

Machines to be Another

Leaving the Self Behind

The strongest VR impression I can recollect was the impression of stepping out self in the experience of temporary death staged by Jon Raffman's in *View of the Pariser Platz at 9th Berlin Biennale* curated by DIS collective in 2015. The biennale was contemplating on the post-internet condition of the screen being more real than the physical world. The experience was built on deceiving the vestibular apparatus into thinking that the body is in the condition of the free fall. The experience was spectacularly staged at the balcony of the Academy der Kunst, which was the main venue of the biennale. It has been just ten years since the Pariser Platz death zone of the Berlin wall, was newly rebuilt and returned to its original status of an elegant urban space hosting the luxury hotels and embassies. The historic square remembers both the Napoleon troops and the reciprocal triumph of the Franco-Prussian war. The balcony is facing the Brandenburg Tor. Four sculptures from the series *L'avalée des avalés* (*Swallowed by the Swallower*) staged unlikely scenes of swallowing pairs: Rhino / Bear, Iguana / Sloth, Ram / Sea Lion, Dog / Lion. Once the experiencer puts on the headset, the swallowings animated, the first scene matches the



architecture and the sculptures. A dog strangles a lion and an iguana devours a sloth. Slowly the animals begin to distend, pulsate, and convulse as a thick fog smothers the horizon. Signature for later Rafman work, digital human figures are scattered skyward like

Jon Rafman, *View of the Pariser Platz*, 2015

discarded pelts. The floor of the balcony disintegrates; the experiencer falls among the wreckage as if in the flood, finally settling among rows of anonymous, grey dummies. The

avalée in the title is becoming an avalanche of the digital sublime, an experience beyond the possibility of human life.

Swallowing the history from the the balcony of the Academy der Kunst, while being swallowed by the dopamine controlling algorithms, is the subject of the work. Every experiencer is in the reality of the social media simultaneously with the reality of the historic space and of the reality of Rafman's art work, she would either photograph, or be photographed, respond or like a message or an image right after the experience as well as before it. Within the VR, temporary death of the bodiless vertigo is a mirror a doomscroller of the social media should be holding to herself. The doomscroller is devoured by the algorithms, without having affected the history. The sense of disturbance and the obscene connotations of the swallowings continued in the surrealist *Dream Diaries* 2016-2019. The work should remind of the unnaturally polished normality of the social media posts and reels that consume the viewer once she consumes them. The historical site of the *Pariser Platz* degrades into the scenery of a video game.

In this piece the viewer experiences a loss of the physical self once the floor beneath her feet dissolves. I clearly remember feeling nausea and uncontrolled fear as a classical trope of flight over the abyss was staged. The sensorium of the VR, as well as other embodied art experiences, force one into feeling, not necessarily into feeling something pleasant. In the Rafman's work all around the crowd of shadow like blue figures were flying or floating above the Pariser Platz. The brain gave a plausible explanation of a deluge. It was the embodied metaphor of the data deluge that Rafman forced the experiencer through. It made one sense the dissolving of self in the scrolling of the feed of the social media as something tangible and physically unpleasant.

Model of and Model for Reality

This chapter will explore if VR can be a sensorium in which one can go through the experience they have never lived or never realised they were living. I will start with considering VR as a possibility of intensified sensorium and defining its specificity. VR is an attentional environment. With its isolation of the experiencer from the surrounding reality, VR can compete for undistracted attention a rare art form can pretend for. The focus of attention can stimulate creating experiences or telling the stories that might require a certain degree of transformational change: be it the experience of the "walking

in the shoes of the other” in real space or travelling to a different time and space in the same shoes. One of the initial steps in this experience would be leaving behind the self¹. Essentially, VR seems to be a uniquely calibrated tool for arranging the sensation of experience of someone or someones completely different from the *experiencer*. I will start my exploration by stating that VR is a machine to be another.

I choose the word *experiencer* deliberately in order to stress the fact that VR is used and can be used further as a *sensorium space* in which vision does not have to be championed. VR can simulate one or several sensations: vision, hearing, perception of movement, touch, being hot or cold, etc. So I will look at virtual reality as digital, physical, or physical augmented with the digital attentional space, where an experience is arranged using the head-mounted display, architecture, light, sound, position of the body, sense of touch, or others senses as the means to create an illusion of presence alone or accompanied with an illusion of agency in a designed space. The example here would be an architectural ensemble, or an installation space to perceive with the whole body. The sensorium here would mean a VR space as a place for sensing.

The focus of attention makes the case for immersive storytelling in which the experiencer is given **the perspective of a witness or a perspective of an actor**. In VR studies there is a discussion about whether this perspective of a witness encourages dark tourism or a genuine change of perspective turning VR into the empathy machine². I am going to take the less critical side than the dark tourism charges and look into the ways embodied experience can contribute to a more profound emotional engagement of the experiencer. Perspective of an actor gives the agency of different type in the world that is explained by the Proteus effect: the way the body is perceived by others affects the way the person behaves, experiencer in the avatar of Einstein is more inventive.

The change of perspective first of all means entering a radically different world and allowing the experiencer an agency in this world. This places VR within a tradition of

¹ The ritual of initiation teaches that it is necessary to withdraw from the world to become another, rituals of belonging give attributes to transform. It is equally necessary to leave the self behind for experience the electric exaltation of collective effervescence in the ritual of belonging, as to travel to a different space and time.

