artist invites the viewer to question his or her desire to see, whether it is generated by a simple, objectifying curiosity about the anatomical features of the trans* body, or whether such a presence can lead elsewhere, to the heart of the political questions posed by her body itself.

A feminist strand of immersivity: Haines' work and the cis-sexist feminist art canon

As the artist states, “trans women’s subjectivity and bodies are abject in society and in feminist/lesbian art and literature – a big way we see that is through... ‘pussy art.’”²⁵ This last phrase refers to the feminist artistic tradition, which has at its core an aesthetic reflection on female physiology and the cultural processes associated with it. I could perhaps venture the hypothesis that there is a feminist declination of immersivity in the history of art that explicitly refers to the exploration of the interior of the female body, and in particular of her sexual organs, which are precisely internal.²⁶ This tradition, which dates back at least to the late 1960s and 1970s, still has many representatives.

25 M. Grande-Sherbert, “Arts and (Mine)crafts,” *the carillon* (March 25, 2021) <https://www.carillonregina.com/arts-and-minecrafts/>, accessed January 24, 2023.

26 Consider some very famous precursors, such as *Hon - en katedral*, the monumental sculpture created by the French-American artist Niki de Saint Phalle in collaboration with Jean Tinguely and Per Olof Ultvedt for the Moderna Museet in Stockholm in 1966; or the insistence on sculptural variations of the vulva explored by Judy Chicago in the monumental participatory work *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979). More recent examples of this strand will be discussed in the following pages.

Before the official opening, on the International Trans Day of Visibility (31 March 2021), Haines held a studio visit during which she clarified some of her artistic references, thus placing her work in dialogue with this specific artistic tradition.²⁷ She prepared an ideal gallery for the interviewer, displaying her personal canon of “pussy art:” recent examples of art that focuses on the female genitalia and the political discourses surrounding it, which participate in the feminist investigations of the body, but are at the same time critical of it, offering suggestions on how to move beyond essentialist views. First, Haines includes the contribution of the neurodiverse Lenape and Potawatomi Two-Spirit artist Vanessa Dion Fletcher, who has often addressed the cultural and biological shaping of the female body. Haines quotes her exhibition *Own Your Cervix*, held at the Tangled + Disability Art Gallery in Toronto, from January 13 to March 31, 2017. During opening hours, visitors could book a guided tour with the artist, which included a session of cervix self-examination.²⁸ Dion Fletcher suggested repurposing the medical practice of exploring inside the body for people with internal genitalia, providing guidance on using a speculum to “own” their own cervix. The speculum, a medical instrument that has been widely cited in feminist philosophy and thought,²⁹ is here restored to its

27 “Ender Gallery: Virtual Open Studio with Cat Haines (Minecraft Artist Residency),” Ender Gallery, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NXfuRPeBMY8&t=1600s>, accessed January 24, 2023.

28 See the website of the Tangled Arts, “Own Your Cervix Appointments,” <https://tangledarts.org/whats-on/own-your-cervix-appointments/>, accessed January 24, 2023.

29 Feminism and feminist art have a long history of dealing with the oldest instrument of gynaecology and obstetrics, a visualisation device intended for both surveillance and diagnosis, at the centre of the debate on the epistemology of looking inside women’s bodies. As is well known, in 1974 the French philosopher of difference Luce Irigaray entitled her theoretical book *Speculum of the Other Woman*. The instrument itself, perfected in the 1840s by J. Marion Sims, who experimented with it on African-American slaves without anaesthesia, became the focus of second-wave American feminist interest in women’s health. Among those promoting its use as a self-diagnostic device was Carol Downer, a feminist and pro-choice activist and founder of the Self Help Centre One in Los Angeles. See L. Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), trans. G. C. Gill (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); D. Spain, *Constructive Feminism: Women’s Spaces and Women’s Rights in the American City* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2016); E. Frankfort, *Vaginal Politics* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973); M. Sandelowski, “This most dangerous instrument: propriety, power, and the vaginal speculum,” *Journal of Obstetric, Gynecologic, & Neonatal Nursing* 29, no. 1 (2000): 73-82, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1552-6909.2000.tb02759.x>.

original and literal function, while encouraging women to understand the political dimension of diagnostics.³⁰

Continuing through the gallery curated by the artist, the visitor encounters the work of Australian artist Casey Jenkins, entitled *Casting Off My Womb*. In this performance, the artist spent 28 days – the average length of a menstrual cycle – knitting a white wool thread that she had previously inserted into her vagina: the resulting strip changes colour according to the days on which it was knitted, showing signs of vaginal mucus until menstruation. The work, which is clearly inspired by famous examples, such as Carolee Schneemann’s performance *Interior Scroll* (1975), has been at the centre of a fierce media debate that has brought the taboo of menstruation and its marginalisation from public discourse back to the fore.³¹

Continuing the visit, one comes across the reproduction of one of the new “models,” so to speak, of augmented genitalia. This is an early project by the Turkish-American artist and architect Pinar Yoldas, entitled “Speculative Biologies.” Called *NeoLabium*TM, *SuperMamma*TM, and *PolyPhallii*TM, these are sexual organs “designed to stimulate our biological imagination” and “to challenge the anatomical norms around sex and gender.” Immersed in a conservation fluid similar to that used in natural history museums, but revitalised by small tubes that emit bubbles, the organs float in their glass tanks in a unique state of suspended life. In particular, Haines chooses to quote the *NeoLabium*TM (Fig. 4), a “necessary update” to female

30 In 1990 at the Harmony Theatre of New York, performance artist and post-porn activist Annie Sprinkle performed the historical piece *A Public Cervix Announcement*, during which she invited the audience member to look at her cervix, through a speculum. This is clearly a precedent that cannot be ignored. See N. Aulombard-Arnaud “A Public Cervix Announcement. Une performance pro-sexe et postporn d’Annie Sprinkle (New York, 1990),” *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* 54 (2021): 185-195, <https://doi.org/10.4000/clio.20733>.

31 The work went viral in 2013 when the YouTube video by “The Feed,” dubbed “Vaginal Knitting” reached rapidly 3.5 million views: the comments by audience were for the most part disgusted remarks addressed to the artist herself. See C. Jenkins, “I’m the ‘vaginal knitting’ performance artist – and I want to defend my work,” *The Guardian* (December 2017, 13) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/17/vaginal-knitting-artist-defence>, accessed January 24, 2023.

anatomy, designed to amplify pleasure, in response to its pervasive limitation³².



Fig. 4 P. Yoldas, *NeoLabium™* from *Speculative Biologies*, 2008, courtesy of the artist.

Another interesting example of recent “vulva art” is the work of Japanese artist Megumi Igarashi (under the pseudonym Rokudenashiko, which means “good-for-nothing”). As the word for this, “manko,” cannot be pronounced in public, the artist has engaged in various forms of “manko” art (fig. 5), to the point of spending ten days in jail in 2014 on obscenity charges after sailing in a two-metre kayak designed on the 3D scan of her vulva. Interestingly, the obscenity charge was not for the kayak itself, whose shape and bright yellow colour were not so mimetic, but for the act of circulating the 3D scan itself: she was the first person to be charged with “electronic obscenity.”

Haines’ ideal itinerary ends with a return to the beginnings of this kind of art historical tradition: the visitor is led to Georgia O’Keeffe’s early masterpiece, *Black*

32 In Yoldas’ words “In a world where sexual pleasure is denied to women under the name of religion, tradition or law the amplified pleasure toolkit of NeoLabium™ is a weapon. The increased enervation of NeoLabium™ is a form of empowerment. Compared to the average female genitalia, NeoLabium™ offers a more accentuated look.” P. Yoldas, “SuperMammal™ Dissected: Towards a Phenomenology for a New Species,” in P. Yoldas, *Speculative Biologies: New Directions in Art in the Age of the Anthropocene*, dissertation (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2016): 43.

Iris (1926). In this monumental floral painting, the details of the interior of the flower are magnified in proportion on a 90-per-70-centimetre canvas, suggesting a non-literal understanding of its subject.



Fig. 5 Rokudenashiko, *Battleground Manko Art*, 2014, courtesy of the artist.

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical and critical frameworks surrounding the artworks under discussion, I draw on the concept of “poetic operation” recently elaborated by micha cárdenas.³³ Exploring the realm of activist art by trans* people of colour, the artist and researcher posits that these works embody survival strategies, representing a poetic sublimation of essential needs that aligns with various characteristics inherent in digital devices. This concept holds particular relevance to Haines’ work, especially considering the examples of vulva art I mentioned. The installation uniquely manifests itself as a safe space for trans* people while simultaneously functioning as a digital reflection of body hacking. With

33 m. cárdenas, *Poetic Operations: Trans of Color Art in Digital Media* (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2022).

this phrase, I do not refer (only) to the cybernetic movement devoted to body enhancing, but, more precisely, to the convergence of transfeminism and hacktivism. In this regard, “the hacker and open-source software movement has served not only as a means of technical support for transfeminist production but also as metaphors that exemplify the practices transfeminists attempt to carry out.”³⁴

Conclusion

I hope that the selection of examples I have presented contributes to situating Cat Haines’ artwork within an aesthetic and political tradition, of a feminist nature, that has placed critical reflection on corporeality at its centre. The choice to adapt it according to the narrow logic of a pre-constituted platform, in this case the video game Minecraft, helps to enrich the meaning of the author’s proposal, which focuses precisely on the transfeminist practice of configuring, modifying and augmenting the body, in the context of a still heteronormative society. By situating itself in a virtual elsewhere, one could say a “metaverse,” where social norms can be circumvented and rewritten, Haines’ work achieves its critical potential. This brings me back to the Foucauldian concept of “heterotopia” that I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, which I think perfectly describes the tensions that inhabit the digital space that Haines is leading: it is indeed an elsewhere where heteronormative rules are subverted, but it is also a non-neutral terrain, ploughed by a grid that limits our possibilities. In Foucault’s words:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously

34 L. Egana, M. Solá, trans. M. Brashe, “Hacking the Body: A Transfeminist War Machine,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1-2 (May 2016): 74-80, 78, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3334223>.

represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.³⁵

35 M. Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" (1984), trans. J. Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22-27, 24.

Techniques and Poetics of the Submarine in Film: A Pretext for an Archeology of Immersion



ÉLISE JOUHANNET, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1052-5164>
<https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19529>

Abstract

Water, whether surface or depths, recurrently appears in cinema as a motif and a material. The great symbolic importance this recurrence of the aquatic bears within film leads to calling its different uses into question, especially when it comes to the subaquatic. Addressing the question of the submarine allows going beyond water as a simple surface, and thus to move towards a real habitability of water. Making a history of underwater cinema that includes precinematic devices such as the public aquariums of the late 19th century enables the identification of an aesthetic community, as well as that of a common desire to stage a totalizing perceptive experience of the aquatic element and, in that way, of the image materiality. In line with the various cinematic underwater devices conceived to that end during the 20th century, virtual reality, as a total experience generator, also resorts to the subaquatic as a pretext to immerse the user in the work of art. The recurring fascination for the subaquatic throughout the ages, even more so with the rise of new media, demonstrates how water is a central feature to better define and archeologize the concept of immersion.

Keywords

[Water](#)

[Underwater cinema](#)

[Aquarium](#)

[Virtual reality](#)

[Hydrohumanities](#)

To quote this essay: E. Jouhannet, “Techniques and Poetics of the Submarine in Film: A Pretext for an Archeology of Immersion,” *AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images* [ISSN 2785-7433] 2, no. 2 (2023): 91-109, <https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19529>.

Taking the Plunge

The true eye of the earth is water.¹

In *Water and Dreams*, Gaston Bachelard tries to define this element that is so hard to catch due to its fluid nature. It takes so many shapes, colors and movements that describing water with human words seems pointless. Therefore, to talk about water, language and imagination must borrow its properties. To Bachelard, a true imagination is always in motion; like a fluid, it is always “without images,” or, at least, “beyond images.”² “The world is an immense Narcissus thinking itself”³ and to get to the essence of things, the true poet must dive through the surface of images, through the mirror, to find themselves in the deep blue and finally feel things from the inside, as they really are.

Water is described by Bachelard as an optical device. The aqueous eye “looks back at us”⁴ but, like a screen, it is also a surface creating moving images. According to Erkki Huhtamo, the first written mentions of the word “screen” in English can be found during the Renaissance period, describing objects supposed to protect from the heat of a fireplace. Those screens were made of translucent materials that allowed the viewer to perceive the movement of the flames. The flames, their physicality and their movement were as important as the screen itself because they create moving images, either abstract or figurative⁵.

1 G. Bachelard, *L'eau et les rêves, essai sur l'imagination de la matière* (Paris: José Corti, 1942): 45 [my translation].

2 G. Bachelard, *L'air et les songes, essai sur l'imagination du mouvement* (Paris: José Corti, 1943): 8 [my translation].

3 J. Gasquet, *Narcisse* (Paris: Librairie de France, 1931): 45 quoted by G. Bachelard in *L'eau et ses rêves*: 36.

4 G. Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (Paris: Minuit, 1992) [my translation].

5 E. Huhtamo, “Elements of Screenology: Toward an Archeology of the Screen,” *Navigationen-Zeitschrift für Medien-und Kulturwissenschaften* 6, no. 2 (2006): 35, <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/1958>.

They gave depth and substance to what would otherwise be a simple surface.

Moving images and the screen are co-dependent. Together, they act as “a threshold, barrier, reflector, membrane, interface, or vehicle for light and sound, thus joining, separating, or reconfiguring the spaces in front of and behind it.”⁶ This definition can be extended to natural elements – like fire or water – allowing for an expanded reconsideration of the screen. Doing a “screenology”⁷ makes it possible to understand that the screen cannot be reduced to a technical apparatus but can be found everywhere, including in nature. This “environmentalization”⁸ of the screen is in accordance with the concept of *immersion* in art which advocates for a genuine habitability of the image by constantly challenging the limits of the screen.

Defining immersive art is not an easy task. It is also difficult to delineate historically. Duncan White, in his attempt to map expanded cinema (one of the various manifestations of what we consider immersive art), demonstrates the tentacular complexity of such a genealogy, the beginning of which he situates in the 19th century.⁹ Extending the definition of the screen and immersivity to nature highlights the porosity between the history of the arts and their apparatuses with the wider history of the relations between humans and ecosystems.

Natural elements must be reconsidered as the raw material of immersion and as fundamental immersive mediums, the various qualities of which inspired our modern devices. Therefore, water can be considered a “natural

6 A. Rogers, “Taking the Plunge: The New Immersive Screens,” in C. Buckley, R. Campe, F. Casetti, eds., *Screen Genealogies: from Optical Devices to Environmental Medium* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019): 135-158, 140.

7 E. Huhtamo, “Elements of Screenology”: 32.

8 A. Pinotti, “Towards An-Iconology: The Image as Environment,” *Screen* 61, no. 4 (2020): 594-603, 594, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjaa060>.

9 D. White, “Mapping Expanded Cinema,” *Vertigo* 4, no. 2 (2009), https://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/vertigo_magazine/volume-4-issue-2-winter-spring-2009/expanded-cinema/, accessed February 28, 2023.

screen” that allows the viewer to fulfill the old fantasy of physically going through the screen. The poet described by Bachelard experiences the literal definition of “immersion” by crossing the surface of water. The etymology of immersion comes from Latin *mergere* which means “bury” or “dive in,”¹⁰ and is defined as “the act of putting somebody or something into a liquid, especially so that they, or it, are completely covered.”¹¹ As a concept and in its artistic applications, immersion is deeply linked to submarine liquidity, continuously reenacting this fundamental experience of being submerged in water.

Let’s describe this situation: underwater, beneath the surface, the diver is the only interface. Their body is changing environment and this change deeply affects their relationships to their surroundings. While the air on earth was an invisible substance in which they could breathe and move freely, in water the whole environment is visible, heavy, tactile, and unpredictable. At a certain depth, the submarine is a deadly environment. The amount of pressure on the body compresses the organism, giving a sensation described by divers as a sea “embrace,” “a true oceanic feeling.”¹²

Although this opposition between air and water is interesting phenomenologically, it is a bit binary. Indeed, even if invisible, if you concentrate enough on your breathing, you can feel there is no distance between your body and the air either. Also, the elements in our ecosystem are not so radically divided. To the hydrofeminist Astrida Neimanis, everything is made *by* and *of* water¹³ and this community of bodies questions the seemingly obvious

10 “Immerger,” Portail Lexical du Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales, <https://www.cnrtl.fr/etymologie/immerger>, accessed July 25, 2023.

11 “Immerse,” Oxford Learner’s Dictionary, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/immerse>, accessed July 25, 2023.

12 M. Jue, *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater* (Durham-London, Duke University Press, 2020): 65.

13 “Astrida Neimanis ‘We Are All at Sea’,” RIBOCA channel on YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hp1wo1irkQA&ab_channel=RIBOCA, accessed July 31, 2023.

oppositions between natural elements. Nevertheless, by being historically situated, these binary oppositions are helpful in understanding how watery imaginary has been built in western culture and how, according to this imaginary, devices were made to confront rather than adapt to water.

Water and Screen Materiality

There is a great community of thoughts and images between water and immersive devices, and, more generally, between water and the visual arts. This collaboration can even be traced back to Antiquity. The Roman era provides one of the biggest testimonies: the *Mosaic of Maritime Life* (c. 100 BCE) decorating the floor of the Faun's House in Pompei, representing water as rather flat and still despite the extreme realism of some animals.

All the potentialities of the surface of watery elements were explored at the Renaissance, with painting experiments on the reflective qualities of transparent mediums such as mirror, glass and of course, water. Those experiments were theorized in the 18th century by Isaac Newton in *Opticks* (1704) which explores the reflection and refraction of light based on the various milieux it passes through, including water. The study of the surface of water is indeed indissociable from light. The laws edited by Newton must help to “neutraliz[e]” “the distorting power of a medium” and to avoid exploiting its joyful deformations.¹⁴ Therefore, the water typically represented in 18th century paintings appears domesticated (Fig. 1).

14 J. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1990): 64.



Fig. 1. Jean Simeon Chardin, *Water Glass and Jug*, ca. 1760, Pittsburgh, Carnegie Museum of Art.

The mastery of light is also the prerogative of cinema. However, contrary to 18th century painting which had a tendency to freeze water and insist on its reflective qualities, early cinema displays a fascination with its movements, especially if they appear to be out of control. In the Lumière's films, water is either discreet and playful as shown in the famous *Sprinkler Sprinkled* (1895) or, on the contrary, taking up the entire surface of the screen, merging the film roll and the sea in a single materiality like in *View no 11: The Sea* (1895). Later, in filmic history, Teresa Weenberg and Suzanne Nessim continue to play with the graphic properties and cinematic potentialities of the surface of water. In *Swimmer* (1978), the rectangular frame of the screen is doubled by the artificial frame of the pool as a way of controlling the volatility of elements, whether water or electronic snow. The editing alternates between wide shots of the water in which we observe the swimmer moving, and close-ups filled with splashes and focus on aquatic material often superimposed with openings of the swimmer's body presented in strange and affected poses.

The focus on the turquoise water highlights its luminous diversity and ever-changing aspect as a perfect metaphor for the materiality of the screen's images.¹⁵ Thanks to water, the video screen as well as the swimmer's body become less rigid, less impenetrable. By blurring oppositions and distances, water enables the transgression of boundaries, including that of the screen's/skin's limits. This way, the screen gets closer to a "natural medium,"¹⁶ a watery one, enhanced by the technological.

Through this use of water, Wennberg and Nes-sim (as well as the Lumière brothers) implemented what Jeffrey Wall called the "liquid intelligence" of photography¹⁷ which can also be applied to moving images as "liquid cinema"¹⁸ or "vidé-eau."¹⁹ It is the idea that photography and cinema take from water in their way of being and of representing reality, adopting liquid properties such as transparency, reflection, fluidity, expansion and permeability. To Jeff Wall, water is an "archaism," a "prehistoric image" of photography²⁰ and thus, of cinema. Therefore, to address water is indeed to consider this element as a historical medium, a naturally cinematic one that can be archaeologized, and which, through its liquidity, inspired a good number of images, whether moving or not.

Liquid Cinema: Filming Through the Aquarium

The history of cinema and water begins way earlier than cinema itself, in nature and other visual arts.

15 F. Parfait, *Vidéo: un art contemporain* (Paris: Éditions du Regard, 2001): 96-100.

16 H. Vaughan, "Toward a Natural Screen Philosophy," in C. Rawls, D. Neiva, S. S. Gouveia, eds., *Philosophy and Film* (London-New York: Routledge, 2019).

17 J. Wall, "Photographie et intelligence liquide," in *Essais et entretiens. 1984-2001* (Paris: École des Beaux-Arts, 2001): 175-178 [my translation].

18 P.-A. Michaud, "Aquarium ou le cinéma liquide," in F. Bovier, A. Mey, eds., *Cinéma exposé* (Lausanne: les Auteurs, 2014): 55-65 [my translation].

19 F. Parfait, *Vidéo: un art contemporain*: 118-120.

20 J. Wall, "Photographie et intelligence liquide": 176 [my translation].

Nevertheless, the aforementioned Lumière's first movies give water a central role. The passion of the two brothers for means of transportation encouraged them to film not only trains but also boats, whether battleships like the *Fürst-Bismarck* (*View no 785: Kiel: The Launch of the Fürst-Bismarck*, 1897) or smaller boats such as in the bucolic *Boat Leaving the Port* (1897). It is the same fascination for marine equipment that led French filmmaker Jean Vigo to make a barge sailing to Paris the main character of his movie *L'Atalante* (1933). If the landscapes passed by on the banks and reflected into water transform the *Atalante's* journey into a real *mise en abyme* of the movie's progress, the movie is interesting for its famous underwater sequences. During one of the key moments of the film, the captain of the boat throws himself overboard. This is followed by a 2-minutes underwater scene where he whirls around in front of the camera with the superimposed image of his lost wife in her wedding dress, floating in the depths of the river (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Jean Vigo, *L'Atalante*, 1934, still from film.

Subaquatic sequences being quite rare at the time, this scene is a technical achievement. The first underwater photograph was taken in 1856 by William Thompson. It is a wet collodion photograph that managed to capture the few beams of underwater light, creating a rather

abstract image of the ocean's depths. Another photograph, maybe more crucial, was taken in 1893 by Louis Boutan. This time the bottom of the sea appears clearly, giving the very first vision of an underwater world.²¹

Before putting a movie camera underwater, observations of the wonders of seascapes were made possible by aquariums. An engraving published in 1890 in the journal *La Nature*, shows the inventor of photochronography, Étienne-Jules Marey, taking shots of an aquarium that he installed in one of the walls of his house in Posillipo, facing the sea.²² Five to six years later,²³ one of the Lumière brothers, Louis, collaborator of the same journal, was making a film named *The Aquarium*, which describes a tiny aquarium filled with frogs and fishes, the iron frame of which almost perfectly matches a projection screen “like an image inside an image,” a medium inside a medium.²⁴

This technique of first filming the submarine through aquariums of varying sizes was then taken up by the filmmakers of the 1920s. Among the most famous is French filmmaker Jean Painlevé who not only wanted to scientifically document aquatic fauna, but also to create an artistic, playful and aesthetic object.²⁵ Painlevé was filming aquariums and his friend, Jean Vigo, borrowed his techniques to film underwater scenes through the portholes of a pool.²⁶ This is how the sequences of *L'Atalante* were made, as well as some of the scenes of the short film *Taris*,

21 A. Martinez, “‘A Souvenir of Undersea Landscapes’: Underwater Photography and the Limits of Photographic Visibility, 1890-1910,” *História Ciências Saúde-Manguinhos* 3 (2014): 2-3, <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-59702014000300013>.

22 É.-J. Marey, “Locomotion in Water As Studied through Photochronography,” *La Nature* (1890) quoted in H.R. Shell, “Things Under Water: Etienne-Jules Marey’s Aquarium Laboratory and Cinema’s Assembly,” in B. Latour, P. Weibel, eds., *Dingpolitik: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005): 327-331.

23 We have found two different dates in G. Le Gall, *Aquariorama: histoire d’un dispositif* (Paris: Mimesis, 2022): 301 and P.-A. Michaud, “Aquarium ou le cinéma liquide”: 59, 1895 for the first and 1896 for the second.

24 P.-A. Michaud, “Aquarium ou le cinéma liquide”: 58-59.

25 P. Roubaix, “Le milieu subaquatique et le cinéma scientifique français,” in A. Martinet, ed., *Le cinéma et la science* (Paris: CNRS, 1994): 150.

26 L. Vigo, *Jean Vigo, une vie engagée dans le cinéma* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2002): 89.

roi de l'eau, which observes the underwater movements of swimming champion Jean Taris, three years earlier.

The French cinema of the 1920s is closely related to water. Due to economic constraint and a willingness to work independently from official studios, French filmmakers were drawn to film French landscapes, including coastlines. The constraint induced creativity, birthing a French fascination for water and seascapes, turning them into a frequent protagonist of the films of this period.²⁷ The experimentations of Vigo and Painlevé are very relevant to understand the specific technicity surrounding the aquatic medium, which led to technical and aesthetic innovations inspired by the material qualities of water. The use of superimposition, fluid transitions, slow motion, combined with the surrealism and astonishment produced by underwater images all lead to a greater sense of immersion. Indeed, the use of water and liquid images narrows the frontier between viewer and screen. The closer the filmic apparatus gets to water, the greater the sense of immersiveness.

Cinematic Immersion in the 19th Century

Shared history between aquariums and cinema does not begin with Marey and Louis Lumière. By shooting a fish tank they were not only making scientific observations on the movement of undersea fauna, but also following a great tradition of displaying the submarine by means of aquariums, which began in the 19th century. With their camera, Marey and after him Louis Lumière, Painlevé and Vigo, are in line with a way of staging a “desire to see”²⁸

27 See on this subject: E. Thouvenel, *Les images de l'eau dans le cinéma français des années 20* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010).

28 G. Le Gall, *Aquariorama*:15.

the marine depths, usually inaccessible to the human eye, and this “through”²⁹ the aquarium glass.

It was Marey’s visit to Naples’ aquarium, which remains one of Europe’s oldest aquariums today, that first gave him the idea to install one at home.³⁰ Conceived in 1872, it was greatly inspired by the first monumental aquarium made for the Paris Jardin d’Acclimatation in 1861: it consists in a single room equipped with large aquariums along the walls, which are punctuated with columns differentiating the many tanks that operate like a “painting gallery”³¹ in motion. The Paris aquarium (Fig. 3) is considerably larger. The aquarium’s entire architecture can be understood as a large “optical machine”³² fully engineered to bring light inside the tanks primarily via zenithal openings. Light has a crucial role to play since it can be used to create different ambiances and illuminate marine creatures in the most optimal way.³³ The necessity of light in the functioning of aquariums also compares to cinema. The many windows created by the architecture constitute real glass “screens”³⁴ lit from the inside, offering a frame to moving images staged to give a certain vision, a fantasy, of the bottom of the sea. Meanwhile, motion within the aquariums is reinforced by the outer movements of the visitors who watch images unfold like film reels as they walk alongside the tanks. Additionally, similarly to movie theaters, the building is submerged in obscurity to emphasize the liquid images.

A few years later during the 1867 Paris World’s Fair, two aquariums were built, one marine and the other for freshwater, both designed like underwater caves. The

29 Ibid.: 38.

30 H.R. Shell, “Things Under Water”: 328.

31 G. Le Gall, “Dioramas aquatiques: Théophile Gauthier visite l’aquarium du jardin d’Acclimatation,” *Culture & Musées* 32 (2018): 85, <https://doi.org/10.4000/culturemusees.2370>.

32 C. Lorenzi, “L’engouement pour l’aquarium en France (1855-1870),” *Sociétés & Représentations* 2, no. 28 (2009): 263, <https://doi.org/10.3917/sr.028.0253>.

33 G. Le Gall, *Aquariorama*: 68-62.

34 G. Le Gall, “Dioramas aquatiques”: 99.

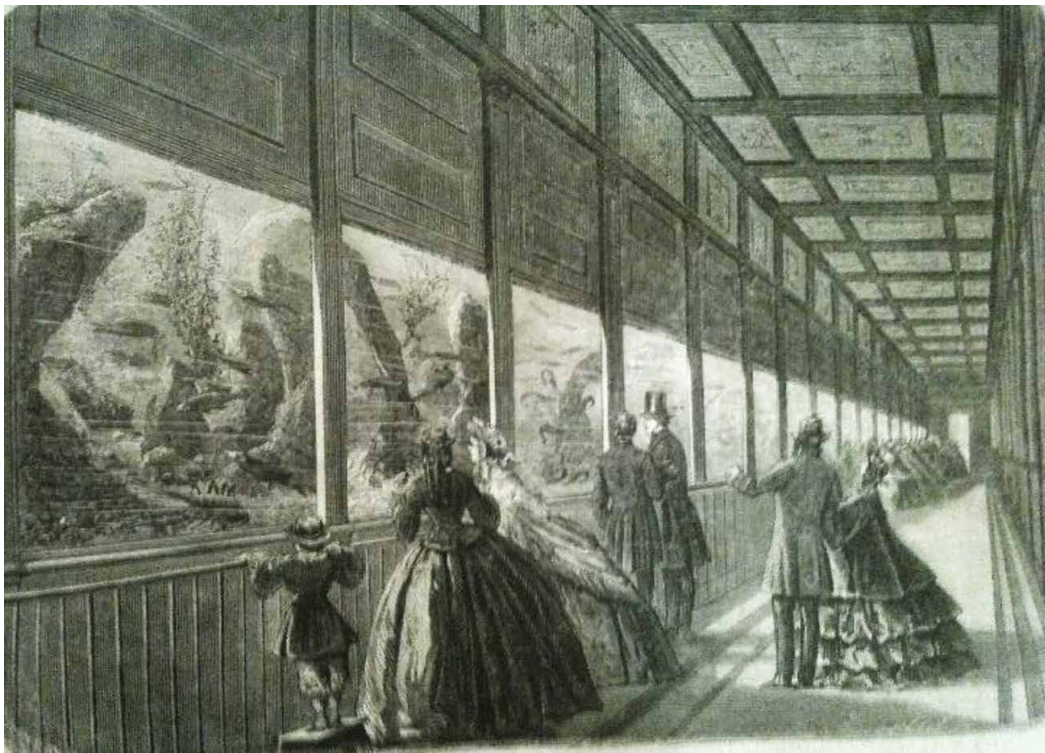


Fig. 3. Bertrand, *The aquarium of the Jardin d'Acclimatation*, in "Le Monde Illustré," January 10, 1863.

marine aquarium is particularly interesting because it featured reservoirs not only on the sides, but also on the ceiling of the cave, which gave visitors the vivid impression of being both under the earth and under the sea, a sensation strengthened by the *mise en scène* of the space bathed in silent obscurity and covered by stalactites such as those found in coast caves. The idea was to experience new physical sensations by immersing the body in a peculiar environment, to disconnect visitors from their usual reality and have them *dive in* an environment they would otherwise never have access to.³⁵ Not only was this aquarium a cinematic experience, a moving light image experiment, it was also in itself an installation in the most contemporary meaning of the word: an all-encompassing environment.

Although less known, this last aquarium is the one that inspired Jules Verne in his description of the *Nautilus* in *Twenty Leagues under the Sea*, which was published a few years after the World's Fair (1869-70).³⁶ It is also this

35 C. Lorenzi, "L'engouement pour l'aquarium en France": 261-264.

36 M.-P. Demarck, D. Frémond, eds., *Jules Verne, le roman de la mer* (Paris: Seuil, 2005): 82.

very book that inspired American filmmaker John Ernest Williamson to make the first underwater film in 1914.

Inventing the Sea: Underwater Films

Williamson's film is interesting from many perspectives. From a media archeology viewpoint, the apparatus he invented is highly symptomatic of the constraints inherent to the submarine milieu (Fig. 4).

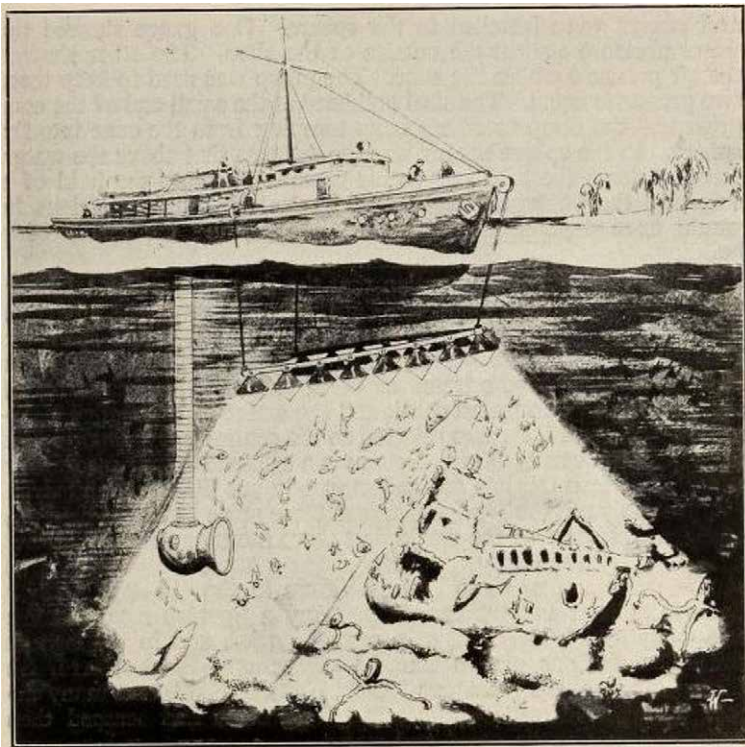


Fig. 4. *How Submarine Movies are Made*, in "Transactions of the Society of Motion Pictures Engineers," New York: Society of Motion Pictures Engineers 153 (1921), Washington DC, Library of Congress.

Thirty Leagues under the Sea is a silent short film showing sights of the Bahamas and its marine fauna, at first fished and brought to the surface by force, then staged in a 5-minutes underwater scene. The Bahamas was chosen for its clear transparent waters which compensated for the lack of undersea light, one of the major issues with underwater filming.³⁷ To counter the obscurity of the depths, Williamson conceived a complementary lighting system using a large spotlight hanging from the ship that

37 B. Taves, "A Pioneer Under the Sea," *Library of Congress Information Bulletin* 55, no. 15 (1996), <https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9615/sea.html>, accessed by 06/01/2022.

would illuminate the sub-seascape. Since analog cameras could not be used underwater, Williamson used a folding tube underneath the boat, leading to a “photosphere,” a spheric observational chamber equipped with a cone that resembles the objective of a camera,³⁸ shaped like a porthole which circles the lens. That way, Williamson would be able, from the boat, to go down the tube into the photosphere, providing a dry space to film various scenes of marine life. Williamson’s apparatus shows that diving underwater requires adjustments, devices and shapes that differ from preexisting ones used on land. In the context of a “surrounding medium”³⁹ such as the aquatic, spheres, globes, and bubbles are better adapted to immersion than for instance a cube, however easier to manufacture. Indeed, just as in space, roundness is suited to withstanding underwater pressure.⁴⁰ That is why underwater exploration equipment will systematically be spherical following Williamson.

The story of underwater exploration is also a story of cinema, all underwater devices also being used to capture moving images. One thinks for example of the *Bathysphere* (Fig. 5) designed by Otis Barton and William Beebe in 1930, a sphere equipped with three portholes and connected to a ship by a cable that allows deeper and deeper descent into the depths of the ocean, sometimes with a camera. Like the aquariums, the photosphere and the *Bathysphere* allow the immersion of their inhabitants at the very heart of the sea and circularize the relationship to the environment. More than simple observatories, they allow the whole body to come as close as possible to the substance of water and, therefore, as close as possible to

38 J.E. Williamson, C. L. Gregory, “Submarine Photography,” *Transactions of the Society of Motion Pictures Engineers* (New York: Society of Motion Pictures Engineers, 1921): 153.

39 A. Somaini, “The Atmospheric Screen: Turner, Hazlitt, Ruskin,” in C. Buckley, R. Campe, F. Casetti, eds., *Screen Genealogies*: 169.

40 J. Brugidou, F. Clouette, “Habiter les abysses? D’une architecture du confinement à la co-création de mondes,” *Techniques & Culture* 75 (2021): 6, <https://doi.org/10.4000/tc.15690>.

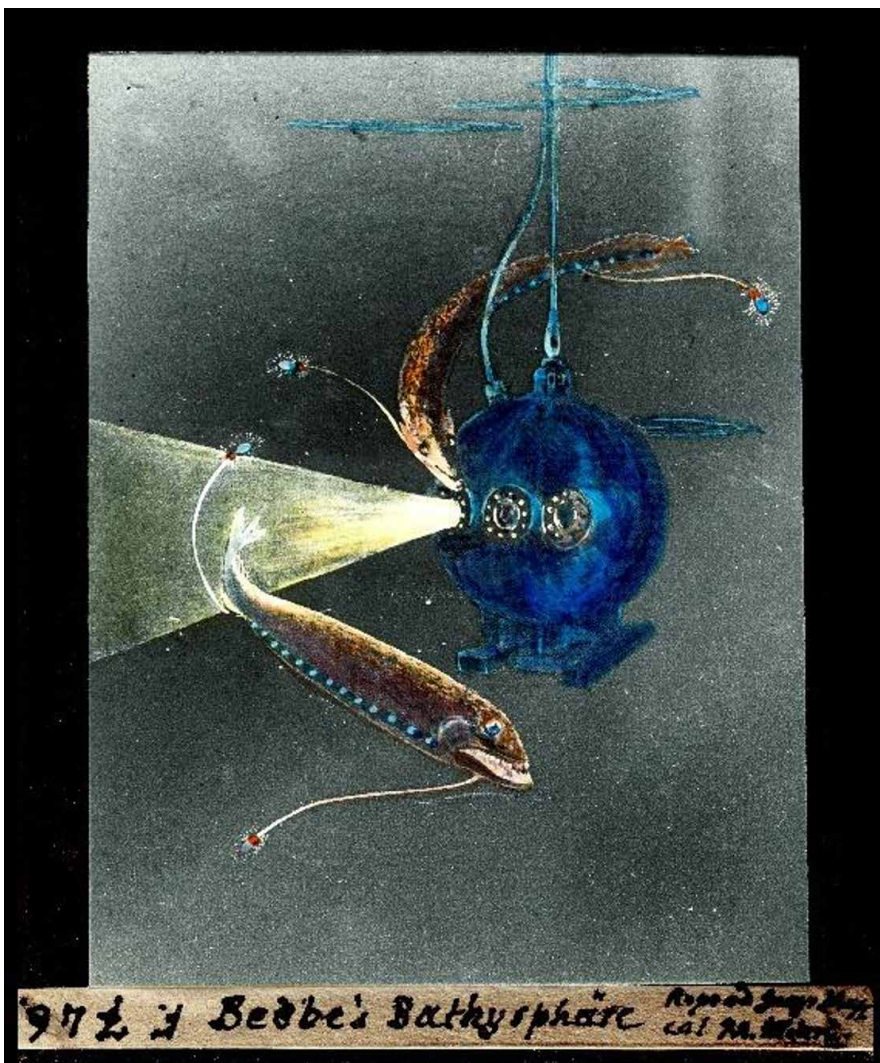


Fig. 5. Leo Wehrli, Margrit Wehrli-Frey, *Beebe's Bathysphere* in "National Geographic Magazine," 1934. © ETH Library Zürich, Image Archive.

the image, thus enabling the body "to navigate in a three-dimensional environment."⁴¹

However, if the goal – especially when the camera is carried by scientific missions – is objectivity, recorded visions are often influenced by the ideologies of their time. Williamson's movie is shaped by Western imperialism which goes along with an underwater imaginary inherited from the aquariums of the 19th century. The ocean, like other territories, is considered a space to conquer, enslave, civilize, along with its inhabitants, a space without time, borders or history.⁴² The underwater scenes in *Thirty Leagues under the Sea* depict the seabed as a place of danger and fascination, a danger Williamson creates himself by hanging a

41 P. Roubaix, "Le milieu subaquatique et le cinéma scientifique français": 162-163 [my translation].

42 N. Starosielski, "Beyond Fluidity: A Cultural History of Cinema Underwater," in S. Rust, S. Monani, S. Cubitt, eds., *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (London-New York: Routledge, 2013): 149.

dead horse face down in the water in the hope of attracting a shark that he will then kill with his bare hands. Williamson did not want to simply document underwater fauna and flora, he also sought to present the fight of the western man against wild nature and its inhabitants.⁴³

This colonial and imperialist imaginary continues in the second part of the 20th century, like in the famous movies of Jacques-Yves Cousteau.⁴⁴ Therefore, even if shapes are changing within the submarine, few films revolutionize their content. The submarine apparatuses also carry technical and ideological confrontation to the environment they seek to explore, a reinvention of the submarine rather than a true understanding of its beings and functioning.

Virtual Underwater Ecologies

Rethinking the materiality of the screen, of images and of relationships to the environment through the prism of water aims to blur the distance between the viewer's body and what is being experienced; the further we progress in the history of the link between images and water, the more that distance shrinks to the point of (almost) disappearing. Immersive art in its most contemporary aspects such as virtual reality, also rhymes with the absence of distance between oneself and one's environment.⁴⁵ VR makes it possible to reproduce the real experience of a body in a given environment as faithfully as possible and thus to go beyond an ordinary experience, making it feel and become something else.⁴⁶ VR is one of the most accomplished versions of immersion thanks to its device, often reduced to a *Head Mounted Display* (HMD) which makes it possible

43 Ibid.: 154-155.

44 See *ibid.* for a complete analysis.

45 However, the absence of distance is one of the major criticisms formulated against virtual reality by O. Grau in *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003): 202-203.

46 A. Rogers, "Taking the Plunge": 152-154.

to simultaneously contain and open perception towards another space.