²Fisher, Joshua A. Schoemann, Sarah
Toward an Ethics of Interactive Storytelling at Dark Tourism Sites in Virtual Reality, 2018
: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04028-4_68

rituals of extracting the spectator from the physical world into a heterotopia. These kinds of extraction were developed by heterotopias of a church, a theatre, a museum etc. In this case, a metaverse presents a heterotopia of similar type. And it is curious to see what the differences can be.

It is habitual to speak of VR as a reality that is opposed to the physical one, and I would argue that digital experience can be deepening the understanding of a certain aspect of the physical world and, in fact, is no more virtual than the experience of a film in a cinema theatre, an institution, or an architectural ensemble – these can be filtering and simulating reality in a way that is not dissimilar to VR. VR, in this case, can be seen as a magnifying glass that can be placed against something invisible otherwise either for the reason it is out of reach or for the reason of the distance over space or time.

VR is certainly not unique in its building of fictional worlds. A film establishes a unique fictional universe with its distinct aesthetics, a viewer moves in it with the personifications of the characters. This world is reminiscent of a certain existing place, but the place is made more recognisable as a part of the fictional world. Traversing an abandoned architectural space is not dissimilar to the film as it switches realities and almost forces to imagine previous or possible lives in this place. As VR, a building or an ensemble is a narrative form of organization of the space; once the space is abandoned the functionality is left behind and the narrative prevails.

A ghost city would be another case of such a narrative space. Ella Raidel, a film maker of Australian descent, made observing Chinese ghost cities her artistic research practice. The continuous economic requirement for generating production surplus fosters a pattern of excessive urbanisation, leading to the construction of more cities than are functionally necessary. This hyperurbanisation thus creates heterotopias of huge haunted spaces nobody lives in. The creation of such real estate wastelands asks for a complete transformation of the natural landscape. In Boluo/Huizhou, for instance, mountains were divided and reshaped to mimic the appearance of the Austrian Alps surrounding Hallstatt. Similarly, the giant-scale Lanzhou New Area development in Shanxi province involved flattening hundreds of mountains simply to make way for new cities. Practice of Ella Raidel³ is revealing the contrast between a collective fantasy of grandiose urban spaces

³ Ella Raidel. Artist website. <http://ellaraidel.com/>

and the reality of them having become exhausted and empty sites. If Raidel's work documents the hollow physical shells of misplaced urban ambition, other creators utilize immersive technologies to explore the psychic and political forces that lead to such societal voids.

Shifting from the observational lens of film to the participatory realm of Virtual Reality, *From the Main Square* by Pedro Harres takes the interaction in an immersive storytelling space even further. The experiencer is placed in the centre of events that describe a civilisation that has both inertia of endless diverse development that is followed by a tragic self-destruction. The script originates from Harres's observation of the political situation in his native Brazil as seen from the news reports while he studies in Filmuniversität Babelsberg Konrad Wolf in Germany. The pace of the experience was also inspired with the ever-changing panorama and gentrification of Berlin. In his own words, he was attempting to achieve in 3D animation what Sergey Loznitsa (*Maidan*) and Spike Lee (*Do The Right Thing*) do in documentary film. So we can think of *From the Main Square* within the lines of documentary story telling as it may be translated to 3D animation.

From the Main Square presents the experiencer the society that polarises itself with two opposing worldviews: the Squares and the Rounds. The Rounds stand for spiritual, irrational, ethnic, bio and possibly left, while the squares live behind the huge concrete fence, shoot guns, have banners with the portrait of dictator and seem to be largely right. If we stay within the Brazilian analogy of the script we would assume that the Rounds to be supporters of the Lula, while the Squares could be seen as the violent supporters of Bolsano. Both of them speak imaginary languages: the Squares speak a mixture of Greek, Bulgarian and Swedish and the Rounds the mixture of Igbo, Mongolian, Somali, Samoan.

We witness the conflict through everyday life scenes but also through the architectonic styles of the Rounds and the Squares. As the conflict escalates, the society finds itself in the condition of the civil war. Although the experience includes the recurring character, there is no one protagonist as the collective experience is being portrayed.

While Harres uses VR to simulate a world divided by opposing ideologies, this process of selective representation mirrors how physical and political institutions curate reality itself.

In the same fashion as a film, or an architectural ensemble, an institution tends to be curating out a part of reality that it is opposed to. For instance, an institutional policy of rejecting plastic results in simulated spaces in physical reality from which the plastic is excluded. A more radical example of the carefully curated space is given by Boris Groys in his book *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin*. In a totalitarian state, such as the Soviet Union, the publications, the technology, the food, and the clothes that could be found everywhere else as a cause of globalisation were nowhere to be seen. Possibly even more radical would be the imagination of the Chinese Empire of itself as the Middle Kingdom, in relation to which other civilisations can gain meaning: the closer, the more meaningful, the further, the more barbarian. If the Soviet Union imagines and curates itself, the Chinese Empire imagines and curates out the rest of the world. VR, we can think of a simulated space from which everything else but the world in question is excluded. Structurally, it is the same principle of filtering and zooming in on space.

We are going to look at VR as an ontological paradigm both functioning as a ‘model for’ and a ‘model of’ reality. We can rely on it to articulate certain cultural worlds. As we can think of Van Gogh as someone who was able to articulate Arles and Provence to itself. It is through the painting of Van Gogh that we learn to see the colours and the properties of light that the region was accumulating since ancient times.

In the similar way, Claude Monet articulates the space of his garden in Giverny that immerses the experiencer in the image space. This immersion is happening through the



Claude Monet, *Nymphéas*, 1896-1926, a series of panoramic paintings, photo from Musée d'Orangerie, Paris

absence of perspective, frame, and horizon. As Oliver Grau observes in *Virtual Art*⁴ this puts the viewer to a close distance of 15 to 20 cm, the distance Monet himself was painting from.