Water, particularly in its submarine application, is very attractive to virtual reality as an unframed, haptic manifestation of a milieu that can be experienced by the whole body, which corresponds to virtual reality's search for total perception. The fluidity of water is commensurate with the fluidity of virtual images in being easily transgressed, crossed as well as expanded and distorted. Virtual environments are in a way liquid, a liquid that cannot be touched, a missing materiality. Even if virtual perception is a totalizing experience, it is also built in relation to a fundamental *absence*. What I aim to touch in the virtual world escapes me instantly.

VR is a reality, effectively perceived, but it is also a virtual one, a program, a simulation. Incidentally, VR has no obligation to correspond to physical reality, above all when it is used for an artistic purpose. For Ariel Rogers, VR does not need to be understood through the dualism of illusion and truth. VR does not intend to “displac[e] the material world” but to “penetrate its surface.”⁴⁷ VR is therefore built on an absence, a lack of the physical world, but it is also a *more-than-the-world*, exceeding and renewing its perception.

The subaquatic experience is similar to that of VR. Being underwater enables an increased perception of some of the senses and disrupt the functioning of others. What it gains in touch, it loses in sight, hearing and smell. The diver's body is already an augmented body, trained to breathe, see and move underwater. Because everything that is perceived from under the sea dissolves in the liquid mass and the darkness of the depths, it constitutes a perfect space for the projections of the imagination. Symbolically, the subaquatic therefore exceeds the common terrestrial

47 Ibid.: 151.

world because it functions according to different laws and principles, which authorize the creation of new possibilities and fantasies.⁴⁸ VR and subaquatic environments are a world in the world, a temporary accessible bubble for humans to feel their bodies and surroundings otherwise.

One of the most renowned works in this regard is *Osmose* by Char Davies (1995). The “immersive virtual space”⁴⁹ created by Char Davies is a reality in which the frontiers between various elements can be crossed smoothly, almost without noticing. One passes without hindrance from the clouds to the darkness of the forest, to the depth of a pond or even under the ground. All these elements are rendered in a transparent and luminous way, bypassing the surfaces and enabling the sight of the interior of things. Virtual reality makes it possible to “penetrate” the surface of reality, to highlight areas of the world beyond our awareness.⁵⁰ Char Davies does not want to create a reality from scratch but rather to reveal, increase, sublimate and transform our sensorium by means of the virtual.⁵¹

To achieve this end, Char Davies drew on her own experience as a scuba diver, which inspired her to create *Osmose*.⁵² I have not been able to find out if the first images of the demonstration of *Osmose* representing the ocean floor with a diver swimming were part of the immersive experience, or if they were added after the video was edited.⁵³ Nevertheless, it is clear that for Davies, the point is to *dive* into *Osmose* and let oneself be carried by its elements. This way, Davies not only uses water as a motif in VR but as a way of experiencing the artwork. The experience is even more similar to scuba diving as the

48 M. Jue, *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater*: 78.

49 C. Davies, “Landscape, Earth, Body, Being, Space and Time in the Immersive Virtual Environments *Osmose* and *Ephemere*,” in J. Mallory, ed., *Women, Art, and Technology* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003): 327.

50 A. Rogers, “Taking the Plunge”: 151.

51 C. Davies, “Landscape, Earth, Body”: 322.

52 O. Grau, *Virtual Art*: 198.

53 See: <http://www.immersence.com/osmose/>, accessed July 25, 2023.

“immersant” floats through *Osmose* thanks to their breathing, which is recorded by sensors located in the vest on their torso. Breath removes any distance between the immersant and the surrounding reality, connecting them more deeply physically.⁵⁴ The whole body of the participant is thus involved in the process as are most of their senses, as each virtual zone crossed has a soundscape which is diffused in stereo in the HMD.

Immersion in *Osmose* lasts about fifty minutes. It is a complete and contemplative experience that intends to redefine our relationship with natural elements and technology. Char Davies is in line with the history of underwater cinema. She inherits from its technical and aesthetic achievements, but transcends them by pushing their last limit, the screen itself. By choosing to embody the experience of water, to adapt to rather than confront the surroundings, she challenges the western submarine paradigm. It is a fundamental work for many other virtual⁵⁵ (and non virtual) pieces that also investigate the relation between immersion and the aquatic element, an element that is no longer seen as a single motif, but as a genuine way of being and of experiencing an artwork.

A special thanks to Marion Magrangeas for their precious help and numerous suggestions in correcting my English for this paper.

54 C. Grammatikopoulou, “Breathing Art: Art as an Encompassing and Participatory Experience,” in C. Van den Akker, S. Legêne, eds., *Museums in a Digital Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016): 48.

55 For an interesting selection of virtual works involving water, see: <https://www.radiancevr.co/categories/water/>, accessed July 25, 2023.

Laure Prouvost's *Deep See Blue Surrounding You*. An Immersive Environment Made of Objects



STEFANO MUDU, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia – <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0680-2621>
<https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19512>

Abstract

This paper aims to demonstrate how Laure Prouvost's artistic practice requires an immersion of the viewer in intermedial installations composed of objects from the most disparate spatial and temporal origins. Since the early 2000s, the French artist has intentionally created surreal *mise-en-scenes* which, by blending video, painting, drawing, sculpture, and performance, can be understood as compositions or collages made of visual references taken from different contexts such as pop culture, the web, and private photo albums. Prouvost's works are "unstable visual entities," made of images that aggregate in heterogeneous configurations, generating eccentric atmospheres and cancelling every hierarchical order between the observer and the observed. Viewers are encouraged to fill the space by becoming objects among other objects.

By using the Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) as philosophical and methodological support, this paper will focus more closely on the analysis of *Deep See Blue Surrounding You / Vois Ce Bleu Profond Te Fondre* (2019), the project Prouvost produced for the French Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale. On this occasion, her work *They Parlaient Idéale* (2019) – a video documenting the Mediterranean Sea journey that brings her to the Venetian lagoon – was the cornerstone of a multifaceted environmental installation.

Assuming a critical and analytical approach, this contribution then discusses the role *Deep See Blue Surrounding You* plays as a “hyper-enactment:” it is a *mise-en-scene* that consists of interrelationships between “things/images” that aggregate as objects, but it is also a composition in which the viewers are “viscously” asked to generate their personal, non-linear narration.

Keywords [Laure Prouvost](#) [Surrealism](#) [Object-oriented ontology](#)
[Hyper-enactment](#) [Venice Biennale](#)

To quote this essay: S. Mudu, “Laure Prouvost’s *Deep See Blue Surrounding You*: An Immersive Environment Made of Objects,” *AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images* [ISSN 2785-7433] 2, no. 2 (2023): 110-126, <https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19512>.

A trip to our unconscious
With the help of our brains in our tentacles,
we dig tunnels to the past and the future towards Venice.¹

It is neither trivial nor negligible that the term “surreal” recurs in the many critical essays and contributions that have attempted to provide a complete – although hardly exhaustive – description of Laure Prouvost’s art practice. And indeed, the appellation seems to fit perfectly if one considers that, in line with the avant-garde sensibility, the French artist’s works appear as *mis-en-scène* (or as we will say later, *enactments*) with a programmatically eccentric aesthetic as to “freely alternate the experience of daily life with imaginary, dreamlike sensation.”²

Pop culture allusions intertwine with biographical narratives; historical sources and events are polluted by the exuberant use of private memories; consolidated linguistic codes and aesthetic canons are cancelled by a good dose of automatism and improvisation: in other words, thanks to the juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements taken from more or less distant realities, Prouvost’s works seem to create a universe of reveries that follows the poetic and emotional ambiguities of that famous “surreality” promoted by André Breton.³ Moreover, as if to embrace the Freudian creed of the father of the French avant-garde, each installation by the artist seems to be the place of a real mediation between truth and fiction, functioning as a threshold for a reality similar to the subconscious, in which

1 M. Kirszenbaum, ed., *Laure Prouvost: Deep See Blue Surrounding You / Vois ce bleu profonde te fondre* (press kit/ English) (Venice: 2019): 9. https://www.citedesartsparis.net/media/cia/183726-press_release_en.pdf, accessed December 12, 2022.

2 R. Tenconi, ed., *Grand Dad’s Visitor Center* (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2019, exhibition catalogue): 16.

3 Famous and descriptive of the attitude in question is the first definition of “surreality” offered by Breton in the first Manifesto of the avant-garde: “I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality, if one may so speak.” See A. Breton, “First Manifesto of Surrealism (1924),” in C. Harrison, P. Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992): 432-439, 436.

each subject is required to immerse themselves and create a personal narrative and/or vision.⁴

Beyond the conceptual purposes of such an approach – which very poetically allude to the possibility of annulling any canon to celebrate the supremacy of subjectivity in every field of experience and knowledge, from religion to sexuality, from ecology to psychology – the outcome of this immersion in images is achieved by Prouvost thanks to the creation of compositions. Indeed, as will be explicitly stated below, each work is presented as a shape-shifting installation which not only integrates video, painting, drawing, sculpture and performance, but treats the materials derived from the use of these media as autonomous and ever changing “objects.” As they are “unstable visual entities,” they are not only “ready-made,” taken from the most disparate contexts – mass culture, the web or family albums; they are often objects created by Prouvost herself for other projects, which continuously migrate from one work to another, adding new levels of space-time stratification to the last one in the series. In any case – whether they are commonly used materials, created from scratch or already part of the artist’s repertoire – each of them joins the others in such elaborate configurations as to require the viewer to immerse themselves completely in the installation. Laure Prouvost’s intention, indeed, is to create “networks” of meaning and connections between the objects to make the observer feel immersed in the body of her works. As the observer enters the installations, the hierarchies among the objects are eliminated and they become an object among other objects; now consumed by the composition.

4 In the introduction to her *Legsicon* – a book published in 2019 in the occasion of *AM-BIG-YOU-US LEGSICON*, the solo show she presented at MhKA in Antwerp – Prouvost argues that her editorial and exhibition project functions almost as a guide for the viewer who, together with her, “will be digging deeper and deeper into the subconscious.” See L. Prouvost, “Introduction,” in N. Haq, ed., *Legsicon: Laure Prouvost* (Bruges-Antwerp: Books Works with M HKA, 2019, exhibition catalogue): 7.

Surreal compositions, immersive installations

The operations of doubling, repetition, manipulation or aggregation that all these materials are subject to (or simply their abundance in a single installation) make it difficult to provide a unitary, linear, complete description of the “contradictory surreality” which distinguishes the compositions they participate of or give life to. A sensation that is often intensified by the use of architectural structures capable of mediating their appearance and producing in the viewer a more vivid sensation of immersion in absurd scenarios, characterized by spatial as well as temporal and conceptual exuberance.

For instance, in *They Are Waiting for You* (2017), an installation conceived for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis,⁵ the artist had brought together an abundance of everyday objects (plants, tables, chairs, breast-shaped sculptures, posters, etc.) which unsurprisingly became protagonists of a broad reflection on language. According to Prouvost, even oral or written communication is the expression of an ambiguous surreality: word by word, it helps to get the sense of the world but it also generates constant misunderstandings.

As suggested by the title, the viewer found all these materials in a waiting room after walking a short corridor that separated them from the rest of the museum (from full-blown reality). Here, alongside the objects, there was also the video-performance *Dit Learn* (2015) in which Prouvost, with a persuasive whisper, addressed the patrons involving them in learning new forms of communication by deconstructing and undermining consolidated knowledge.⁶

5 The work has evolved over the years, and in addition to having modified various installation variables in many exhibition venues, it has also become a samesake theater piece presented for the first time in Minneapolis when the exhibition opened. See “Laure Prouvost in collaboration with Sam Belinfante and Pierre Droulers: They Are Waiting for You,” Walker Art Center, <https://walkerart.org/calendar/2018/laure-prouvost-in-collaboration-with-sam-belinfante-and-pierre-droulers-they-are-waiting-for-you>, accessed December 12, 2022.

6 For any further information about the project, see V. Sung, “Laure Prouvost’s Artworks Need You to Exist,” Walker Art Center, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/laure-prouvost-they-are-waiting-for-you-installation>, accessed December 9, 2022.

Indeed, as the critic and curator Nav Haq has argued, this space was conceived as a meeting place for the viewer and many common objects which acquired new meanings in the film; despite being immobile, these were “literally talking to each other. They were animated, in a state of flux, preparing us to learn their new meanings.”⁷

A few years earlier, on the occasion of her first solo exhibition in Lithuania, Prouvost had combined these conceptual and linguistic oddities with a bold use of architecture which, with its physiognomy, literally allowed immersion in her imagination. In Vilnius, in fact, she had presented “Burrow Me” (2015), a hand-dug underground cave in the garden of the Rupert Art Center which housed a video and a series of objects capable of an absurd narration about her artist grandfather.

Just to provide another example, one of the latest and most famous monumental works – entitled *Deep Sea Blue Surrounding You* (2019) and presented on the occasion of the 58th Venice Biennale – was conceived with the specific purpose of simulating in a very surrealistic way the entry into the stomach of a marine animal, ideally an octopus. And precisely with the aim of accompanying the viewer in “a liquid and tentacular universe,”⁸ each visual, verbal and sound material was conceived to recall another, in a fluid game of free associations of meaning and form all aimed at erasing perceptive certainties and giving life to the abysmal metaphor to which the title alluded.

This last work is an emblematic case study to understand the characteristic immersiveness of Prouvost’s installations, so it is at least necessary to retrace the visit itinerary proposed for the occasion. It should be underlined, however, that trying to order the elements that contribute to the creation of this or other projects by the artist can only give exclusively partial results.

7 N. Haq, “Laure Prouvost’s Lexicon of Ambiguity,” in N. Haq, *Legsicon*: 9-16, 15.

8 M. Kirszenbaum, ed., https://www.citedesartsparis.net/media/cia/183726-press_release_en.pdf, accessed December 12, 2022.

Deep Sea Blue Surrounding You

Seen from the outside, the French Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale bore no striking indication of the many oddities that would in fact envelop the visitor once they entered the exhibition space. Indeed, from a formal point of view, the neoclassical temple appeared immaculate and well structured; it certainly presented no more aesthetical connotations than other previous Biennials had. The expectation of an ordinary installation vanished since at regular intervals the architecture disappeared in a blanket of artificial fog and the main entrance to the Pavilion, under the colonnade, was barred. On the left side of the loggia, almost confused with the pattern of the façade, a first sculpture appeared which, like a small billboard, had specific features and signaling functions. In fact, a sentence engraved on the stone read “IDEALLY YOU WOULD GO DEEPER TO THE BACK OF THIS BUILDING” and invited you to cross the rich vegetation that surrounded the structure to reach the back of the building (Fig. 1). Here, the viewer accessed the exhibition space from the foundations of the Pavilion (Fig. 2): a dark and liminal space which, in its being a connoted threshold, sanctioned the transition between inside and outside, non-art and art, real and imaginary, order and disorder, and progressively accompanied the visitor to immerse themselves in the many contradictions of meaning and form that characterize the aforementioned “surreality” of Prouvost.

In this specific passage area, the first objects were delivered to the spectator: masks which, for those familiar with Prouvost’s work, represented the first indication of a recycling of images, since the artist used them as props at least in her video *Dit Learn*, and perhaps even earlier, in some of her early experimental video-performances.

As on previous occasions, the iconography of the mask certainly alluded to the need of a camouflage operation with the new reality created by the artist. Perhaps it was even referring to the need to cancel the identity of the wearer. But in this specific work, thanks to the phonetic

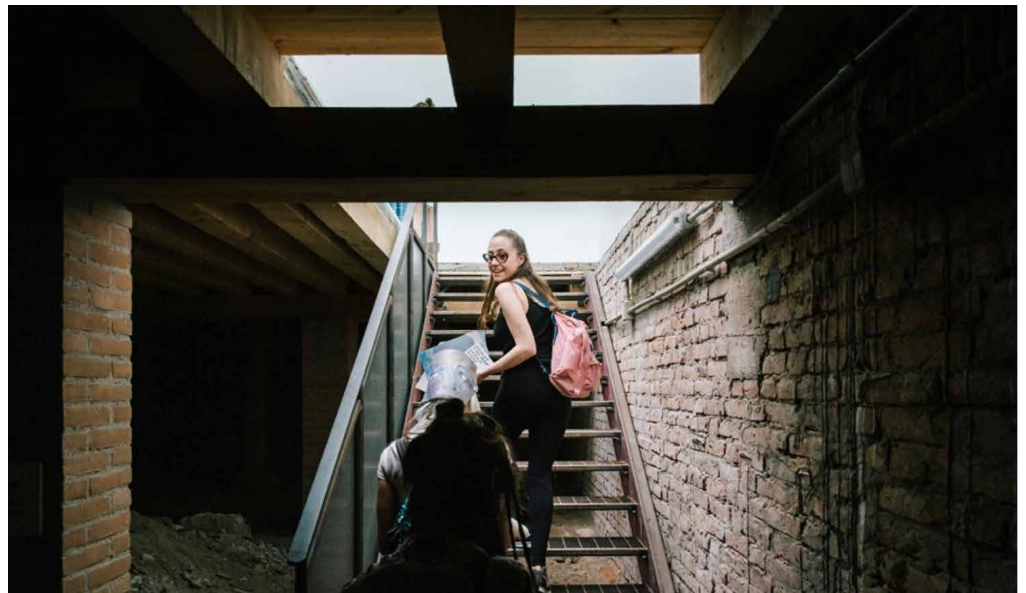


Fig. 1/2 – Laure Prouvost, *Deep See Blue Surrounding You*, French Pavilion Biennale Venice 2019 (installation view) © Laure Prouvost, Photography by Gianni Cipriano

ambiguity of the term “Sea” in the title *Deep Sea Blue Surrounding You* – a homophone to “see” – the mask seemed to become to all intents and purposes a vision device to approach and be able to interpret the abysmal world in which visitors were about to immerse themselves.

The next room was then conceived as an ante-chamber that anticipated the true immersion in the narrative, of which it was already strewn with clues. It was dazzlingly lit and apparently empty, except for a light blue resin floor in which, like on a waterline, various types of objects were trapped: from biological remains (such as eggshells, feathers, dry branches), to artificial materials (such as telephones or plastic bottles) and finally small glass sculptures that reproduced the shape of animals, often marine (such as octopuses, fish and jellyfish) (Fig. 3). These were objects from Prouvost’s imagery, which circulate from project to project and, not surprisingly, belong to the series she called “reliques.” Indeed, as the latter title suggests, these sculptures worked as traces, as “archaeological” fragments of the artist’s design history, and at the same time they served as the necessary material for the construction of ever new narratives. Objects that Prouvost defines as “Being used to help [...] Used to prove something, get the imagination



Fig. 3 – Laure Prouvost, *Deep See Blue Surrounding You*, French Pavilion Biennale Venice 2019 (installation view) © Laure Prouvost, Courtesy Lisson Gallery, Carlier | Gebauer, and Galerie Nathalie Obadia. Photography by Cristiano Corte

going. Proof of reality. A small part of a bigger thing, often used by religions.”⁹

After crossing a further threshold – this time a fabric membrane (Fig. 4) – the spectator finally had the sensation of immersing themselves in an abysmal world whose intermediary objects, distributed in three rooms, all referred to the video *They Parlaient Idéale* (2019), projected on a large screen (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4 – Laure Prouvost, *Deep See Blue Surrounding You*, French Pavilion Biennale Venice 2019. Photography by Gianni Cipriano



Fig. 5 – Laure Prouvost, *Deep See Blue Surrounding You*, French Pavilion Biennale Venice 2019 (installation view) © Laure Prouvost, Courtesy Lisson Gallery, Carlier | Gebauer, and Galerie Nathalie Obadia. Photography by Cristiano Corte

⁹ L. Prouvost, “Reliques” in N. Haq, *Legsicon*: 245.

While the filmic work documented with a bizarre gaze the (initiatory) journey undertaken by the artist to reach the Venetian lagoon and followed the story of different professionals who, in the Mediterranean, deal with magic, music or dance; the installation consisted of further traces/relics of the film image or other materials that mimicked its aesthetics. The space surrounding the projection housed the film's props, but was also filled with sculptures in resin, clay, glass and fabric, with plants and steam that derived from other projects or recalled their aesthetics and temporality (Fig. 6). All together, these visual materials formed an abysmal atmosphere in which the viewer immersed themselves metaphorically and literally, conceptually and formally.