During thirty restless years for Europe—from 1896 to 1926—Claude Monet produced two hundred and fifty paintings, seemingly bypassing the tremors of the Great War. Among these were forty large-scale works dedicated to a singular, obsessive subject: the water lilies in his aquatic garden at Giverny, Normandy. The garden, of course, shifted with the seasons and the hours, yet the core themes remained immutable: infinity, time, and the reflections upon the water. While most were captured from life, they were not left there; the artist returned to them later, layering memory over observation.

Four of these forty canvases eventually found their space in the *Musée de l'Orangerie*. This series, the *Nymphéas*, represents a slow migration from sight to memory. There is no central composition, no sky, no horizon, and almost no perspective. Monet envisioned a panoramic installation that would fuse the physical space of his garden with thirty years of steady, unblinking observation of it. It seems that if one looks at something—almost regardless of what it is—for thirty years, one can eventually see the infinite.

Seventeen years into this obsession, working in a vast studio where canvases moved on wheels like scenery, Monet finally gave physical form to the idea of eternal repetition. He transitioned from the circle to the oval, and finally to the double oval—the mathematical symbol of infinity. Before settling at the Orangerie, the project was a nomad, destined first for the Hôtel Biron and then the Musée Rodin. Its final home is significant: the oval hall is suspended between the Tuileries Garden and the Seine, positioned precisely along the celestial artery where the sun carves its path through Paris.

Four panels capture four moments of the day. On the first, we see the boundary between night and day—a twilight where the night seems to embrace the day from both sides. In the morning, the water reflects the rose-colored clouds of dawn; the lilies are visible, yet still closed. By midday, the water is a deep, heavy blue, carrying the weight of the earth, while the lilies have opened into shades of pink. In the evening, the blue dissolves into violet, the lilies turn white as they seal themselves shut, and the water begins to feel like

⁴ Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art*. From *Illusion to Immersion*, p 142

air. Finally, in the light of the sunset, the water appears to ignite with a yellow flame; a crimson glint remains as a memory of the sun, while the lilies have gone into hiding.

The viewer's movement through the elliptical halls of the Musée de l'Orangerie, where the *Nymphéas* are displayed, mirrors both the Earth's trajectory around the sun and the life cycle of a living being. There is a profound simplicity and a sense of repetition in these paintings—a quality more characteristic of an algorithm than of a human hand. Monet's thirty years of labor imbue this elliptical environment with the sheer, physical weight of time. Yet, a question lingers: why do we need a representation of the pond at Giverny, when the pond at Giverny already exists?

These being at the same place at multiple different times is the means by which Monet is augmenting the place, and creating an effect of the model of the garden. This articulations, or put in Heideggerian terms, 'things thinging,' can reveal what deeply matters to us, but also can demonstrate the functioning of the art and hold a potential of transforming a historical community.⁵ The series can be considered a prehistoric VR as it pushed the experiencer in the sensorium of the artist, making them see the model of time shifting through the changes of the time of the day.

VR Space. Rules of the Real.

The space in VR and in its historical prototypes such as panorama, or the depictions of the garden in Giverny by Monet is characterised by the absence of a frame. This space can be created by means of 360-degree video, by means of animation, or by means of designing images in space. Oliver Grau in his *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* traces the history of VR to the cave drawings, frescoes, and later dioramas. The use of these spaces can be manifold; for instance, for designing objects, training for mission-critical procedures or researching human behaviour.

It is important to note that VR is perceived as an actual space by the human brain and any content type for the VR should be respecting spatial constraints: be it the image, a character, or sound. The same, unexpectedly enough, works for the perception of the

⁵ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger-aesthetics/>

body: the body seen in VR is perceived by the brain as one's own. Three main illusions that are making virtual reality real include the illusion of place (PI the illusion of physically being in the place made in VR), illusion of plausibility (Psi the illusion that events in VR are happening in reality) and the illusion of ownership of the virtual body.⁶ Copresence, or sensation of actually sharing the same time and the same virtual space with other people (or virtual humans) can be a consequence of the PI and Psi, but also a form of social presence.

Since VR is normally a multidimensional space, the author has very little control over the experiencer's field of view. They literally can look in any direction, unless the view is guided by the author, but this way the degree of the agency is considerably decreased, and the distance between the architecture and VR is shortened. This can affect stories in which many things happen or there are many characters acting presumably at the same time. On the other hand, it provides an excellent condition for the experience of a specific space or a specific mood. Consequently, VR seems to be an ideal televisual experience. **In case where the environment reacts to the gaze direction this is called passive interaction, in the case where an action of any sort is needed the conscious interaction is at play.**

As I was putting the participant's badge on my neck at the *New Images Festival*, impressive annual international VR festival, held in Paris, I didn't expect too much. My usual VR experience was limited to cartoonish or indie graphic, which always makes what is happening less real, or to the strangely filmed 360-degree video in which you find yourself in the point of view of a fly. While the first one is not very convincing, the second is not more than unusual. As yet, you would expect something more from something that has a history as long as the history of frescos.

Little did I expect to find myself *Traversing the Mist* directed by a Taiwanese artist Tung-yen Chou. The experience starts with the mirror in which the experiencer sees her new self: a young and slim Asian man with freshly grown beard. The elevator is shabby, by no means clean, sleek and neutral as digital spaces oftentimes are. It has brown doors with scratched-in lines and scuffed metal walls. This place has history and bears traces. One

⁶ Slater M, Banakou D, Beacco A, Gallego J, Macia-Varela F and Oliva R (2022) A Separate Reality: An Update on Place Illusion and Plausibility in Virtual Reality. *Front. Virtual Real.* 3:914392. doi: 10.3389/frvir.2022.914392

sees other participants in the elevator, it feels uncomfortable to be tightly packed in it with two other males with bodies identical to my avatar.

The next stage is the locker room with numbered metal boxes. At this stage in the similar experience a visitor would leave their clothes, and with them the social markers and the social roles to start the cruising experience. In *Traversing the Mist* it is the moment of transition as well. At this stage the business outfit dissolves and the participants find themselves in identical white underwear. The community etiquette does not allow dressed people in the steam rooms.

The experience is collective and this uncomfortable sensation of incompetence and unfamiliarity starts in the cloak room. Two other people taking this experience with me were males. I remember entering the boy's cloakroom at the football stadium near my son's school when he was seven and wanted to play football for a short moment. I was stricken by the smell of sweat in different stages, boys and men were changing, nobody paid attention to me as they were either exhausted after playing outside in this cold autumn day or impatient and excited to play. In the cloak room of the gay sauna I felt out of place in the same way as in that cloakroom. Two other males were sharing with me the same body, the same face and the same underwear.



Tung-Yen Chou (Very Theatre), *Traversing the Mist*, 2020, a screen shot from a collective VR experience

Later reading about the etiquette of the gay sauna and talking about it with gay people who are familiar with this culture, I learned that the experience of *Traversing the Mist* was equally thrilling for them, but also was very true to the experience of cruising. In this space, gaze is almost material, making eye contact is an invitation for the sexual contact, looking away is a denial of this contact. Speaking is uncommon in the dark sauna spaces. Communication is done through gaze and touch. This is another reason why the experience felt uncomfortable – it is being in the space where you are meant to be touched.

Once the clothing dissolves there are two objects that the experiencer finds in each of the lockers: the key and the torch. While the key is a universal symbol pointing at the search of the way or of the self, the torch in this context could be seen as a synonymous object: suggesting assistance in seeing the shape of objects in the dark. It could also be added that the torch is associated with detective stories or dungeon and dragons. There is also direct contextual meaning for these two objects. Each one plays a role in particular sauna cruising culture. Since speaking is uncommon, the choice of the side of the body where one puts the elastic strap with the key designates one's preference: on your left to indicate you are a top, or your right hand to indicate bottom. Most of the places in the sauna are rather dark including the steam, whirlpool, and launching area. A torch would be a tool of finding your way, showing yourself and literally an invitation, and the light turned away – a silent 'no'. The use of the torch in the dark room or a private room would be too intrusive. Two tools the experiencer is equipped with may be thought of as attributes of this particular gay culture that the experiencer is now partaking.

Traversing the Mist is a concluding part of *The Mist Trilogy*, following *In the Mist* (2020) and *Gazing*. Even though I knew that the space was safe, and yet one doesn't feel so in the misty gravity covered corridors of the gay sauna. The uncanny in it must be the effect of being in the male body and inheriting its fear of penetration, while remaining entirely detached from the thrill of being desired or accessed.

The experience of dimmed light of sauna or the mist of hammam is quite familiar to me as a frequent visitor of wellness clubs. Being around gay males is even more so, as 2000, my formative years in Russia, were the time of open queer culture. Everyone who had previously lived in secret was coming out of the closet. It was a period of major change

and the collapse of the grand narrative of the Soviet Union. Everything marginal moved to the centre; queer culture, esoteric cults, Orthodox religion—alongside with many other incompatible things— all came to the forefront of the cultural scene. So it is not the sauna itself, and not being a woman in male gay community, but entering into rather ritualised community that would be closed for me as a woman.

This VR experience puts you under the skin of a welcomed male observer in the realm of caressing each other males. Being welcomed is also being a subject to the gaze. This must be pleasurable, or at the very least comfortable for a homosexual male. This man is receiving a gaze he can respond to safely and surely, if he chooses so, unlike in the street full of heterosexual people. Conversely, as female having this experience I instinctively felt unsafe in the surrounding of multitude of naked males. It felt as if everybody else knows what they are doing and why they are here, unlike me.

It is easy to extrapolate: gay people feel uncomfortable in the normal and normative spaces. They can only be themselves in a handful of countries, but otherwise in the hidden places akin to mitreums, underground caves where males met to worship Mitra, one of the main rivals of the Christ to become the most celebrated religious figure in the early AD. Hence, *Traversing the Mist*, in case experienced by a heterosexual, is a faithful translation of the uncomfortable sensation of a homosexual person in a largely heterosexual world, or if taken even further, it is an experience of a minority in the culture different from their own.

Even though interpretations can be found for the use of the same bodies in the experience, such as to present fundamental similarity between men. Same body replicated should be explained technically: one should scan or draw the person and the way they move. Also a person owns their image, so to populate the VR world with multiple people they either should be imagined and designed, or scanned – both unnecessarily complicates the work. Multiple bodies, on the contrary, would simplify the process, and also stage the soulscape. In case an experiencer is in the body of the avatar and everybody else has the same body, one must be either in a dream or inside one's soul. The same trope is used in *Duchampiana* by Lillian Hess, 2025 or *8 Billions Selves*, 2024 by Nemo Vos.

Multiple is one of the key tropes first of montage and early film, and later of the digital. It touches on the way media reflects the material reality and creates capsules of time. This reflection may not exist a moment after. But also multiple makes the image anonymous, and this anonymity is often part of an orgasmic ritual. In this case multiple is a trope for universality of the experience of naked self in search of love over time.