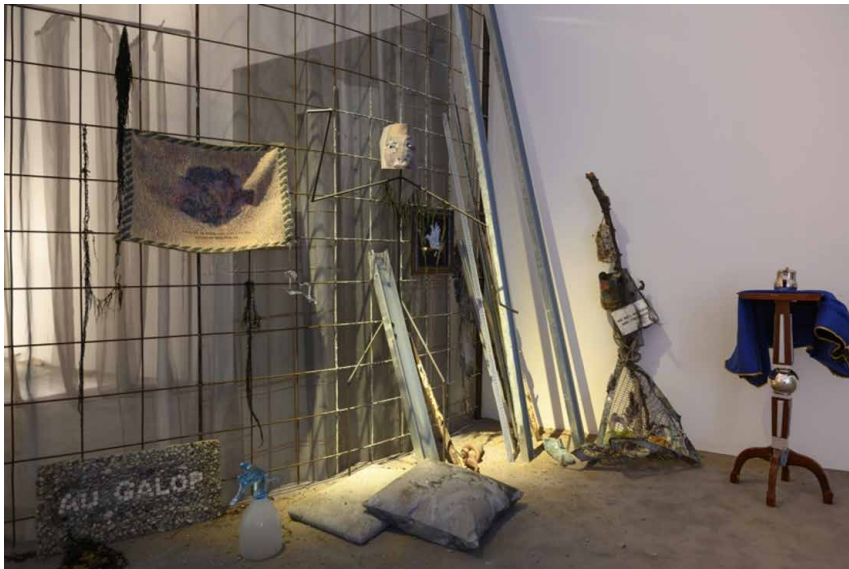


Fig. 6 – Laure Prouvost, *Deep See Blue Surrounding You*, French Pavilion Biennale Venice 2019 (installation view) © Laure Prouvost, Courtesy Lisson Gallery, Carlier | Gebauer, and Galerie Nathalie Obadia. Photography by Cristiano Corte

The seats on which viewers could sit looked like coral formations, but they also perfectly mimicked the forms of the architecture of the *Palais Ideal du Facteur Cheval* from which the journey had started – some had a riding saddle resting on them to recall the scene in which ideally a group of knights starts the film. The wrought iron mannequins (*Metal Men and Woman*, 2015-22) were the same as in previous projects, and here they wore the same mask used by some performers in the film and handed over to the viewer at the entrance to the Pavilion. Structures in the shape of an umbrella-fountain made of Murano glass [*Cooling System (for global worming)*, ca. 2017-2019] inhabited the space after being used

as props in a performance that took place in the spaces of the Pavilion and throughout Venice the days before the opening. Then a large tapestry was conceived as a collage of images taken from the film which, woven together, functioned as a decidedly chaotic storyboard.

To put it differently, the filmic work *They Parlaient Idéale*, as if it were the stomach of the octopus in which Prouvost wanted to immerse the viewer, held together in a truly sprawling way a series of images and objects which, like fragments from different provenances, came in sequence simultaneously declaring their being anchored to different spatio-temporalities and their ability to build new entities. All together, so to speak, these materials worked as pre-existing entities that united in a new “enactment” – an unprecedented staging – conceptually or formally multicellular.

Diving viscously among objects

It has already been noted how this aggregative methodology guarantees the most vivacious conceptual outcomes to Prouvost’s works – since for the French artist, following Breton, the image seems to arise from the juxtaposition of different realities and to present itself all the stronger the more distant and just the relations between them are. And it is also evident that the surreal language is used by the artist as a narrative ploy to narrate the complex identity and the ecological urgencies of the contemporary world, which perhaps needs dreamlike distance from reality in order to understand and face its critical issues.

Instead, it seems necessary to point out the process with which, within her installations, the artist achieves similar outcomes in terms of content. It is necessary to describe as far as possible the order in which the various visual materials are joined, the artist’s “rules” – if any – for the juxtaposition of objects and images in the installation.

In this sense, it seems to be of great help to use some partial notions formulated in the context of the

so-called Object-Oriented Ontology or OOO, one of the most radical philosophical currents which proposes to study reality starting from the role and status of the materials that form it, all attributable to the rank of “objects.”¹⁰

According to the OOO, any experience of reality would in fact be composed of delimited entities which, regardless of their human, non-human, inhuman, animal or imaginary nature, join together to create reality of progressive complexity. Graham Harman, founder of the theory, underlines how each manifestation of reality is linked by a biographical relationship with the materials that compose it but which, at the same time, is distinguished by the emergence of new and peculiar qualities.

Although it aspires to define itself as a “theory of everything” and, not without potential systemic problems and flaws, it intends to act on reality at all disciplinary levels – from history to art, from ethics to politics – the functioning of such aggregation model between “objects” seems to have extremely notable repercussions especially in the context of artistic production, where the case studies are small enough to be analyzed, and where the intermedia approach has now led to the coexistence of materials so different as to require the intervention of new analytical tools to understand the equal importance they assume in the composition.

In *Deep See Blue Surrounding You*, for instance, architecture, sculpture, video, performance and design produce autonomous objects of a heterogeneous nature which, however, manage to unite in coherent formal and narrative agglomerations. Just as the OOO maintains, bodies, sounds, images and objects appear as portions of a lexicon and, in a more or less elementary way, carry the memory of their previous experience in other contexts while putting themselves at the service of a new and more complex installation. To use a metaphor that Harman himself derives from biological studies – and in particular from those on

10 See G. Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Penguin Random House, 2018); and L.R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, University of Michigan, 2011).

“symbiosis” by the scholar Lynn Margulis –¹¹ Prouvost’s installations behave like aggregations of cells that come together to produce compound objects that always have a degree of structural complexity higher than that of the materials that compose them.

Moreover, the OOO brings the concept of flat-ontology (an equal ontology); every entity of reality – regardless of its human, non-human, imaginary nature – contributes without any hierarchy to the construction of the new compound object. Therefore, as in the most abstract philosophy, “humans, animals, inanimate matter and fictional characters all equally exist,”¹² in Prouvost’s installations sculptures, video-art, sounds, lights, and even human and animal bodies contribute to the formation of an expanded composition. Based on the democratic outcomes of this confrontation between objects, now the observers feel immersed in the body of this “phantastic and abstract” animal. Acting as a prey inside the stomach of an octopus, they lose their identity and become similar to the objects, or at least, coexist with them.¹³ It does not seem rash to argue that, in these circumstances, even the spectator appears as an object among objects. Moving in space, the viewer is led to relate to the objects of the composition, to physically embrace the surreality placed before them and, finally, in carrying out this operation, to become part of the composition, or so to speak, to dive “viscously” among objects.

Installations as hyper-enactments

The use of the term “viscous” is not accidental. It is in fact one of the adjectives that the philosopher Timothy Morton – a colleague of Harman and one of the first

11 Harman explicitly refers to Lynn Margulis’ research, which describes “symbiosis” as “the system in which members of different species live in physical contact.” See L. Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (London: Phoenix, 2001): 7; and G. Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*: 111.

12 G. Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*: 55.

13 It is to point out that the spectators are asked to stay and sit in specific places within the installation space. In any case, they assume a particular point of view to watch the videos, and they wear a mask to view the objects and the space. This means that they might appear as an object among others, following the artist’s intention, but in terms of reception, they might be part of a more complex interplay of movements, regards and subjectivity processes.

supporters of the OOO – uses to describe his “hyperobjects:”¹⁴ those entities widely distributed in time and space which, thanks to the union of portions of smaller objects, have become so big, “hyper” indeed, that they are everywhere: above and, mainly, among us. In the ecological aspects of his discussion, Morton defines as hyperobjects concepts such as “global warming,” “the biosphere,” the “sum of all nuclear material on earth” and so on: objects or phenomena that are “‘hyper’ in relation to some other entity, whether they are directly manufactured by humans or not.”¹⁵ They are therefore very specific entities and apparently very different from art installations.

And yet, his proposal has structural foundations close to those of the OOO and which are well suited to analyzing smaller scale objects such as art pieces; with increasing frequency they are created thanks to the use of heterogeneous physical or human materials and capable of establishing connections so wide in terms of composition as to provide the sensation of enveloping the viewer.

The composition of *Deep See Blue Surrounding You* is an example of the dynamics just described. Prouvost’s work is not a hyperobject in Morton’s terms (even if the environmental issues in which she believes do not differ from those addressed by the American philosopher), but it can be defined as a *mis-en-scène* (“enactment”) which, due to its degree of compositional complexity can derive from the theory of the American philosopher, at least as regards the prefix “hyper.” A terminological intuition, the latter, which also seems to be confirmed by the words used by Massimiliano Gioni to describe the practice of the French artist. Indeed, when Prouvost invited him to write about it in the *Deep See Blue Surrounding You* catalogue, the Italian curator declared: “she cultivates an excess of

14 T. Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

15 Ibid.: 1.

storytelling that flourishes in a constant hyper-connectivity of characters and situations.”¹⁶

The concept of hyper-enactment proposed here,¹⁷ in fact, would not only describe a creative staging which, like the OOO, plans to bring together “objects” and “references” so heterogeneous as to make a univocal orientation among them almost impossible; it would also denote a chaotic abundance of materials and narratives which, as Gioni also claims, is functional in structuring the conceptual surreality desired by the artist. Prouvost’s hyper-enactments are, in fact, “streams of consciousness”¹⁸ where “things are broken and cut. Stories and narratives spiral out of control – digressing laterally in a constant flow of free associations.”¹⁹

In this compositional context, as already shown by the description of the *Deep See Blue Surrounding You* exhibition itinerary, the viewer moves between the objects and the narratives of the stream of consciousness developing so-called interobjective links²⁰ and, in a “viscous” way, becomes part of them in an attempt to understand them. To use the image that the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre introduces in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) – and that Morton takes up again in his work – in these cases the spectator experiences the sensation of a hand dipped in honey:²¹ thus merging with the surrounding objects thanks to the reciprocal relationships (aesthetic or semantic) established with that material. In fact, it is only this degree of extreme immersion that allows the visitor to understand the composition and to develop with its materials what

16 M. Gioni, “Fata Morgana,” in M. Kirszenbaum, ed., *Laure Prouvost: Deep See Blue Surrounding You / Vois ce bleu profonde te fondre* (Paris: Institut Français, 2019, exhibition catalogue): 252-254, 252.

17 I have extensively explored the subject in the context of my doctoral thesis. See S. Mudu, *Re-/ Over- / Hyper-enactments: Strategie di riattivazione nelle produzioni artistiche contemporanee*, a Thesis in Visual Culture Presented in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Università Iuav, Venice (2022). <https://hdl.handle.net/11578/319396>, accessed December 13, 2022.

18 M. Gioni, “Fata Morgana:” 253.

19 Ibid.: 253.

20 T. Morton, *Hyperobjects*: 1.

21 Morton openly quotes Sartre pointing out that “we are stuck to hyperobjects, as if they enacted Sartre’s nightmare, ‘the sugary death of the For-itself,’ evoked when I plunge my hand into a jar of honey.” See T. Morton, *Hyperobjects*: 180.

Harman calls “metaphorical relations:”²² the ability that an object possesses to identify with another without obvious similarities, to join it and, in doing so, to create a new, more complex reality.

In *Deep Sea Blue Surrounding you* the human experiences a system of expanded human and more-than-human (even imaginary) relationships and renegotiates its claims to supremacy and autonomy. By crossing the “porous threshold”²³ of the installation they immerse themselves in what Morton calls “symbiotic real:”²⁴ a *whole* “in which entities [human and nonhuman] are related in a non-total, ragged way.”²⁵

Moreover, it does not seem out of place to underline how it is Prouvost herself who involves the viewer in this diving game. Thanks to the structure of her particular video-performance objects, the artist communicates directly with the observer using the second person: she asks them to follow clues and instructions to reconstruct the narrative in which the spectator is immersed; she constantly puts them to the test with effects of doubling, repetition and manipulation that modify the shape and meaning of the entire visual composition.

Also using “words and language as found objects,”²⁶ Prouvost builds a “*hyper-communication*”²⁷ that accompanies the viewer to abandon the condition of “subject” and embrace that of “object”, one among many others around. To put it in the words that the artist uses in the aforementioned video-performance *Dit Learn*, the viewers are destined “to become the seat [they are] sat on.”²⁸

Using an eloquent image extrapolated from the last moments of *They Parlaient Idéale* (Fig. 7), thus, the visitor who approaches *Deep Sea Blue Surrounding You* and other works by Prouvost is required to jump into an

22 G. Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*: 119.

23 R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Politi Press, 2013): 131

24 T. Morton, *Humankind. Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2017): 13.

25 Ibid.

26 M. Gioni, “Fata Morgana:” 254.

27 Ibid.

28 Original formulation: “to become the seat you are sat on,” taken from the script of *Dit Learn*, published in N. Haq, “Laure Prouvost’s Lexicon of Ambiguity:” 11.

alternative reality. Here, among images and objects of various kinds, the spectator will abandon the surface of things – what they seem to be – to float in a sprawling world that helps illuminate what they really are. Or, perhaps, they may be in an alternate reality: a sur-reality.



Fig. 7 – Laure Prouvost, *They Parlaient Idéale*, 2019, HD Video, 28 min 30 sec (video still) © Laure Prouvost, Courtesy Lisson Gallery, Carlier | Gebauer, and Galerie Nathalie Obadia.

What to do in /with images? The (virtual) hand in augmented and virtual reality.



JULIA REICH, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3516-3558>
<https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19765>

Abstract

This paper focuses on the concept of acting with and in images in the context of recent AR and VR artworks. The thesis is that the (virtual) hand plays a significant role in an immersive experience. Referring to Doris Kolesch's relational concept of immersion as one that considers not only the status of *being evolved* but also the process of *getting inside*, three forms of actions in and with images are discussed: the hand as stage, the hand as a symbiotic contact zone, and the hand as a designing hand. With artworks by Jeremy Bailey, Aristarkh Chernyshev, Rachel Rossin, and Florian Meisenberg, this contribution aims to contour the forms of action in which the (virtual) hand, in particular, allows an immersive experience by interaction with the virtual sphere and knows how to combine distance with nearness.

Keywords [Immersive experience](#) [Virtual reality](#) [Augmented reality](#)
[Virtual hand](#) [Contemporary art](#)

To quote this essay: J. Reich, "What to Do in/with Images? The (Virtual) Hand in Augmented and Virtual Reality," *AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images* [ISSN 2785-7433] 2, no. 2 (2023): 127-143, <https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19765>.

“Viewing is already an activity, and distance from the work is its necessary condition. Immersion? Not necessary. We are already in the picture.”¹ With these words, Peter Geimer ends his polemical assessment of the immersion trend in contemporary art and in exhibitions. His critique, published almost five years ago, is mainly directed at the seemingly obstructive distance between the visitor and the artwork, as well as at the artistic and curatorial unreflected affirmation of an immersion-based paradigm of experience. What was considered hype at the time, however, as Oliver Grau’s art historical genealogy of virtual art impressively unfolds,² turns out to be neither new nor based purely on media technology. Rather, the increased emergence from a temporal distance suggests itself as the advance of a second virtuality boom in the art and cultural landscape, which has become a matter of course today, and which was additionally fueled by the Covid-19 pandemic. While the pandemic caused the entire global society to practice social distancing, immersive technologies, such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), that challenge the polarity of close and far, not only became increasingly prevalent in the field of art but also obtained an impact in our everyday lives. Whether in regard to medical applications or in the context of commercial instruments, these immersive scenarios permeate our life worlds.³ In contrast to the first wave of virtuality in the 1990s, whose discursive tenor tended to emphasize the otherworldly and spectacular, AR and VR technologies have recently been used by artists to highlight the fragility and permeability between

1 P. Geimer, “Kunst und Immersion: Der Trend zum Bildersturm,” *FAZ* (July 23, 2018), <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kunst-und-architektur/was-soll-der-trend-zur-immersion-in-der-kunst-15701142.html>, accessed April 23, 2023 [my translation].

2 The author begins his genealogical analysis of virtual reality in art with the example of the pre-Christian Pompeian Villa dei Misteri and includes analog as well as digital simulation spaces. Cfr. O. Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003).

3 Cfr. S. Rieger, A. Schäfer, A. Tuschling, eds., *Virtuelle Lebenswelten: Körper – Räume – Affekte* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2022). At this point, reference should also be made to the Collaborative Research Center 1567 *Virtual Lifeworlds* [*Virtuelle Lebenswelten*] at the Ruhr-University Bochum, which is dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of various manifestations of virtuality.

“art, mediating technologies, and daily life”⁴ through immersive experiences. According to Doris Kolesch, immersion is foremost an experience of a “threshold and transition,” a “dynamic of oscillating between embeddedness and distance, of submersion and surfacing,” and less a complete absorption by the artwork.⁵ While AR immerses virtual objects in the physical environment, to which users can relate in the hybrid zone of the display, VR offers the possibility of entering a completely designed visual world, that is accessible via head-mounted displays (HMD). VR and AR, with their *environmental images*⁶ or hybrid image spaces, tend to locate themselves in zones of permeability and transience between the virtual and physical sphere.

Particularly in the context of virtual art forms, an artistic interest emerges in testing those threshold experiences and making them reflectible via a technically achieved nearness. And here the (virtual) hand, through its activity in immersive art forms, reduces the distance that makes a reflexive reception possible in the first place. Not only immersive-virtual works create a perceived loss of distance, but also their viewers, who enter a relationship with and into images. Immersion is thus not only defined as a media-technical *being enveloped* but is also understood as a “relational concept”⁷ and, therefore, equally bound to oneself actively *getting inside*.⁸ As multifaceted as the concept of immersion is, it derives from the physical process,

4 D. Kolesch, “Immersion and Spectatorship at the Interface of Theatre, Media Tech and Daily Life: An Introduction,” in D. Kolesch, T. Schütz, S. Nikoleit eds., *Staging Spectators in Immersive Performances: Commit Yourself!* (Oxon/New York: Routledge, 2019): 1-17, 9, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429198274>.

5 The author distinguishes between two variants of immersive experience, mental-psychological and perceptual-psychic situatedness. While the former primarily addresses the cognitive level, where the recipient’s attention is directed, such as when reading a book, the latter promises a whole-body experience that involves the recipient as an active and essential entity. Contrary to the reproach of an unreflected appropriation, which Peter Geimer also addresses, Kolesch sees in immersive situations a potential of an “*interruption of aesthetic illusion*.” D. Kolesch, “Immersion and Spectatorship”: 8.

6 Image worlds in VR in particular illustrate the tendency of the image to become an environment, as they are characterized by an *unframedness, presentness and immediatness*, and in this way, make their own image status precarious. A. Pinotti, “Towards An-Iconology: The Image as Environment,” *Screen 61*, no. 4 (2020): 594-603, 602, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjaa060>.

7 D. Kolesch, “Immersion and Spectatorship”: 4.

8 T. Hochscherf, H. Kjær, P. Rupert-Kruse, “Phänomene und Medien der Immersion,” in *Jahrbuch immersiver Medien: Immersion: Abgrenzung, Annäherung, Erkundung* (Kiel: Schüren, 2011): 9-18, 14, <http://dx.doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/18222>.

which is first and foremost a directed movement that is followed by the topos of surroundedness.

And, as quite a few works of film and art history demonstrate, the first – often exploratory and recognizing – immersive movement into unknown terrain is led by the hand⁹. By contrast, the 21st century resembles an era of the hands' oblivion [*Handvergessenheit*], as Jochen Hörisch notes.¹⁰ According to him, it is precisely cognitively abstract, immaterial processes and values that are displacing the dimensions of handiness and craftsmanship in the (post)digital age, even though they are based on them.¹¹ Yet it is these aspects that seem to be emphasized in AR artworks, when one's own hand literally moves forward into the screen-viewed hybrid sphere, or when the hand in VR works takes on the function of a tool by means of hand tracking and starts to interact with virtually found objects. While so-called data gloves were already used in the early VR art of the 1990s to navigate from one space to another, the possibilities for action have multiplied considerably.¹² If one considers immersion in this sense as a bodily movement that creates a simultaneity of being here and there, of which the recipients are quite aware, then the stretching forward and pulling back of the hand seems to be paradigmatic for a perception of difference, from which a self-reflexive quality can emerge.¹³

Based on this observation, this paper focuses on the significance of the (virtual) hand and its forms of action in AR and VR art. While the concept of image act(ion) [*Bildhandlungen*] is applied to different image types and

9 In their introduction, Burcu Dogramaci and Fabienne Liptay discuss an immersion conceptualized particular in film and in the process name various film scenes in which the sense of sight is usually doubted and therefore a reassurance by hand takes place. For example, in the case of Neo, the Matrix protagonist, who recognizes his own reality as a dream by touching a billowing mirror. Cfr. F. Liptay, B. Dogramaci, eds., *Immersion in the Visual Arts and Media* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2016): 1-17.

10 J. Hörisch, *Hände: Eine Kulturgeschichte* (München: Hanser, 2020): 22.

11 Ibid.

12 An early example in which data gloves were used to provide orientation and navigation in the virtual space with hand movements is Monika Fleischmann's and Wolfgang Strauss' installation *Home of the Brain* (1989-1992).

13 According to Doris Kolesch, immersion include not only the process of diving in, but also that one of surfacing, which in the case of the hand can be understood as a stretching forward and pulling back. D. Kolesch, "Immersion and spectatorship": 9.

widely discussed in the discourse of image studies and art philosophy, it can only be meaningfully related to the interactive image, according to Silvia Seja. Because only the interactive image allows an action with things, images, spaces, and bodies that are merely virtually in the image and thus present and manageable.¹⁴ Referring to simulated scenarios, Inge Hinterwaldner points out that interactive images not only allow but also significantly shape and influence actions.¹⁵ Users both intervene in and are influenced by the iconic configuration, as it determines the way in which they can interact with it, as is the case in AR and VR artworks.¹⁶ Accordingly, iconicity and interactivity are reciprocal.¹⁷

Along with current works by Jeremy Bailey, Aristarkh Chernyshev, Rachel Rossin, and Florian Meisenberg, this contribution aims to contour the forms of action in which the (virtual) hand, in particular, allows an immersive experience in interaction with the virtual sphere and knows how to combine distance with nearness. In this context, the actions in and with images are further developed on the basis of three perspectives: the hand as a stage, the hand as a symbiotic contact zone, and the hand as a designing hand. Prior to examining these artistic works in detail, it may be useful to first explain the technological background and development, determining the importance of the hand in relation to virtual sceneries.