Once the experiencer has studied all the pools, steam baths and private rooms, the scale starts to hallucinate. The experiencer is exploring the enlarged body of its own avatar, just to notice that the body they are facing has turned into the body of an old man.

In the Mist is a deeper probe into these topics. The question Chou was particularly interested in posing is a cryptic one: can love exist in the absence of love?

“‘Love’ is always held on a high pedestal; in movies and stories, it’s always depicted as this eternal and complex force,” he notes. “But I realized that the contact of flesh against flesh is in itself something profound, even when it’s between two strangers. In that short and fleeting moment, they’re offering their entire beings to one another. Their lust and desire doesn’t even matter—being present together in the moment is all that matters. How many times have we bared our souls to a stranger, revealing parts of ourselves that we don’t dare share with our supposed loved ones? In the sauna, the characters’ kiss, touch, and caress are the farthest thing from love, but yet they’re also the closest. To me, this aptly captures the idea of ‘love in the absence of love.’”

<https://neocha.com/magazine/in-the-mist/>

As someone who is familiar with the medium of theatre and film, Chou operates with the conventions of both the composition of space, interactions, and eye contact with the live audience and video frames. He uses projection of moving 2D (*Vanishing Film*, 2009) and 3D images (*Chronicle of Light Year*, 2028) both in film and theatric performance to suggest the multiple layers including memories and dreams. It is in his work that virtual is used in its oldest sense as something potent, hidden force of either memory, dream or desire.

Traversing the Space.

Humans can traverse physical space. There is a sense of pleasure in the wandering and in covering space with body movements or being transported by a mechanical vehicle. Flat space can normally be physically crossed without any difficulty. The impediment can be presented by distance, impassable terrain, or a political border. COVID has significantly changed the sensation of passibility of space. The temporary isolation of China following the pandemic and later isolation of Russia following the war in Ukraine presents yet another case of impassable space of a new iron curtain. A non-isolated space would be joined with other transportation hubs by means of flights, trains, and traversable roads, while at the present moment Russia can be joined this way only to non-Western countries. This territory which was isolated from the same parts of the world since 1920s and up to 1990s, and was open only for thirty years, before the curtain went down again. These borders illustrate the balance of forces in contemporary world. **VR can be used in case physical traversal of this space is unreachable.** And this may be the reason why the year 2020 that has witnessed unprecedented interest in VR and digital spaces that could be physically traversed but without moving one's body. This fact illustrates very real possibility of substituting experience of the space for a VR experience.

Another use of VR is exploring the sensoria that do not exist a priori. Non-existent spaces would normally be either dreamscapes, or soulscapes, explaining the processes happening in the psychic world of a person, or metaphors of the processes happening in the contemporary world. Jon Rafman's sculptures of animals swallowing one another is a metaphor for humans being swallowed by algorithms, so this is a picture of every individual. While the vertigo of the disappeared balcony and the avalanche covering Pariser Platz is a considerable part of the humanity being covered by the algorithmic turn. Showing imaginary places that can be perceived as real sensoriums is the most exciting potential of VR as it holds the possibility of creating non-gravitational, flexible, liquid, or other spaces impossible for the human physiology otherwise. The case for surrealistic spaces traversed in unconventional ways was made in the early 90s by Char Davis in *Osmose*. In *Osmose* the space was navigated by inhalation and exhalation which is familiar for the divers way of vertical traversal of the space by controlling one's buoyancy: the inhale increases the space of the chest and pulls the body upwards, the exhale decreases it and body becomes heavier and sinks. By means of using breath for

navigation Osmose stresses attention on the breath, an essential, yet not necessarily always being in focus, aspect of the human-body functioning.

Two important observations are made by Char Davis in her artist statement kept at Ars Electronica 1990 archive⁷. The first one is an idea of the space as a combination of parameters of light and surface. In other words, a different space appears once we change the basic parameters. Here the artist allows herself not to limit her expression with either photorealism or abstraction, but navigate between them. Another important remark concerns the geometries of the 3D modelled spaces, Davis claims that they seem to be always based on Cartesian space as even imagination is limited by the cultural tradition. The artist advocates for the necessity of more **subjective places**. Further development of digital and artistic spaces either creates unconventional ways of moving about the space or modifies the space altogether.

The subjective spaces can be one of the most close way of getting to the empathic sensorium possible. Putting experiencer in the sensorium would be the way to give a literal physical experience of how another person perceives the world. Jean Susplus creates a mindspace of associations. This allows to decode the objects from neutral or universal in the world of the experiencer, to ones with particular associations for the subject of the narration. The world of Melodie Musset is a world in which there is a unity of all females that are given agency to shape it. It is a sensorium where the female hands are growing as grass. The hand stands for agency and competence of all these different females.

⁷ Charlotte Davies
«Artist's statement»

«The software as a tool provides a hugely expanded visual language, allowing me to create within a three-dimensional world, on the other side of the picture plane, using an infinite combination of properties of light and surface, within the entire range of photo-realism and abstraction. It is a powerful and exquisite tool, encompassing aspects of painting, sculpture, photography and film with entirely new syntactic elements: the creative possibilities it offers are endless. Inherent in this technology however, are certain value-laden conventions such as Cartesian space, linear perspective, and 'objective' realism, intrinsic to the computer as a product of western scientific tradition. For me the challenge is to go beyond these conventions, using the technology to create ambiguous visions of subjective realities.»