The (virtual) hand

The constant progress of media technology developments in the field of hand recognition seems to be something of a paradox when one considers the hands' oblivion in the 21st century, as identified by Hörisch. In

14 S. Seja, "Der Handlungsbegriff in der Bild- und Kunstphilosophie," in I. Reichle, S. Siegel, A. Spelten, eds. *Verwandte Bilder: Die Fragen der Bildwissenschaft* (Kadmos: Berlin, 2007): 97-112, 111.

15 I. Hinterwaldner, *The Systemic Image: A New Theory of Interactive Real-Time Simulations* (2010), trans. E. Tucker (Cambridge/London: MIT Press, 2017): 229.

16 Ibid. The author emphasizes two qualities of the systematic image focusing on interaction: the presentational and the operative aspect, and therefore, highlights the image as its own interface.

17 Ibid., especially the chapter "Iconicity and Interactivity": 215-271.

February 2023, Mark Zuckerberg published a short demo video of the now-available *Direct Touch* feature for the VR headsets Meta Quest 2 and Quest Pro. The feature promises a more intuitive operation in the VR and mixed reality view,¹⁸ via gesture control, manual scrolling, and tapping, for example, in a superimposed browser page or a basketball game. Thereby, the user's hands are tracked with external headset cameras and appear in the user's view as grayish virtual hands. What can be traced in this current example is the technological genesis of the (virtual) hand, which seems far from complete. After the first prototypes in the 1970s, the first commercial data glove developed by VPL Research was launched in 1987 and already featured gesture recognition and tactile feedback.¹⁹ In addition to the further development of wearables and external peripherals, such as handheld controllers, vision-based tracking experiments with gesture recognition started parallel in the 1980s.²⁰ Dependence on previously complex calibrations and external power sources was no longer necessary with the 2013 launch of Leap Motion Technology. Although now taken for granted, for example, in VR gaming, it marked an important step towards free-hand interaction with the desktop screen and later within a VR environment. With this technology, small infrared sensors and cameras track the hands motions and visualize them in VR or desktop view. While Leap Motion Tracking is now mostly implemented in VR headsets, there have also been efforts to combine this with AR applications on private devices to provide more natural interaction with mobile AR objects.²¹ In the early years, AR interaction was mainly based on physical objects with markers. More recent applications, however,

18 In this context, the mixed reality mode is understood as an interweaving of real environment and virtual elements, which clearly comes close to the passthrough mode mentioned later, but also makes the separation to AR questionable. For this aspect, Cfr. A. Urban, J. Reich, M. van der Veen, "Passthrough: Von Portalen, Durchblicken und Übergängen zwischen den (virtuellen) Welten," *Kunstforum International* 290 (2023): 86-95.

19 Cfr. P. Premaratne, *Human Computer Interaction Using Hand Gestures* (Singapur: Springer, 2014): 5-12.

20 Ibid: 12f.

21 Cfr. M. Kim, J. Y. Lee, "Touch and Hand Gesture-based Interactions for Directly Manipulating 3D Virtual Objects in Mobile Augmented Reality," *Multimed Tools Appl* 75 (2016): 16529-16550, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11042-016-3355-9>

increasingly use hand tracking. What this very brief outline illustrates is the increasing desire for the most device-free and intuitive handling possible in and with virtual environments, which is reflected in these technological innovations. Even if hand tracking is not an essential feature for VR applications, and 360° VR films, for example, usually manage without it, numerous research studies point to an increased sense of immersion and presence in the virtual environment with visualized hands.²² While technological advancements have made it possible to simulate manual activity and seem to have brought the hand out of oblivion, the hand movements required in virtual environments are often different from those needed in daily life. For instance, simply flicking your index finger won't be enough to put a basketball into a basket, as *Digital Touch* simulates. Thus, while these endeavors may bring the hand out of oblivion, they still fall short of replicating true-to-life experiences. Rather, the hand seems to adapt to the existing motion patterns of the virtual hand. As will become clear in the following, the desire to hold one's own hand in the virtual world does not first arise from hand tracking but starts with image configurations that presuppose much less interaction.

The hand as stage

In the context of the *AR Biennial* (Aug. 22nd, 2021-Apr. 24th, 2022), initiated by the NRW Forum, visitors were able to explore and marvel at AR sculptures in the public spaces of Düsseldorf, Cologne, and Essen using a specially developed app on their devices. Regular strollers in the Düsseldorf Hofgarten became accustomed to people performing crazy movements with their smartphones held

22 Cfr. G. Buckingham, "Hand Tracking for Immersive Virtual Reality: Opportunities and Challenges," *Frontiers in Virtual Real 2* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3389/frvir.2021.728461>; J. N. Voigt-Antons et al., "Influence of Hand Tracking as a Way of Interaction in Virtual Reality on User Experience," *Twelfth International Conference on Quality of Multimedia Experience* (2020): 1-4, <https://doi.org/10.1109/QoMEX48832.2020.9123085>. For the complex discussion of immersion and presence sensations in virtual space, cfr. M. I. Berkman, E. Akan, "Presence and Immersion in Virtual Reality," in N. Lee, ed., *Encyclopedia of Computer Graphics and Games* (Cham: Springer, 2019): 1-10, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-08234-9_162-1.

high or staging themselves for a photo as if they were interacting with invisible objects. In short, these were physical actions that addressed not so much the real-life environment but rather the hybrid space of the display view. These aimed to enter the picture by anticipating the hybrid zone of the AR work, as is the case with Jeremy Bailey's oversized steel bean *YOUar, stainless steel ellipsoidal arc* (2021) (Fig.1). As expected, AR works tempt us to document that individual moment of hybrid interaction in the image space via screenshot, simply because of their genuine form of appearance in the display. This need, trained by social networks, is additionally motivated by the app's own recording function, which enables uncomplicated, one-handed screen recording while the other hand can enter into a relationship with the virtual objects.²³ Like illusionistic vacation snapshots, where different distance ratios enable one's own fingers to hold, for example, the top of the Eiffel Tower, there are numerous screenshots from the AR Biennial in which the palm acts as a stage for the augmented objects.

Unlike in photography, here the hand becomes the ground for the figure, making it part of the environment

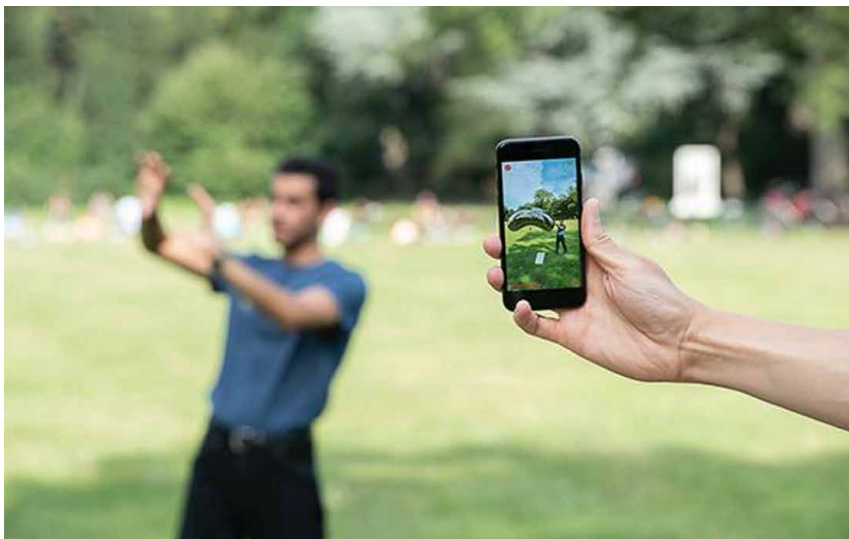


Fig. 1. Jeremy Bailey, *YOUar, stainless steel ellipsoidal arc*, 2021, Augmented Reality App, at Düsseldorf AR-Biennial, 2021, photograph by Katja Illner, courtesy of the Artist and NRW-Forum Düsseldorf.

or replacing it in interaction. Therefore, these image actions can be described as an anticipation of one's own bodily placement in the image and result in pictorial relations between

²³ With common devices, a screen shot requires two hands, since two remotely located keys have to be pressed simultaneously.

body, virtual object, and space. In doing so, they stand out as self-evident, playful explorations of a boundary sphere and thus emphasize the close connection between a sense of immersion and the user's movements.

Symptomatic of these not directly intended image actions, our hands prove to be a central interface to the (physical and virtual) world in the digital age as well, in which manual grasping is still intertwined with cognitive comprehension.²⁴ While AR figures can generally be placed anywhere, the palm of the hand seems to offer itself as a particularly appealing stage. Surreal proportions are emphasized in the image; a physical nearness to the virtual figure is suggested; and one's own body, moving forward into the virtual sphere, is immersed in it. Conversely, the hand has no influence on the movements of the figure and cannot change anything in the AR, but rather adapts to it and thus, as a stage-like presentation site, resets itself in its actual ability to act and create.

While these movements are individual amusements of the users, in Jeremy Bailey's video work *Nail Art Museum* (2014) (Fig. 2) the hand becomes a very concrete stage of an AR exhibition. In the exaggerated manner of a DIY YouTube video, Bailey, who remains anonymous, notes a renewed shift in the artistic paradigm of creation. If artists moved into organizational-curatorial roles as early as the 1960s, the turn away from manual creation seems to have been amplified by the digital and transformed into the creation of entire worlds. Bailey's proposal is an AR application that allows everyone to independently curate exhibitions, appropriate existing works, and literally present them on their own fingertips. Through AR, company logos, palm trees, and iconic artworks of every era – from the ancient Venus de Milo to Ai Weiwei's Neolithic vases to Jeff Koon's Balloon Dog – can be assembled on one's own hand. The artworks, themselves in thrall to a consumer culture, are perched on finger-bound museum pedestals. In the role of his extravagant alter ego – the self-proclaimed “famous new

24 J. Hörisch, *Hände*: 18.

media artist,” – Bailey satirizes the self-staging practices of social media, addressing museums and artists who in turn use these networks as exhibition spaces. In doing so, he touches upon the sensitive tension between the *topos* of a democratization of art via its mediatized (over)availability and the question of artistic-creative innovation in times of its medial (re)producibility. Bailey further exacerbates this relationship with the aforementioned oversized AR mirror bean: its unmistakable model is Anish Kapoor’s steel sculpture *Cloud Gate* (2004-2006), with which countless tourists pose daily for the perfect snapshot. Its social media usability continues to be effective in Bailey’s AR and is even facilitated since the sculpture can even be placed on one’s own hand with a click.



Fig. 2. Jeremy Bailey, *Nail Art Museum*, 2014, video Performance and Augmented Reality, still from video, courtesy of the Artist.

The hand as symbiotic contact zone

In contrast to the preceding image acts, in which the hand becomes dissimilar to itself because it functions more as a stage or exhibition space, the AR application *Personal Information Organism. PiO 1.1.* (2019) by Aristarkh Chernyshev, and Rachel Rossin’s mixed reality theater *The Maw Of* (2022) focus on the hand in its physical genuineness, namely as a contact zone between humans and technology. At the interface between science fiction,

biotechnology, and speculative art, both works allude to so-called *anthropophilic media*²⁵ for which their unobtrusiveness and cuddliness toward the body and its everyday routines are particularly characteristic. Affect-sensitive wearables, such as smartwatches, are examples of this. These rely less on the user's activity at the interface but rather measure, collect, and utilize personal body data and mental states in the mode of passivity, such as the oxygen saturation in the blood or an incipient feeling of frustration.²⁶

With the AR *PiO 1.1*. (Fig. 3), which can be accessed via QR code on social channels of Instagram or Snapchat, Chernyshev imagines a digital hybrid organism consisting of a genetically modified leech and a smartphone whose natural habitat is the human body. The creature, which nestles tenderly around the wrist, lives on the blood of its user but, in return, takes care of his or her health. It does this by continuously monitoring the user's body, even releasing insulin in the case of a rise in blood sugar. It also proves to be a practical tool for Zoom conferencing. While such symbioses are still speculative, the direct link between our brain and the machine has recently become real. The controversial media mogul Elon Musk and his neurotech company, for example, announced recently that they would be conducting clinical studies on humans with so-called brain-machine interfaces.²⁷ The fact that Chernyshev's *PiO 1.1*. so far only gets under the skin in its conception allows users to experience a futuristic interaction with a wearable assistance creature that intuitively adapts to the movement of one's own hand. When used, the wrist becomes the contact zone of an imagined symbiosis, transforming at the same time into a control surface with various display

25 Cfr. M. Andreas, D. Kasprovicz, S. Rieger, eds., *Unterwachen und Schlafen: Anthropophile Medien nach dem Interface* (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2018).

26 For Michael Andreas, Dawid Kasprovicz and Stefan Rieger, this mode of passivity is a central marker for the definition of "antropophilic media," which, in contrast to actively used tools, provoke a reduction of distance, since they operate in a new physical, social, and semantic nearness. Of particular interest is the underlying thesis of a shift from technical-medial surveillance to a surveillance that increasingly eludes perception as such and outwits the users. Cfr. M. Andreas, *Unterwachen*: 19.

27 R. Levy, "Elon Musk Expects Neuralink's Brain Chip to Begin Human Trials in 6 Months," *Reuters* (December 1, 2022), <https://www.reuters.com/technology/elon-musk-says-expects-neuralink-begin-human-trials-six-months-2022-12-01/>, accessed May 4, 2023.



Fig. 3. Aristarkh Chernyshev, *Personal Information Organism. PiO 1.1.*, 2019, screenshot from Augmented Reality App, courtesy of the Artist.

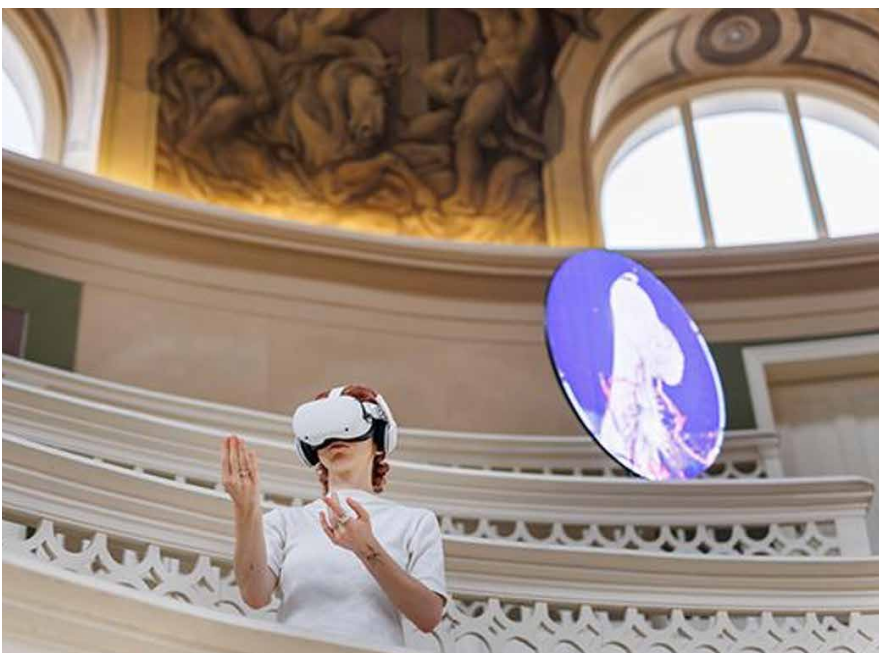


Fig. 4. Rachel Rossin, *The Maw of*, 2022, view of the exhibition “KW on location: Rachel Rossin The Maw of” at Tieranatomisches Theater Berlin, 2022, photograph by Frank Sperling, courtesy of the Artist and KW Institute for Contemporary Art.

modalities and thus suggesting self-control. This collides with the underlying consent of permanent information utilization and must, therefore, be a hollow promise. The quickly transferred consent of a foreign control in assistance systems such as Alexa is closely related to the design of socially compatible counterparts, which is why *PiO's 1.1*. animal-like movements also generate familiarity but thus prompt a self-reflection of the quickly conceded acceptance in dealing with the artwork.

Rachel Rossin's multimedia setting *The Maw Of* (Fig. 4) not only combines various media formats (installation, VR and AR, video, and net art) that blur the boundaries between the virtual and physical worlds as well as technological and organic systems, but also the bodies that inhabit them. Rossin's work is decidedly based on recent research experiments that fuse body, mind, and technology. These experiments are no longer about developing prosthetic extensions of the human body but rather about an invasive fusion of hardware and the nervous system, by means of which our thought center can act beyond the body. The central storyline is a narrative interwoven through the media formats and accompanied by a manga figure, in which the visitors themselves are conceived, as agents of a larger techno-organic network. They follow the figure as a machine spirit through a widely ramified network that embodies the human nervous system. When visiting the work at the Tieranatomisches Theater in Berlin (Sept. 14th–Oct. 22nd 2022), the application on an HMD enabled a view (Fig. 5) into the symbiotic sphere Rossin transmedially designed. In the midst of a lush grassy hill environment, which is revealed by a superimposed progression diagram as genuinely calculated and instantaneously processed, two bluish transparent hands appear. They directly implement the hand's own movements and gestures in the virtual environment by means of Leap Motion. The media-reflexive and at the same time instructive text field, "you are looking for your hands," brings one's own hands into the field of vision. Since they appear uniquely in both spheres, they are a contact zone: in the palms of the hands, text codes



Fig. 5. Rachel Rossin, *The Maw of*, 2022, screenshot from HMD-Experience, courtesy of the Artist.

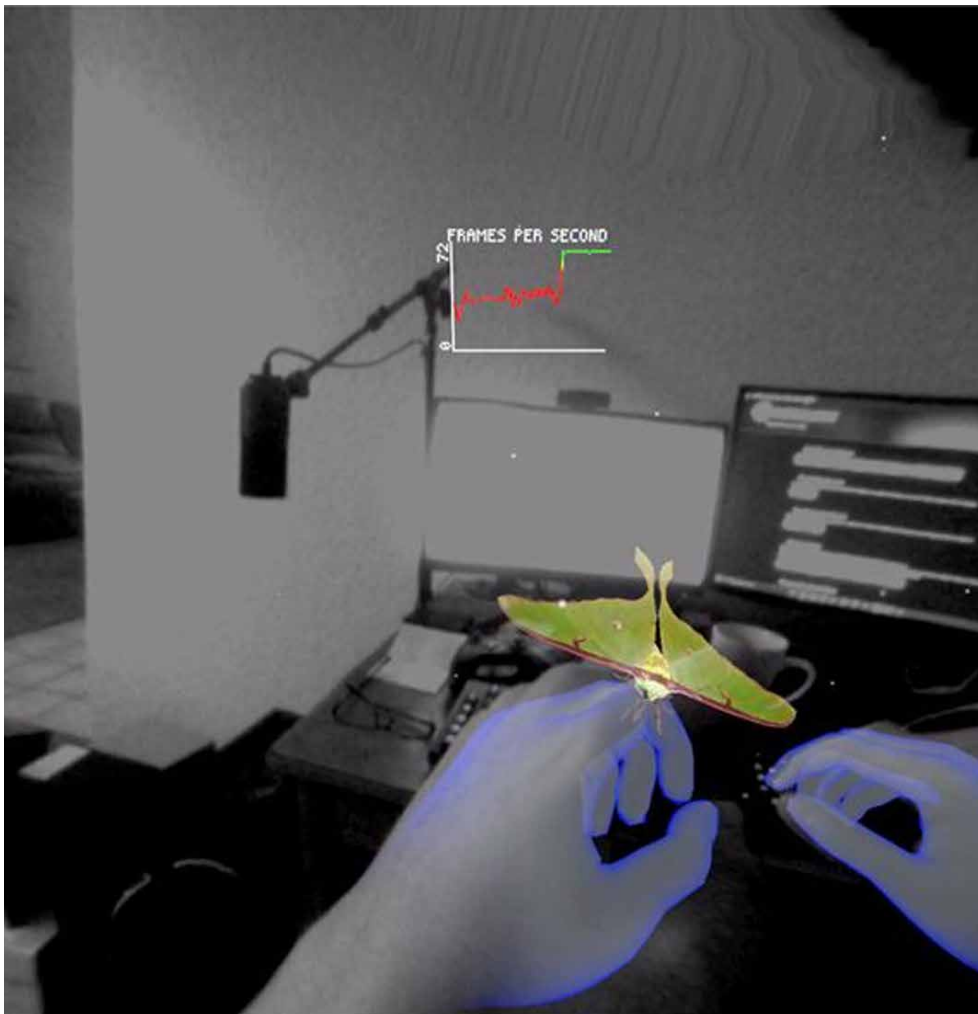


Fig. 6. Rachel Rossin, *The Maw of*, 2022, screenshot from HMD-Experience, courtesy of the Artist.

and symbols alternate with wondrous beings, such as a blazing flame spirit or a human-shaped nervous system. This idiosyncratic interplay continues even as the virtual environment recedes and users find themselves in their physical, but colorless, world with the same virtual figures (Fig. 6). In this superimposed mode of perception, also called “pass-through,” the user’s own hands intersect with the represented hands, blurring the boundaries between an action in physical and virtual space – for example, when a virtual moth settled on the hand can be shaken off – and paradoxically leading to a disembodiment as well as a sensitization of the user’s own corporeality.

The designing hand

While the focus so far has been on the active hand, which has been integrated into the art works as a stage or contact zone, the perspective of the designing hand will be examined in conclusion using the example of Florian Meisenberg’s VR installation *Pre-Alpha Courtyard Games (raindrops on my cheek)* (2017). As a collaborative project between Meisenberg and programmer Jan Ahrens, *Pre-Alpha* connects installable, sculptural, and painterly elements with VR, video, and design processes. In the exhibition, visitors are greeted by a carpet drawn up in the manner of an infinity cove used for photography. On its left side, a vertical second-screen projection gives outsiders a glimpse into the intimate VR sphere. By putting on the HMD in the midst of the virtual environment with its rudimentary cosmic world reference, users can model their own virtual objects with pattern-like hand representations, almost like God-like creators (Fig 7). For this purpose, a grid shape shoots up from the underground onto the image surface, which goes back to the basic geometric shapes of 3D programs, so-called graphic primitives, with which illusionistic VR worlds are “built.” Even though the hands do not feel any resistance in reality, the shape can be bent and distorted in all directions by lightly touching it in accordance with physical laws, thus referring to artistic

modeling processes. In the next step, the naked grid can be clothed with texturing material. This derives from the artist's own image archive, from which individual images with a textile texture randomly rise up, fluttering in front of the user's hands. In addition to Meisenberg's physically existent paintings, this archive contains all kinds of image material – from antique portrait busts to net-genuine memes to online head texture maps – that are made available to the users for designing the grid surface. Quite literally, an action with images is invoked in this way. The specific gesture of two palms raised in front of the HMD causes the appearance of those double-sided images that can be

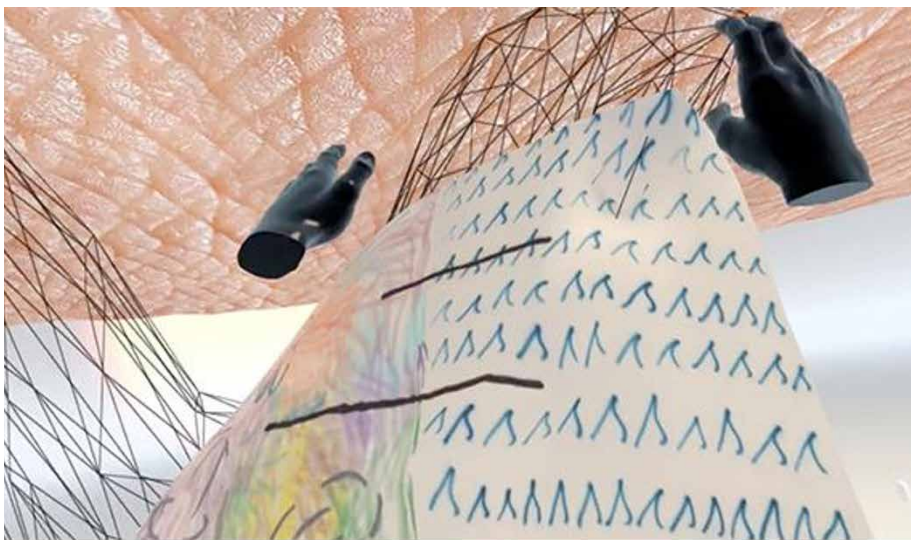


Fig. 7. Florian Meisenberg, *Pre-Alpha Courtyard Games (raindrops on my cheek)*, 2017, screenshot from HMD-Experience, courtesy of the Artist.

manually applied to the grid shape.

While such creation processes delegated to museum visitors may have a special visual value for visitors outside the VR, this process is withdrawn in *Pre-Alpha*. While the second screen usually provides a voyeuristic live insight into the processes within VR, in this case it merely shows the pantomime-like hand movements of the immersed user around an empty center. The VR-internally designed virtual object remains intimate, eludes a view, and meanwhile shifts the focus to the manual performance of the (non-) creating hands of the immersed user. In this way, the user on the stage-like carpet becomes an exposed

performer and twists the exhibition logic inherent in the exhibition space.

Along the provisional spectrum of the three forms of action in and with images in AR and VR artworks presented here, the aim was to clarify the extent to which a loss of distance achieved by hand does not primarily subscribe to a technological euphoria or an affirmative immersive experience, but rather offers the recipient the opportunity for reflection in the sounding out of those border zones between the physical and virtual spheres, one's own body and other bodies. With the focus on the hand, it becomes apparent to what extent immersion, in the sense of getting inside a direct contact or a design, grants the potential of becoming aware of and critically sensitizing oneself to those technologies that permeate our lives. Immersion as a productive extension does not exclude emergence – as exemplified by the hand. For whoever puts on the VR goggles must also take them off again, willy-nilly.

I Stalk Myself More than I Should: Online Narratives to Disrupt and Investigate *Interveillance* and Digital Bodies Politics within Centralised Social Media Platforms



S()FIA BRAGA, (artist) – <https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19858>

Abstract

Today we find ourselves immersed in digital environments made available by centralised social media platforms on a daily basis. While these platforms did provide users expanded connectivity and visibility, they also confined the same user in an economic system focused on collection and commodification of personal data for profit, and in return used them as resources of free labour. In light of this analysis, is it possible to carry out an artistic practice within centralised social media platforms, therefore take an active part in them, while remaining critically engaged, in the attempt to highlight some of the structural dynamics and problems of these realities?

In this paper some fundamental aspects of the aforementioned channels will be discussed through the analysis of selected works and two methods utilised by the author to avoid the culture of *interveillance*.

Keywords

[Centralised social media platforms](#)

[Interveillance](#)

[Online narratives](#)

[Digital bodies](#)

[Subversion](#)

To quote this essay: S. Braga “I Stalk Myself More than I Should: Online Narratives to Disrupt and Investigate *Interveillance* and Digital Bodies Politics within Centralised Social Media Platforms,” *AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images* [ISSN 2785-7433] 2, no. 2 (2023): 144-155, <https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19858>.

When we talk about immersiveness within the digital realm we should consider the fact that, nowadays, there is no longer a clear distinction between our real and virtual existence, since these two realities are heavily interconnected and they coexist interdependently.

In this paper we will focus on digital environments made available to users by centralised social media platforms, where we witness a radical shift in terms of control, power and representation of the body and the self.

Over the past few years I developed my artistic research on the social impact of web interfaces and the subversion of centralised social media platforms by focusing on ways to avoid the culture of *Interveillance*,¹ which is a participatory surveillance enabled by social media's operational structures that leverage the human need of auto-determination, and carry the non-institutional agencies that operate on the Internet – GAFAM –,² as well as the users themselves, as new objects of power.

Often unaware, users become an active part of these hidden power dynamics that are no longer based on control and repression of bodies,³ but on prevention through the promotion of beliefs and habits that take advantage of processes of identification, and that manifest themselves in the form of viral trends.

The evolution of the web and the self

In the early web (web 1.0), users started experimenting with HTML – Hypertext Markup Language – to build their own “virtual homes.” They used to see the *WWW* as a parallel world in which they could build and develop

1 A. Jansson, M. Christensen, *Media, Surveillance and Identity: Social Perspective* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013).

2 GAFAM is an acronym for a group of American technology companies: Google, Apple, Facebook (Meta), Amazon, and Microsoft.

3 M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (1975) (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1977).

their personal space. This gave users the feeling they had control on the construction of a unique space, by using a new universal language, that offered them a chance to present and spread their thoughts worldwide.

Despite this fresh feeling of freedom, the early web was neither a democratic nor a completely free space, but the lack of user-friendly tools for web development put users in the position of working on an “empty canvas,” which offered more possibilities with less limitation.

For the Web 1.0 user, the web space was an extension of the physical one: “Welcome to My Website,” “Welcome to Sofia’s homepage,” a space which only exists in the moment the computer is on and the browser window open. Moreover, the distinction between the two spaces was still very clear because of the medium. Firstly, because of the impossibility of connecting anywhere due to the technical limitations of the Personal Computer and access to the Internet. Secondly, because the user tended to spend more time building their digital space rather than constructing their online persona due to the act of programming.

The introduction of web development systems in most web hosting services gave space to everyone to build websites through user-friendly tools which restrict the creativity of the user, together with the characteristic uniqueness of the 1.0 era web pages. With the structural change of the web also its final purpose shifted: with the advent of the web 2.0, we witnessed the beginning of the Social Media era, in which the focus shifted towards the creation of content for the platform and on the user’s online image. This indicates the transition between *My* and *Me*,⁴ where the online space becomes an extension of the user’s identity based on real data, reshaping new dynamics of

4 O. Lialina, *Turing Complete User. Resisting Alienation in Human-Computer-Interaction* (Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net, 2021).

control and proving that modifying the structure of the web interface changes the experience of the medium radically.

The Digital Panopticon

Nowadays we find ourselves in an economic system focused on the collection and commodification of personal data for profit, where Big Tech companies are gaining exponential power and control over our decisions and behaviour through sentiment analysis. Surveillance Capitalism pushes people to become prosumers – producers, consumers and products – by using them as resources of free labour. This results in what can be considered a total collapse of the private space through the use of intimate human experiences as free raw material that is later translated into behavioural data.⁵

In this context the fields of artificial intelligence and machine learning find themselves in a very critical position: on the one hand AI holds the potential to be utilised on the way to human self-realisation by enhancing human agency and increasing societal capabilities, while on the other hand, the misuse of these algorithms by Big Tech corporations as data scrapers are already gaining more control over people, consequently undermining human self-determination.⁶

Today's misconceptions surrounding *the algorithm* and its tendency to become even more of a black box as it advances, consequently leads to an animist, almost magic-like, perception towards it. The fact that these

5 S. Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

6 J. Cowl, L. Floridi, M. Taddeo, "The Challenges and Opportunities of Ethical AI," in J. Rogers, I. Papadimitriou, A. Prescott, eds., *Artificially Intelligent: V&A Digital Design Weekend 2018* (Dundee: University of Dundee, 2018).

technologies are developed by the human mind is being overlooked in the face of the worldwide crises we are facing.

People in power at tech monopolies build their narratives around technology in a way that give responsibility and agency to it, whereas the ethical responsibility relies on the ones that are developing, monitoring, using, and taking advantage of said technologies. Therefore, it is misguided to fear the machine based on the dystopic dispositions it has been displaying, while the focus on the people behind those machines, taking decisions that introduce biases and lead their direction, is lacking.

Within the next pages, by analysing a selection of my works, I will outline two possible methods I developed within my artistic practice as ways to subvert centralised social media platform dynamics and problematics to bring awareness to users about their role and power within these structures.

1. Data overload: appropriation and manipulation of users' personal content to make data unreadable.

I Stalk Myself More Than I Should

There is a narcissistic aspect in surveillance which empowers internet users to monitor their behaviour daily, overcoming the fear of being observed. Sharing structured, rationalised, and complex private content with intimate details online places users in a digital panopticon. This content is not easily read and is subject to interpretation, hence it is possible to find various starting points for speculative stories.

I Stalk Myself More Than I Should is an archive of expired memories that were meant to die within 24 hours. The work displays a selection of Instagram Stories preserved through the use of screen recordings. Going against the

nature of this feature, the project investigates appropriation, interpretation, and representation, as well as qualities and hierarchies of humans memories shared and stored online.

I Stalk Myself More Than I Should shows chaotic collages of short footage where users' narrations and promotional ads coexist: selfies, morning routines, semi-nudes, ads, parties, concerts, complaints, ads, quotes, memes, self-promotion, ads, exhibitions, and so on are combined as sounds and images that hypnotise and capture us in front of the screen wondering what will come next. By making rather straightforward connections between videos, the audience can easily read users' stories in various ways, nevertheless we progressively discover that the artist is actually the exposed one: through her interaction with these short stories we are able to unveil information via her personal preferences just by paying attention to the viewing time of each video, or to the ads recommended for instance. This process highlights how the act of appropriation is still a way to express the self.

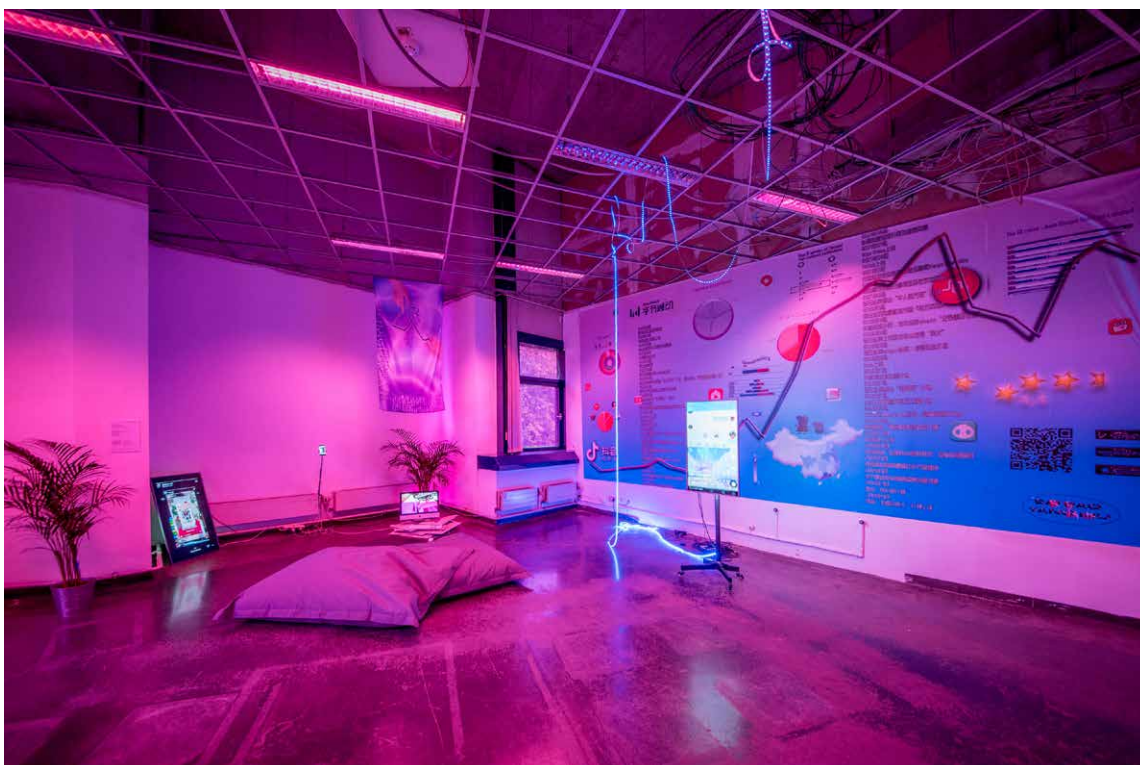


Fig. 1. Sofia Braga, *I Stalk Myself more than I should and Meanwhile in China*, view of the exhibition at Ars Electronica Festival, Linz, 2019.

Users have made this project possible by sharing and giving permission to anyone to get a glimpse into their daily life, which is constructed on the foundation of impressions they want to convey about themselves. What might represent itself as a moral problem – the appropriation of other people’s “private” content – is actually an insolent take on how to deal with issue of data storage by centralised online platforms. The general misconception of being in control of the data we give up, because of the interface’s presented possibility of deletion, or because they will automatically disappear thanks to a feature of the platform, leads users to readily share an abundance of content, increasing profits of the platform itself which stores all data within databases, making use of them as prediction products to be sold into future behavioural markets.

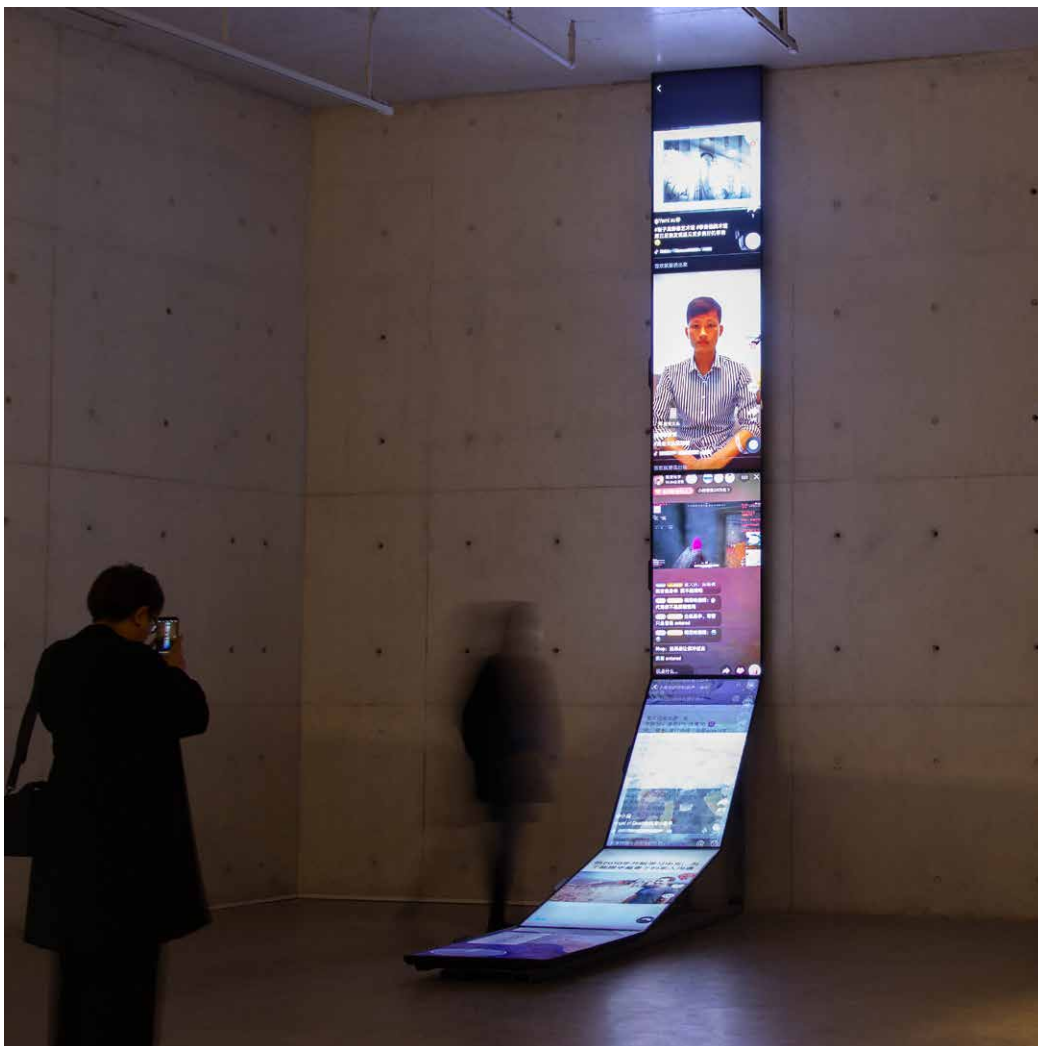


Fig. 2. S()fia Braga and Matthias Pitscher, *A Study on the characteristics of Douyin*, Xie Zilong Photography Museum, Changsha, 2019.

The research that was initiated with *I Stalk Myself More Than I Should* was then developed further with the realisation of *A Study on the characteristics of Douyin* and *Meanwhile in China*, two video installations created in collaboration with artist Matthias Pitscher, which analyse the app *Douyin*, the original version of *TikTok* created in China. Within this platform users attempt to copy specific patterns that go viral to achieve success: the same dances or memes are continuously repeated using the same music, while the individual seeks acceptance within the platform by conforming to the standards set by the community. It is not a coincidence that the majority of users on Douyin and TikTok are young people, who are still developing their self image by being part of a peer group to begin with. In fact TikTok promotes different internet aesthetics and *vibes* in which young users tend to find a sense of belonging within.