(Source: ars electronica archive, Linz 1990)

The Jean Susplugas *I will sleep when I am dead* presents a mindscape of associations. The work is an exploration of the chaotic and associative world of thoughts of a number of people she was talking to. The navigation and soundtrack are suggesting that there are distinctly different places in the brain. We move in a space shaped by synapses and 3D models of very recognisable objects. Everything in the scenography is almost always already seen. Lost hat, the house on long thin legs, the running figure, the rainbow, lost car keys, the lp player starts playing by itself, Tchaikovsky's waltz, the audio of police radios, ITTV camera, the mask, the sofa. Coronavirus pandemic talk and the huge 3D of the virus. The house is a recurring image in the work of Jean Susplugas. It has been present in her work since *Maison malade* (1999). House means a private space of safety, but also confinement, introspection and neurological disorder

An example of modification of the space can be found in the works of contemporary artists Mélodie Mousset, for instance. A specific metaphor for the physiology of space perception was made by an extremely minimal and yet very unusual VR piece by Melody Musset *Hana Hana*⁸. *Hana Hana* is exhibited as a part of installation called *L'épluchée* (2019), which includes the video piece *Intra Aura* (2012-2019) to Mexico in search of her proper body, and the sculpture *Organs* (2015). Both the setting and the title *l'épluchée*, which means uncovered or peeled (as a potato), suggests invitation under the skin.

The premise of the film is the task that the protagonist faces. Her mother is schizophrenic and that is possibly hereditary. The protagonist tries to find a place in her body where the disease can possibly sit. To do so, she addresses herself to the anatomy and the technology of reading through the body such as MRI or ultrasound. She creates the replicas of her organs to reassemble herself in a better way and the initiation begins. In one of the next scenes she invites her family to see the body parts over a dinner party, they don't quite seem to be understanding. Then on the board of the cargo ship she crosses the Atlantic Ocean to arrive to Mexico, where she makes the replicas of her inner organs of wax to turn them into candles. The wax was the material of the anatomical models of the female body used in the early medical history, namely in the eighteenth century. And this inscribes the protagonist in the tradition of the medical history. The second tradition she inscribes herself in is the Catholic ex-votos (from the Latin *ex voto suscepto*, meaning "from the vow made"), it is a votive offering placed in a

⁸ HanaHana by Melodie Mousset <https://fabbula.com/artists/hanahana-by-melodie-mousset/>

church as a gesture of gratitude for a prayer answered. Anatomical votives would be small charms (usually silver, tin, or wax) shaped like specific body parts—a heart, a leg, an eye, or even a kidney. If one's leg was healed, one pins a tiny silver leg to the saint's cloak. The protagonist is not healed, neither is she sick.

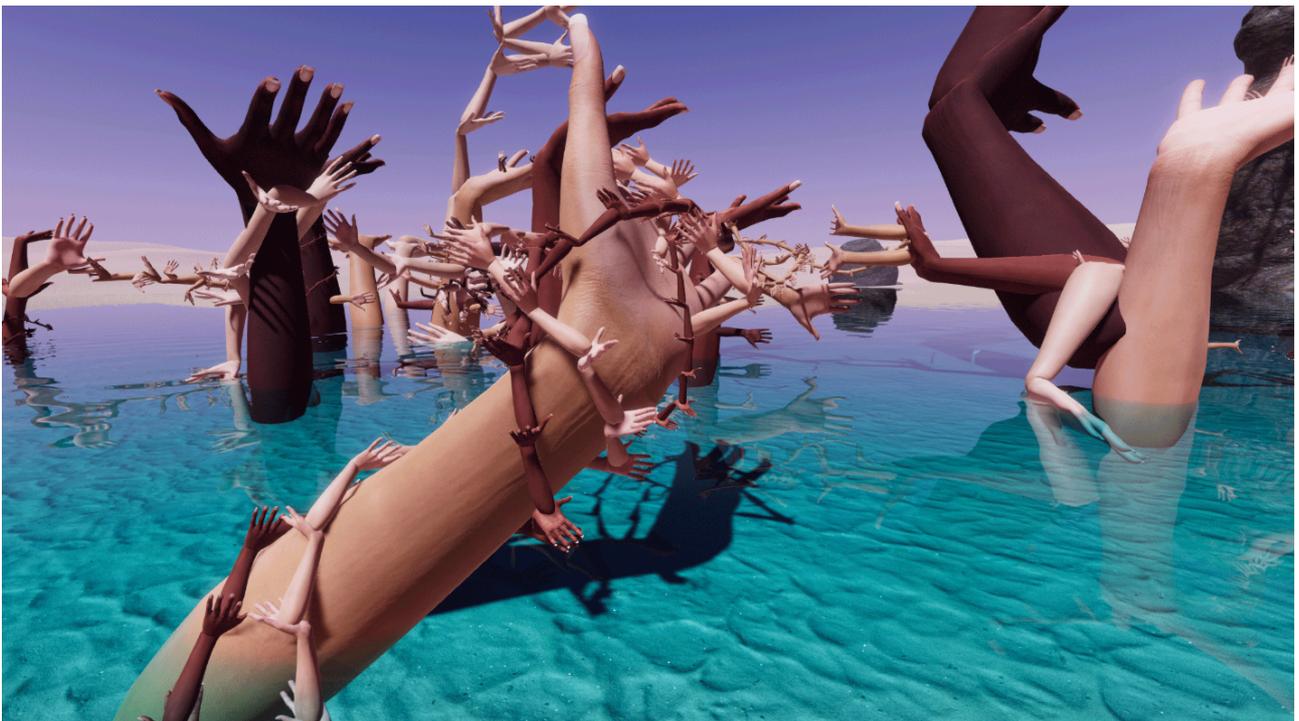
After the medical history museum, the protagonist reaches the Mazatec indigenous lands, where she meets shamans and *curanderos* who attempt to heal her of her inexplicable ailment. When the rites and psychedelic substances reveal nothing to her, she plunges into a network of underground caves—a refuge for the Mazatec people during the time of the Conquistadores—and discovers ancient vestiges, including a pot in which a stalagmite grows drop by drop. Faced with this find, a mineral-organic image of a body being born in the heart of a cavern, her journey seems to reach a 'point zero.' She lights her organ-candles. At the same point, the hard drive containing most of her video footage disappears. The fate of this black box, the vessel of her experience, remains unknown, further jeopardizing this fragmentary and blind quest.

For Mousset, VR is yet another tool for mapping the body on a par with MRI and medical 3D printing, historical models of the human bodies etc. *HanaHana* is a collective rain ritual in which ten online participants attempt to summon a change of the weather forecast. The space is traversed by means of growing tree- or algae-like constructions made up of female hands of different sizes and of different skin colours. The word 'hana' (花) means 'flower' in Japanese, but with the suffix *-su*, *hanasu* also means to speak, and *Hanashi* translates to "story." The exhibition acts as the story space of a branching body, growing in multiple direction as a plant body would. Experiencers have been generating the living forms in the space since 2016, and the constructions made previously materialise the traces that the users leave in the digital world each time they enter it. So the piece is a sculpture dedicated to the unity of people creating something together as a growing form that stays in the world, and, at the same time, a reminder of the transparent to the algorithms body of the user of the digital worlds.

The experience is inspired by Nico Robin, the character of Japanese manga *One Piece* created by *Eiichiro Oda*. Robin acquired a super power of growing her own body parts by eating *Hana Hana no Mi*, a type of "devil fruit". Nico's legs grow to push the *Straw Hat Pirate* ship from the bottom of the sea, or, exactly as in Mousset piece, Nico's slim,

delicate feminine arms grow into a lianas type of structure and hit humpty-dumpty shaped monster Yama against the giant tree. All her fighting techniques are named after flowers: *Six Fleurs* or *Mille Fleurs*. These flower hands grow from surfaces other than her body, as botanical flowers, or lianas would. For Nico Robin, both connection with the *Devil Fruit* and her capacity to grow limbs, develop from her character. She may turn into a monster to protect her friends, as many of the manga characters. This transformative aspect of Nico Robin's character, in connection with multiple arms, evokes associations with Durga and Kali, the bloody destructive goddess in the hindu mythology. She also possesses detached and mysterious character, in the crew she acts as a voice of reason with specific morbid sense of humour. Growing of limbs is a form of detachment, desire to keep everyone literally at arm's length.

Melodie Mousset builds the exhibition space based on the her study of her body. The



Melodie Musset, Hana Hana, 2016, a screen shot from a collective VR experience

experiencer is invited to the the 3D scans of her body parts and her trip to Mexico to study various corporeal traditions. We see the woman in the video experiencing traditional medicine rituals in the small villages in the jungle. The intuitive, feminine, indigenous seem to be synonymous for her method of expression. The boat she travels to Mexico on is a

vehicle to reach the self, a vehicle to reach herself as a woman. The experiencer has a sense of being invited into this female body.

This invitation into the female body extends to the invitation to the vessel, laboratory, home of a traditional medicine practitioner, or a space of creation. The image of multiple hands evoke another aspect of the tradition of creation: creation from a body part (Zeus creating Athena, creation of Eve from the rib, world from the body of a giant Pan Gu), or ability to grow multiple limbs. In Vedic traditions the gods with multiple limbs are the gods associated with cosmic creation (hundred eyes of Vishnu, multiple bodies of Indra, who has bodies in the waters, and others on Earth, within fire, in soma (the heaven-knowing), and in the atmosphere, the fiery bodies of Agni as sun, thunder, and fire). Cosmic creation is an intensification of the human birth-giving process, as mother emits from her body another body of a child, so a creator god emits from his body the forms that comprise a new world. The creator god is able to give birth because he encloses within himself the totality of parts and forms comprising 'phenomenal diversity'.⁹ Musset evokes this type of creation to re-appropriate and rethink the female body as an origin of cosmic and divine creation, but also as a means for women to connect to one another to return this power in their hands.

Hana Hana literally builds thousands of female hands, fragile, slim, with long nails, but taking space and growing in all directions. The sensation and the power of these thousand hands evoke the iconography of sahasrabhuja (thousand hands), is a distinctively feminine capacity associated with infinite compassion. One of the bodhisattvas, Avalokiteshvara (known as Guanyin in China or Kannon in Japan), the Bodhisattva of Compassion. According to myth, Avalokiteshvara vowed to never rest until all beings were free from suffering. The struggle was so great that her head split into eleven pieces and his arms shattered. The Buddha Amitabha gave her eleven heads to hear the cries of the world and a thousand arms to reach out and aid them.

Avalokitteshvara is oftentimes depicted holding a flower. In case we return to *One Piece* first, this thousand arms and connection of the team of the *Straw Hat Pirates* in their fight against the world government is an encoding of resistance in popular culture. And it was read as such, which can be proved by the fact that particular *Straw Hat Pirates* Jolly Roger flag was used in the number of protest movements such as the protests in August

⁹ Doris Srinivasan, The Religious Significance of Divine Multiple Body Parts in the Atharva Veda, *Numen*, Vol XXV, Fasc 3 (Dec., 1978), pp. 193-225. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3269536>.