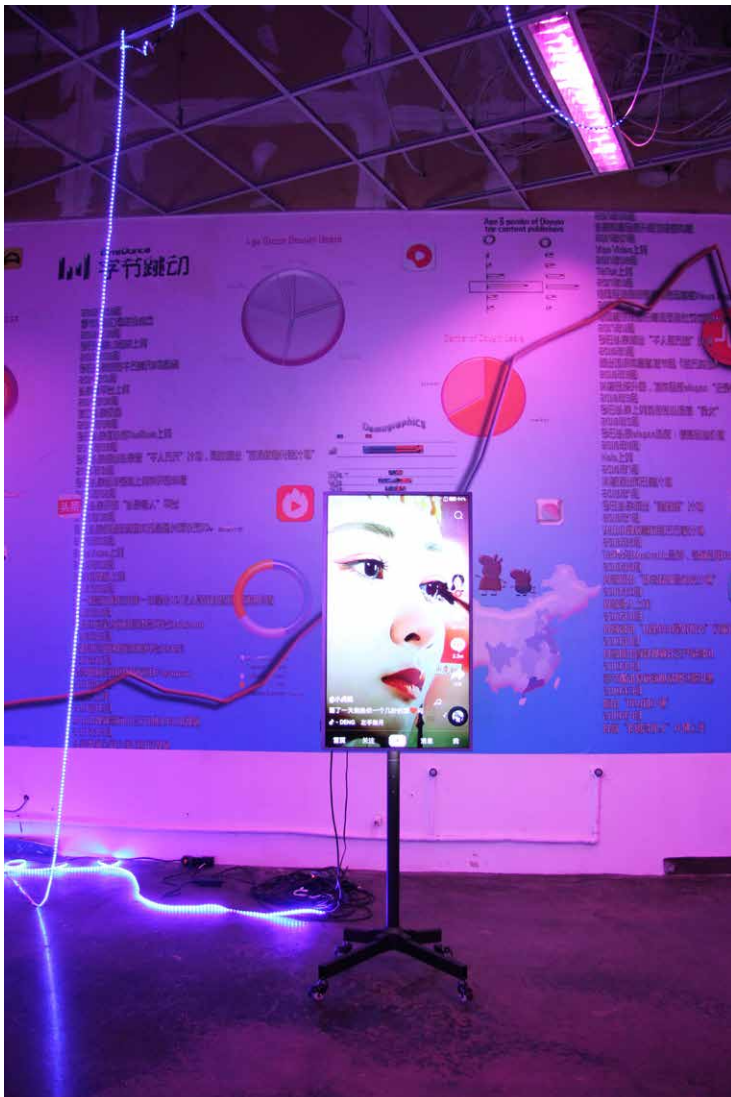


Fig. 3. S)ofia Braga and Matthias Pitscher, *Meanwhile in China*, view of the exhibition at Ars Electronica Festival, Linz, 2019.

Nevertheless *Meanwhile in China* also focuses on problematics related to freedom of speech within Chinese social media platforms due to restrictions caused by the *Great Firewall*, a series of legislation that enforce censorship by regulating internet domestically. The project shows different tricks and symbols users utilise within the platform to find ways to talk about censored topics.

Even if it manifests itself in different ways, we should not forget that censorship is not foreign to western social platforms either, which consistently update their content restrictions for users.

Welcome to My Channel

Welcome to My Channel delves into the vast world of video sharing, in which intimate storytelling has become a tool to achieve visibility and gather views as part of a process of self-determination. Within this context, mental distress itself becomes a dangerous narrative tool, as it becomes more and more difficult to delineate the boundaries between reality and fiction.

Through the appropriation of *Vlogs* downloaded from one of the most famous video sharing platforms on the Internet, the video reflects on the contemporary condition of confiding online.



Fig. 4. Sofia Braga, *Welcome to my channel*, 2020, still from video.

In this mash-up of appropriated videos, suicidal thoughts are alternated with promotion of online counselling apps, creating a disturbing combination that questions the reality of the narration and highlights the latest neo-liberal marketing trends on mental health and self-care, with the ultimate goal of controlling people's behaviours by covertly imposing a series of habits. Thus Social Media becomes the most accessible tool to control bodies in a subtle way, leveraging the human need of belonging, and therefore conforming.

2. Online fictional narratives and transmedia storytelling.

Die Verwandlung

The project, commissioned by TBD Ultramagazine on the topic of metamorphosis, the human/non-human relation, and immersivity, is a short movie for Instagram Stories in which a disturbing everyday life is narrated through an atmospheric mix typical of the psychological horror genre, found footage sub-genre, and vernacular online aesthetics such as *cursed images* and *backrooms*.

The short movie is permeated with a continuous feeling of alienation towards the domestic environment and the body, that is victim to a slow process of mutation, and becomes undesirable and alien. The body in *Die Verwandlung* is passive, and is tired of behaving conformingly, while trapped in the house and within a screen that manipulates its own reality. The body we witness is a body that is looking for its own identity within several realities: the physical one, the mediated one of the Instagram story interpreted by the audience, that – as in a video game – will be asked to choose a finale, and gameplay moments that become a meta-narrative tool in which the body, wandering

within the walls of a virtual castle as an avatar, is desperately searching for the identity of a video game character affected by amnesia.

The atypical format of the IG Stories that were used to develop a traditional format such as a short movie, challenges and subverts the user's fruition as well as the concept of fiction and credibility of images within social media platforms.

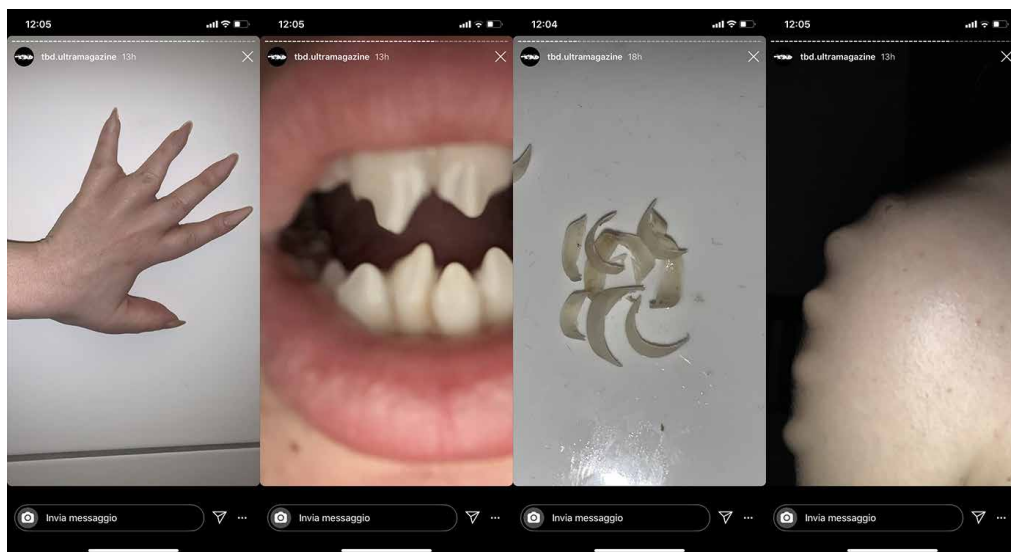


Fig. 5. S()fia Braga, *Die Verwandlung*, 2020, stills from video. Courtesy of the Artist and TBD Ultramagazine.

Forehead Vulva Channelling Research

The *Forehead Vulva Channelling Research* is a speculative *transhumanist* research which focuses on developing advanced studies on the human body's potential to reach lifelong emotional well-being via a re-calibration of pleasure-centers by channeling hidden organs through the use of specialised technologies. The purpose of opening the "Forehead Vulva" is to bring the body to an uninhibited state, and thereby transform it, rediscovering new potentials that humans are still not aware of.

Started as a series of *Forehead Vulva Channelers* – a specific Augmented Reality specialised technology –, The *Forehead Vulva Channelling Research* found rapid support and success within centralised social media platforms, consequently creating a spontaneous worldwide online

performance: just within 24 hours of the first *Forehead Vulva channeller* release, it was already used by 10.000 users and had more than 250.000 impressions.

The project deals with topics such as techno-gender identity and the perception of digital and hybrid bodies, looking for ways to use technology to disrupt identity standards, while at the same time challenging the contemporary capitalistic propaganda of finding ways to reach a “higher” or “better” version of the self through promotion of specific habits and beliefs. Within this context, in a dark and humorous way, *Forehead Vulva Channeling Research* brings the non-compliant body within a capitalistic context, causing a short circuit.



Fig. 6. S)fia Braga, *Forehead Vulva Channeling Research*, 2021, still from video.

These methods have proven that the disruption of the user experience within social media platforms hold the potential to engage with users and bring awareness with a non-manipulative approach, and that a system, in order to be changed, needs to be modified and subverted from within.

In my work, I try to make users aware of their relevance within these structures and invite them to take a critical stance by triggering subversion techniques aimed at disrupting and upsetting the everyday use of the platform.

...Or We Will Do Without the Theatre. Challenging the Urban Space, Drafting a New City Map Through Performances.



ALICE VOLPI, Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3498-6379> <https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19760>

Abstract

The article discusses the evolution of urban mapping and innovative urban design. It explores the transition from functional urban planning to more creative approaches inspired by artists such as Guy Debord, Yoko Ono and others. It suggests that the city is a stage for events, similar to Antonin Artaud's vision. The central question is how the city can be transformed into a theatre through practical design rules. The paper presents two experiments. The first involves random map rearrangement, encouraging new exploration of familiar neighbourhoods. The second experiment introduces guidance and unpredictability, reflecting the uncertainties of architectural projects. These experiments aim to apply theatrical concepts to urban design. The article seeks to develop a manual for dramatic urban navigation, highlighting the inherent dramatic structure of the city and promoting innovative design regulations.

Keywords [Urban](#) [Maps](#) [Flânerie](#) [Theatre](#) [Performance](#)

To quote this essay: A. Volpi "...Or We Will Do Without the Theatre. Challenging the Urban Space, Drafting a New City Map Through Performances," *AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images* [ISSN 2785-7433] 2, no. 2 (2023): 156-165, <https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19760>.

Since we started to be aware of the concept of *urbanity* – since humans began to organize their settlements and to design their cities – simultaneously we have left traces of this exercise. Over the years, the finest technique for representing the forms of communal living – the cities – has been sought. Surprisingly early on, this practise begun to be regulated and detailed cartographies have been consequently elaborated. Today, city maps take different forms and are composed of different layers each time, in accordance with the information needed by the specific target user.

Urban planning nowadays follows strict rules, meticulous, and unfortunately not always exhaustive territory plans – primarily devoted to the ideas of functionality and *services per-capita*. Those guidelines should help the architect in the elaboration of schemes, and in the *design of a reality*, capable of satisfying the needs of those who live in it: the citizens. As designers, we learn early on that choosing to draw certain elements instead of others and consequently reporting selected information on a blank sheet of paper, is itself already a creative process – a selection. The act of drawing represents nothing more than translating a preliminary impression from reality to a two-dimensional surface. In most cases, this choice will evolve into a deliberate synthesis of our intents, while at times it will end up being nothing more than an unpredictable personal discovery. The information presented changes across different maps and over time, making the analysis of these visual representation a fascinating archive. By examining these maps, we can gain insights into the goals that were established during each specific period and era.

The process of designing and mapping cities with a focus on functionality and services is just one approach to cartographic representation. On the other end of the spectrum, we encounter alternative maps that diverge from urban efficiency and instead employ a psycho-geographic analysis of the territory. Guy Debord, as well as other members of the Situationist International

in the late 1950s, accurately retraces the steps of the *flâneur*,¹ creating new maps – new traces – and thus providing us with an innovative, and more up-to-date, playful-constructive vision of the city of Paris. In the same years Constant Nieuwenhuys, drawing the *New Babylon*, suggests a different map – an anti-capitalist city – whose planimetric representation is reassembled by considering an analysis of social structure and not the functionality of urban grids. Hence, New Babylon becomes the city where *Homo-Ludens* wanders from one leisure environment to another, in search of new vibrations; it becomes the new urban reality where the canonical, bourgeois ideas of work, family life and civic responsibility can and must be abandoned. Constant would be overwhelmed, yet not surprised, by knowing how relevant it still is nowadays. Debord and Constant are two of the major exponents in the field, but it is perhaps even more interesting to mention the many artists in the second half of the 20th century, who “played” with challenging the intricate urban grids. Those performers have allowed themselves to be guided by unusual *stimuli* or seemingly inappropriate or negligible details, succeeding in drawing new maps or in overwriting the existing ones. We are not surprised to see how, with the group *Fluxus*, Yoko Ono incites us to *draw a map to get lost* (1964);² or how Richard Long traces his paths by inscribing them in predetermined geometric shapes on the land, *Cerne Abbas Walk* (1975).³ Not long afterwards, these maps begin to be translated into directions, so to be given to those, other than the artists, who want to attempt to navigate cities differently. Therefore,

1 The terms of *flânerie* date to the 16th or 17th century, denoting strolling, idling, often with the connotation of wasting time. With Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Man of the Crowd,” the *flâneur* entered the literary scene.

2 Y. Ono, *Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions and Drawings by Yoko Ono* (1964) (New York City: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

3 Long uses walking as an artistic medium. This work is the result of a six-day walk around an ancient figure cut into a chalky hillside in Dorset. The map shows his route, retracing and re-crossing many roads to stay within a predetermined circle. *Cerne Abbas Walk* is an artwork by Richard Long, in the collection of the Tate Modern in London.

Janet Cardiff's *Video Walks*⁴ guides us around Edinburgh through a new *video-3dimensional experience* of the city, and also through the past and present of the places we cross by following her instructions. These exercises are innumerable and they vary in form and declination, to the point of becoming actual algorithms that mathematically directs our moves inside our cities, such as the *Psycho-geographic Walks* by Wilfred Hou Je Bek.⁵

These various experiments and performances, offer a new understanding of cities and of the city as a map, whether two-dimensional, three-dimensional, video, etc. However, in most cases, they remain episodic. While they are diligently catalogued and graphically displayed, the primary focus is on the performance itself and what the artist learns through its execution.

The city however, regardless the way it is navigated and crossed by its users every day, and especially regardless its own graphic implementation, constitutes itself a *significant stage of events*. When Antonin Artaud, in the late 1920s, begins his invective against the conventional idea of theatre, he immediately brings the city to the core of his dissertation and our attention. By announcing that we have come to an age where we can dispense with the theatre, envisioned as a physical place, a stage, the playwright can “afford” such a bold statement only because he trusts in the possibility that a performance – *a true and complete spectacle*⁶ – is already taking place somewhere else, outside the theatres: in the city.

Starting from Artaud teasing manifesto, and reflecting on different themes: urban planning, performance

4 Wilfried Hou Je Bek uses algorithms to design *psycho-geographic* walks through cities and other areas. The geographic and psychological output is visualized with the help of simple software. Wilfried is a “culture hacker” who develops generative psychogeography.

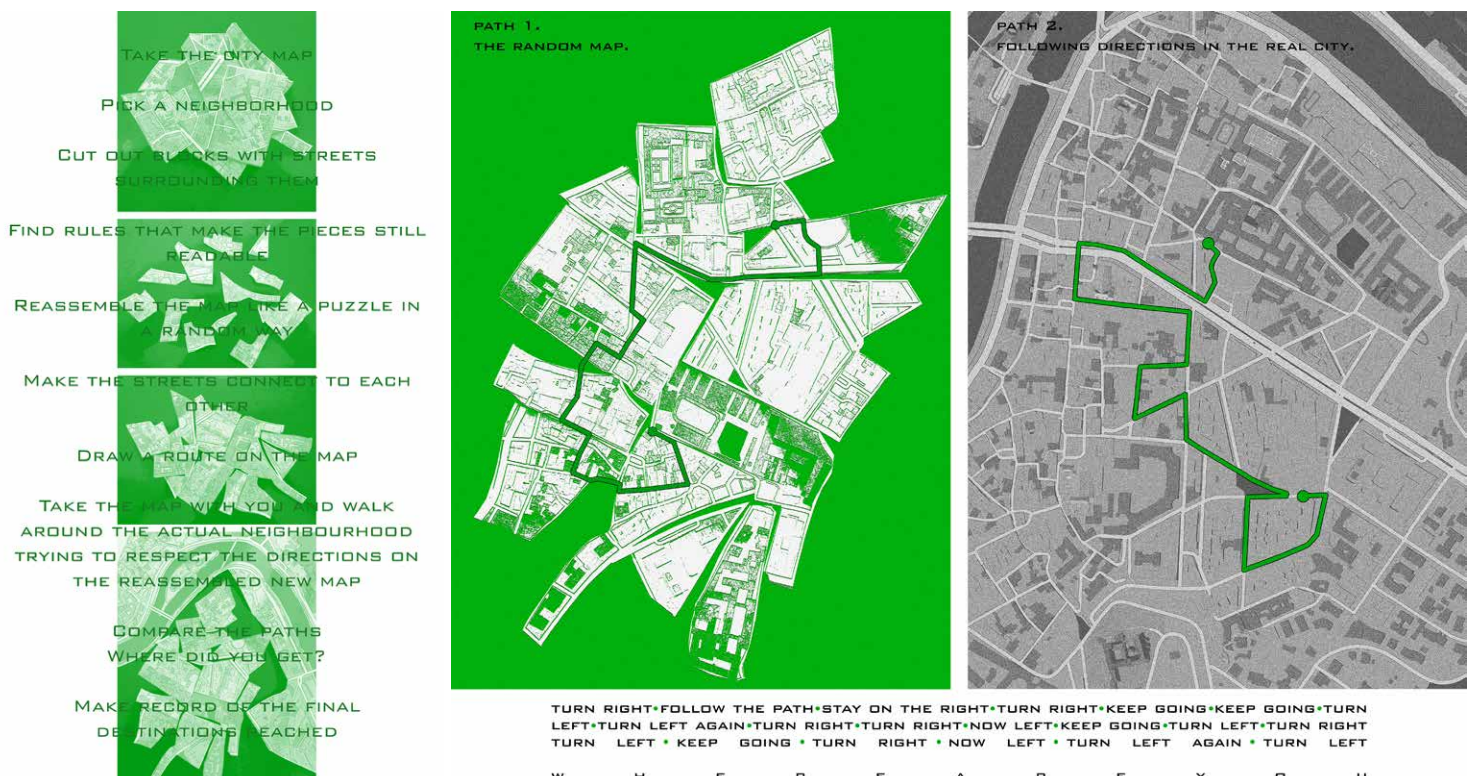
5 Wilfried Hou Je Bek uses algorithms to design *psycho-geographic* walks through cities and other areas. The geographic and psychological output is visualized with the help of simple software. Wilfried is a “culture hacker” who develops generative psychogeography.

6 A. Artaud, S. Sontag, *Antonin Artaud: Selected writings* (Berkeley-Los Angeles CA: University of California Press, 1988).

in the city, and the *transurbanza*,⁷ it could be interesting to codify a new substructure, a new set of rules and directions that can be provided to the architect in the first place, but then to the universal user to answer a single question: *how to transform the city into a theatre?*

As an architect, I ask myself how it is possible to analyse the space of the city through tools other than those provided by urban planning studies, being – *the city* – the reality in which 54% of the world’s population (4 billion people) necessarily gets implicated – *immersed* – every day. Thus seeking to obtain, not a resolute nor repeatable episode, but setting up a handbook for navigating the city *dramatically*, where the theatrical performance becomes an instrument of urban design, and will dictate, obviously with a dash of impertinence, new rules for the drafting of new *master plans* for our cities.

If we are looking for a complete spectacle, the following question might be:



⁷ *Transurbanza* is a term used by Francesco Careri in *Walkscapes: Camminare come pratica estetica* (Turin: Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, 2006). With this concept the author invites us to go in search of empty spaces to be traversed as in a labyrinth, to identify urban natural-ground pathway, tracks where it is still possible to experience the difference between nomadism and sedentariness, basic categories for being able to understand the presence of our species on earth.

Can we walk (in) the city “dramatically” and thus subverting the concept of urban functionality by introducing new variables that belong to theatre’s world?

Not only by cataloguing recurring daily actions – as Artaud suggested by wondering which choreographies belonged to the places we inhabit, considering the *inevitable show* – but by understanding how can we turn these performances into urbanistic tools, and thus from being the ultimate goal to have them becoming the *design means*.

To answer these questions, the initial step is to start navigating the city; immersing oneself in the urban fabric through some experimental tentative; trying to follow the advice of these artists; attempting to get lost in familiar places. To *walk dramatically* we definitely need a few tips, a method. How to follow the footsteps of strangers, how to make them taking us where I wanted to go but through paths we did not intentionally choose. How to follow random geometric shapes in the cluttered building grid; how to draw new ones, disregarding the obstacles. Can we do this, however, trying to avoid becoming performers ourselves, but persisting as designers? The idea is to “shift the logic” preserving the artist’s creative ownership of the original experiment, while simultaneously adapting their perspectives into a fresh framework for a different design approach.

The following two experiments are an early attempt to set the methodology for this urban wandering; with the intent to continue in the extrapolation and setting up of instructions taken from the performative exercises. The goal is to achieve a graphically translatable practice that can be likened to real design rules, with an attempt to show that urbanism can meet functionality requirements even if it responds to a different structure, the *drama*.

Experiment 01.

The Dadaist map.

Moving into the city through randomness.

Inspired from Tristan Tzara proposed *recipe* for a poem.⁸ Tzara suggested to cut out a piece of a newspaper the length of the poem we want to write. Then divide and cut singular word. Mix them in a bag. Then take it out one by one randomly and built the poem respecting the random order of the words. Can this be done with a map, with the city?

Recipe for a new map:

Take a map of the city; choose a neighbourhood; cut out the blocks with the streets around them. Find rules that make the pieces still readable; put the map back together like a puzzle, randomly; try to make the streets connect to each other; draw a route on the new map. Take the map with you and walk around that neighbourhood trying to respect the directions on the newly reassembled map.

The purpose of this experiment is to navigate and immerse oneself within a familiar neighbourhood, while trying not to be overcome, or be affected, by what one recognizes as familiar. After all, how many times have we gone to the same theatre, to see completely different plays; or indeed very often even the same drama, staged in the same theatre, but the different sets, choreography, directing allowed us to transcend the venue to enjoy the new play. How can we apply these rules to the city?

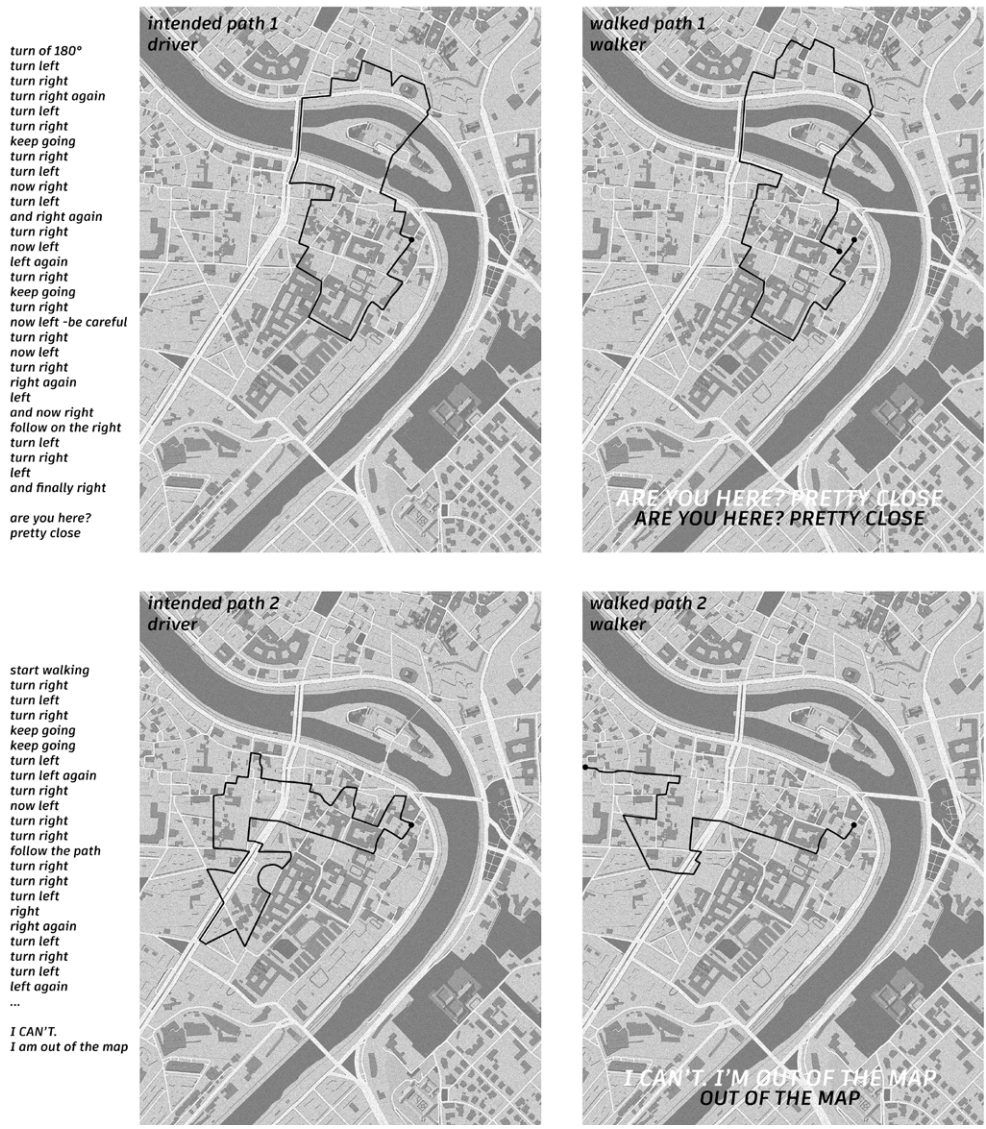
Experiment 02.

Moving within the city, driven by others.

Speaking of guidance, the purpose of this second experiment is to introduce the element of a *direction*. Very early on I felt the need to be guided by the stage directions of someone else, precisely the director

8 T. Tzara, "Pour faire un poème dadaïste" *Littérature*, no. 15 (July-August, 1920): 18.

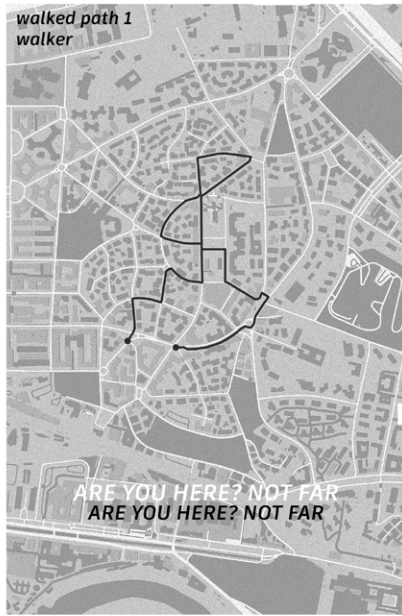
or choreographer of the *urban drama* I am looking for. By introducing a director, thus including *the other*, we also get the chance of inevitably familiarising, with the possibility of unpredictability and mistakes. The risk that the performance, the dramatic act, will not come to fruition as planned or at all – which is an issue that even the architect often wonders about, the failure of the project.



Take two identical maps of a portion of a city. Ask someone to draw a path on one of them without paying too much attention to it. Do not look at the route and leave the first map with your friend. Take a second, identical but clean, map with you. Ask your friend to tell you where to start based on the route he or she has drawn – identify a place. Then, by phone, be guided by his directions that respect the route he has drawn.

walk left
 keep going
 turn left
 turn left again
 turn right
 turn left
 turn right
 follow the street
 turn right
 again
 go up on the left
 keep going
 turn right
 turn left
 turn left again
 keep going
 turn left
 turn right
 immediately left
 turn left
 turn right
 turn right
 turn left
 turn right
 turn left
 keep going

are you here?
 NOT FAR



walk left
 keep going
 go up
 turn right
 turn left
 keep going
 turn right
 turn left
 left again
 turn right
 turn left
 now right
 right again
 turn left
 follow the street
 turn right
 turn left
 keep going
 turn right
 turn left
 left again
 again
 turn right
 keep going
 turn left
 keep going
 turn right
 left
 right
 right
 now left

are you here?
 NOT AT ALL



Before starting establish rules and lexicon to be used:

- The walkers must be silent.
- The walkers can only pace their steps. If not wearing shoes that make noise, use another object against the microphone to pace the steps.
- The director must not use street names.
- The director must not use landmark references.
- Do not use monuments as landmarks.
- Use only simple direction verbs: turn, cross, continue, stop, turn back.
- Use only simple direction indicators: left or right.
- The driver should not suggest how long to walk in a specific direction.

- The driver must not use numbers to indicate the distance between points on the map.
- Prohibited phrases: take the first (or second, etc.) on the left.
- The same applies to the right.
- The driver: must sense the length by hearing your footsteps and suggest when to turn and change direction by feeling that you have walked far enough.

While walking take track on the second map of where you are and of the path. When your friend has finished directing you, mark where you are. If you are not where you were supposed to be, go back to your friend at the starting point. Confront the two maps, and the two paths. Do it again, switch roles.

THE ITALIAN JOB - Job N. 3, *Lazy Sunday* (2022)



EMILIO VAVARELLA, artist, Harvard University, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5550-8093>

in conversation with SOFIA PIRANDELLO, Università degli Studi di Milano, <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4477-9199>
<https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19850>

Lazy Sunday is the third work in *THE ITALIAN JOB* series. Started in 2014, straddling the distance between Italy and the United States, this series intends to highlight the hidden structures behind themes such as artistic legitimacy, virtuality, immaterial labour and 2.0 relationships between artists and curators. *Lazy Sunday* takes shape after an invitation to participate in a virtual residency within the spaces of the 12th Atelier of Casa degli Artisti in Milan. The artist accepts the invitation, overturning the assumptions of the residency: instead of participating at a distance, Vavarella transforms his point of view into an open space for the virtual participation of other people. The work consists of a 12-hour film made with a 360° camera and shot continuously on August 8 2021, on an ordinary day. Starting at 9:40 a.m., Emilio Vavarella filmed the events of one of his summer Sundays, recording his every activity, from waking up until the evening. The film has been shown in the space set up in the Casa degli Artisti, where visitors took on the point of view of the artist using a Virtual Reality headset.

Keywords [VR](#) [Performance](#) [POV](#) [Portrait](#) [360-degrees](#)

To quote this essay: E. Vavarella in conversation with S. Pirandello, “*THE ITALIAN JOB - Job N. 3, Lazy Sunday (2022)*,” *AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images* [ISSN 2785-7433] 2, no. 2 (2023): 166-172, <https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19850>.

SOFIA PIRANDELLO: *Lazy Sunday* was produced in response to a call for you to make a VR work during a remote residency; the idea was to create a workspace, an online artist's studio. With your work, you decided to overturn these premises: you transported us between Cambridge and Boston, opening a window on your everyday life, changing the cards on the table a bit as regards the roles of the people involved. I am thinking above all of us curators and the public. What kind of experience does this result in for the parties involved, in your opinion?

EMILIO VAVARELLA: Actually, on an empirical level, you would be better equipped to answer the question, because it was in a way your role, along with Elisabetta's, that was partially turned on its head. And those who enjoyed the work could, or should, answer the question. Because I, after all, could not share their point of view either...From my perspective, it was about working simultaneously on several fronts. On the theoretical front, I was interested in exploring the idea, or ideology, of immersion, precisely because it represented the starting point of your research project, and offered so much food for thought.

From a conceptual point of view, I was interested in creating a work that seemed very straightforward and direct, like the other works in this series, but capable of opening up multiple discourses and various types of analysis and interpretation.

From the point of view of the material production of the work, I needed to give concrete material form to my ideas by bringing the dimension of *techne* as close as possible to that of *logos*, and I needed, as requested in your invitation, to use Virtual Reality.

And finally, from an interpersonal point of view, it was important to me that no matter how much my operation was cloaked in a certain irony, unscrupulousness, and even a certain amount of irreverence, it was still clear that it was not a boutade, but an operation driven by a deep desire to get to the bottom of all of these issues.

And precisely because each of my works stems from a synthesis between concept and material, the synthesis came very naturally and spontaneously, almost as if it were something absolutely necessary.

SOFIA PIRANDELLO: *Lazy Sunday* was conceived as the third chapter of a series, *THE ITALIAN JOB*, dedicated to the relationship between artists and curators in the realisation of online works. What are the two works that precede *Lazy Sunday* and what are they about?

EMILIO VAVARELLA: First of all, all the works in *THE ITALIAN JOB* series share a number of characteristics related to the mode of production, the geographical context of the works, and the issues addressed.

The conditions of production reflect general socio-technical changes: production through (technical and social) networks; production at zero cost to the artist; production in the absence of a traditional artist's studio; and alternative forms of monetisation of artistic practice.

With regard to geography, the artist's position straddling two countries, Italy and the United States, should be emphasised. But also a position straddling online and offline and at the intersection of material production and intellectual work.

The issues addressed, all interconnected, are originality, technical reproducibility, the relationship between original and copy, artistic legitimisation and the value of the work of art.

The first work in the series was in 2014. I had been selected for a digital artist residency on the theme of cloud computing entitled *embarrassment party*, created and directed by Marii Nyröp. My project consisted of stealing the entire residency plus the eleven works created by seven other international artists. The work, or operation, was supported by curatorial texts by Lucrezia Calabrò Visconti and Marii Nyröp.

The second work is entitled *An-Archiving Game*, and is from the following year. I created a virtual exhibition in the form of an animated GIF using photographs from the FBI's archive of stolen artworks, the "National Stolen Art File." I then offered physical copies of the stolen photos for sale using an experimental open source platform that offers a decentralised, peer-to-peer, tax-free, censorship-free online network through which to trade in Bitcoins. This second project was accompanied by curatorial texts by Monica Bosaro and Emma Stanisic.

SOFIA PIRANDELLO: Immersive experiences, artistic or otherwise, often aim to involve those who participate in them thanks to a strong interactive dimension. You made a twelve-hour film in which, as you yourself pointed out, the highlights are those in which you read a book, eat an ice cream, take a motorbike ride, and chat on the terrace on a lazy summer Sunday. It is often said that VR is capable of recreating the world we live in, and you have decided to do this in a way that the viewer might not expect: you have provided twelve hours of your life and the chance to be present. Elisabetta wrote in this regard that there is no climax, all the moments are equally important and interesting. What prompted you to create a 360° film with these characteristics?

EMILIO VAVARELLA: I believe that spending an entire day in someone else's shoes is as interesting as it is impractical, for innumerable reasons. The duration of the work then has as much to do with how I recorded my point of view as with how I imagined it would be enjoyed, i.e. a one-off projection, from morning to night, performative and un-repeatable. A kind of live performance filmed for deferred broadcast. With the hours of the night, the darkness, the immobility of the body, the negation of the image, marking its beginning and its end. If I had made cuts and editing, arbitrarily, the meaning of the work would have inexorably slipped through those same cuts. Editing would have produced a semantic structure that would have interfered

with the very idea of “live action.” Only the annihilation of the montage, or at least its reduction to a minimal, almost non-existent form, makes it possible to focus on the content of the frame, which in turn is 360°, thus itself free of the cuts made by the image frame.

The 360° element, I believe, serves even more to negate the idea of immersiveness it promises. Because, while it provides an immersive image, there is in a sense a discomfort in immersion that becomes glaringly obvious when one finds oneself cramped and constricted within an image that is as impenetrable as it is immersive.

SOFIA PIRANDELLO: At first, *Lazy Sunday* may seem an extremely sincere work: you lay bare your everyday life without veils, you share everything and everyone with us. When we enter the film, we put ourselves in your shoes. Yet, one thing we soon realise is that even if we spend hours immersed in your environment, we will never have the experience you have had. Both as an artist and as a researcher, what is your stance on the rhetoric of presentiality and immediacy of immersive media such as 360° cinema and Virtual Reality? Are we ever really present in such a context and in what way?

EMILIO VAVARELLA: The work offers exactly what it promises: it provides the artist’s point of view. On the other hand, this type of residency is mainly aimed at this, and every artist has in a way a duty to please the patrons they decide to work with.

The interesting thing, for me, is that the ideology implicit in the discourses related to immersivity cloaks this work with a desire for sharing and identification which is not currently possible, and perhaps never will be, but which arises almost automatically in the spectators / viewers.

The work promises the audience the possibility of experiencing a recording in Virtual Reality, but it is the expectation linked to this type of fruition that immediately cloaks the work

with a desire, partially conscious and partially unconscious, for immersion and identification with other bodies.

Then there remains the question of access to the artist, to his body as much as to his mind. I believe that there has long been a deep fascination with artworks also as a means of immersion in the minds of artists: it is perhaps a history of art in reverse that has yet to be written. But this is undoubtedly there.

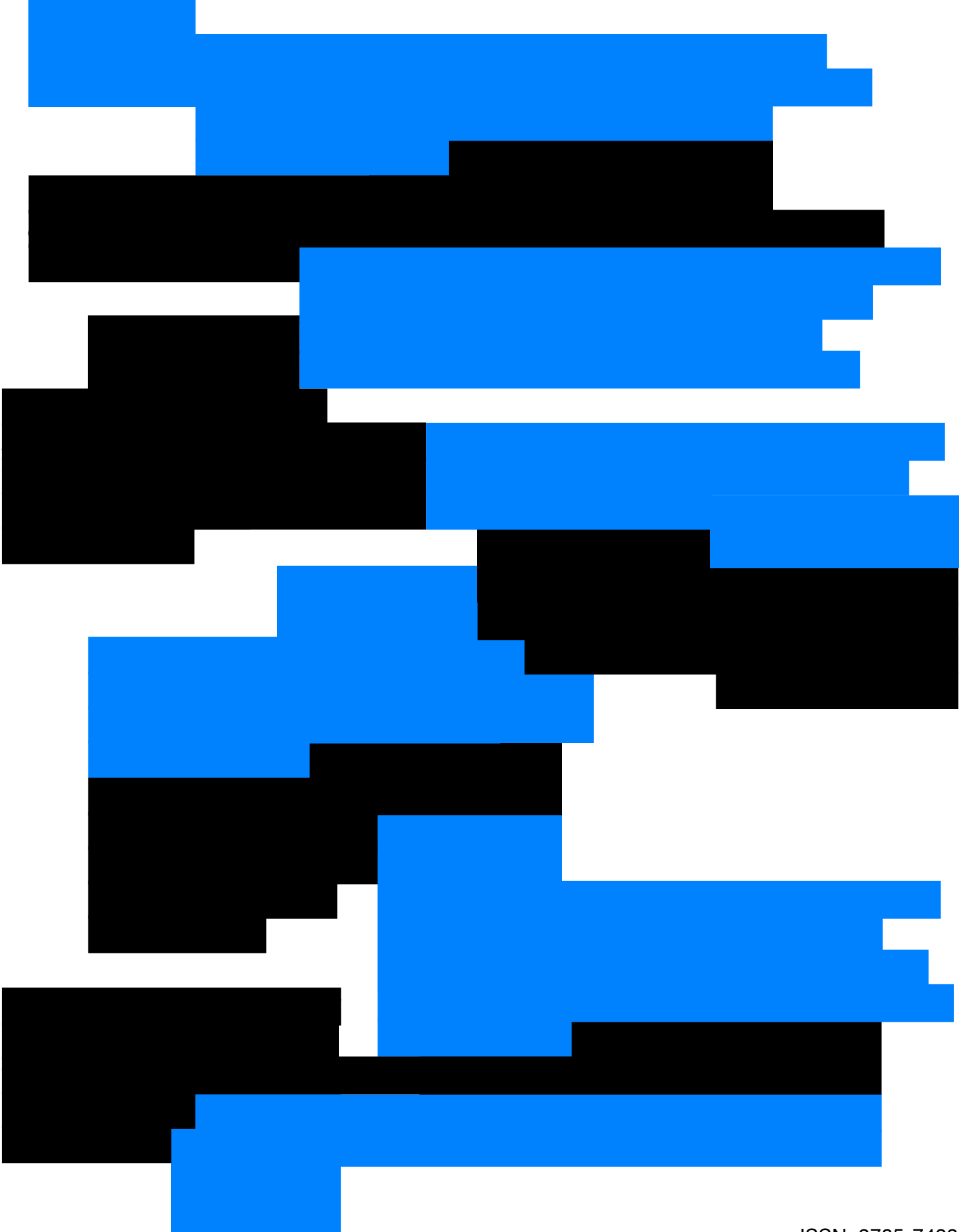
I like Elisabetta's interpretation of the work, speaking of a "faceless self-portrait," linked in various ways to other works of mine. I am thinking of *The Sicilian Family*, which merges my family memories with images of my relatives, but blends everything into impenetrable glitches; I am thinking of my genetic portrait at the MAMbo Museum in Bologna, of the series *The Other Shapes of Me*, in which I exist as a digital clone in textile format, but still impenetrable, unreadable. In *Mnemograph* I trace my childhood memories but without letting anyone else have access to them.

In a way then, all these works are a form of negotiating, in an era dominated by visibility, the need to make oneself visible, readable, recognisable, and accessible. I think it is more interesting to deny all this regime of absolute visibility, and thus always remain partially invisible, inaccessible, or unrecognisable.

SOFIA PIRANDELLO: *Lazy Sunday* is a film, but it is also a performance, in a more or less broad sense: a performance which you carried out by filming subjectively for twelve hours straight last summer and which was only available for twelve hours on January 23 this year, at the Casa degli Artisti in Milan; it is for those who wear helmets, ideally for twelve hours, and who have to physically bear the burden that reliving even just an ordinary day entails. Does this have anything to do with betraying the promises of entertainment often linked to VR in order to rethink the use of this medium in an alternative way?

EMILIO VAVARELLA: This has to do with my desire, traceable in all my works regardless of the medium used, to create a space for reflection. We could call it a critical space within which to exercise one's thoughts. The long, even boring times of an anti-spectacular and prolonged fruition can bring about this critical space.

But it also has to do with a certain way of seeing reality, which for me is a constant performance, or metamorphosis, of events, of flows, to which we give order and which we try to break up and segment according to our own arbitrary logic and our own forms of experience. By offering to the public a kind of mirrored experience of a day in my life I necessarily gave form to my own idea of what reality looks like.



ISSN: 2785-7433

AN-ICONOLOGY
History, Theory, and Practices
of Environmental Images



UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO
DIPARTIMENTO DI FILOSOFIA
"PIERO MARTINETTI"



AN-ICON has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. Grant agreement No. 834033 AN-ICON. The project is hosted by the Department of Philosophy "Piero Martinetti" – Department of Excellence at the State University of Milan.