2025 Indonesian protests, protests in Nepal and Madagascar, which in fact overthrew their governments. It is not overthrowing of the world government that Musset is demanding with her VR piece, but possibly building a subjective space in which women could be reaching out to one another to try and build the world in a gentle way.

Characteristic of a VR piece can be boiled down to the characteristic of its space and the vehicle of traversing it. The space can be real, real shifted in time or completely unreal. In the last two cases there is no way you can compare the place in the past and place in the dreams to a real place. Or hypothetically you can but then the rules of the real will not be applicable to it. Real in the language of VR would imply the illusion of ownership of the vehicle that traverses the space and the illusion of agency over its movements. The questions, that the experiencer needs to find answers to in order to start, are who am I what are the properties of my body, and where am I and what can I do here. The vehicle is either a vehicle of a body realistic, enhanced or reconfigured the oversimplified scenario would be exploring the world with a different vehicle than one's normal body

Vehicles to Traverse the VR Space

Paradoxically, being a space, historic VR is often a vehicle for traversing either a model of a real or a fictional space. Canadian researcher Louise Boisclair makes a remark on the analogy between the means of transportation and the immersive interactive installations. The glass windows, rear view mirror, the wheel and the accelerator take the driver away from her habitual fashion of traversing the space. It is not the alternate muscular movement any more but the constant pressing of the pedal with just one leg and turning the wheel to adjust direction. And curiously enough the early VR pieces often present us with a paradox of a habitual vehicle or habitual piece of furniture behaving in a different way. The ideas that seem to be central are the ways to find an embodied perception of a different type. Jeffrey Shaw, Shar Davis, and Maurice Benayon works invite unnatural navigation in the space ruled by gravitation. Works by Jeffrey Shaw, Char Davis, Maurice Benayoun, and James Partaik place the viewer in a digitally simulated space. In case of Shaw and Partaik's work, the place has a recognisable referent. Jeffrey Shaw's *Legible City* is turning the mapped layout of Karlsruhe, Manhattan and Amsterdam into a readable text.

Partaik at ISEA 2014 is inviting us to explore the soundscapes of the cities (Dubai, Casablanca, Montreal, Mexico, Sao Paolo, Toronto, Quebec and Sherbrooke) by means of rotating in rolling chair ¹⁰. Once an experimenter is moving in the chair, she is falling into a “sound transect”, a sonic documentation of a path through the city of Dubai and its sonic ephemera. The analogues Transects were created for Quebec, Casablanca, Montreal. Partaik’s *Moteur de réalité* adds “digital dervish” circular movement to the bits of the recorded cityscape. The circular movement translates the documentary and historic perception of the city into vortex “underlying the world of appearances by accumulation of kinetic energy”. One can also think of *Moteur de réalité* as a condensed experience of the city as multifocal and diverse. *Moteur de réalité* challenges the perception of the city and prioritises the perception of the city as space of multichannel sounds that change depending on the position of the listener. One of the features of the art of 2010s can be this interest in proprioceptive media, or media that reacts to the change of the position of the body in space. One of the reasons for its development can be the wide spread of gps and emergence of Google maps.

As Van Gogh in the nineteenth century, and Claude Monet later in the early twentieth century, Partaik and Shaw articulate the space to its guests and inhabitants. The experience of the space becomes tangible once it is retold with the other space.

Shared Remote Space

¹⁰ <http://www.jamespartaik.ca/index.php?villes/montrealvox/>

The use of VR can include either a narrative or an interface. In case of an interface one space is used to represent the other. The aim of this experience is placing a visitor in an unlikely or impossible space. The use of such telematic spaces gained a new wave of popularity in the post pandemic period. An emblematic exploration of the idea of hybrid space, for collective exploration of intersections and boundaries between different physical spaces. The installation provides an interactive space in the Ars Electronica Center where museum visitors can meet and interact with online visitors. Online visitors can interact in real time in the physical space in the museum by using a drawing board on the FL25 website, or by taking control of a telepresence robot from home. The robot will „embody“ them, giving them a presence at the museum in Linz.

The only content of this communication without language and without video is a communication of presence of someone else in the space. This presence is translated into touch that either has or has not the capacity to modify shapes or produce sounds in the remote space.

Rendering a space might include rendering its kinetic properties: the way bodies move in it, and the choreography of the body in this remote space. In the event of individual architecture or fractal flesh, rendering a body or a space means separating it into distinct functions, the way buttons do, and making each function button remotely controllable. This is what is attempted in Eduardo Kac *Genesis*, *Telegarden* by Ken Goldberg or Stelarc's *Ping*.

In *Genesis*, viewers are invited to influence the mutation of E. coli bacteria by either switching on or not switching on a light. The mechanics of this yes/no action is based on agreeing or disagreeing with the line of the *Book of Genesis* 1:26-28 that reads, “Let man have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.” If one agrees, the light is switched on and the mutation happens; if one doesn't agree, the situation remains as it was. As a result, the mutation is connected with the delegated act of switching the light on and off. This is how this micro world is rendered available to remote control. In the case of the *Telegarden*, the functions that the viewer can perform are planting and watering seeds. In the case of *Ping*, the body is divided into regions, and the control of every region is given to the remote participants in Helsinki and Paris.

Is it possible to render a space by replicating the process happening in that place? Instead of seeing the place, we register the changes in the conditions of objects within the place. An absence of change means an absence of feedback. If nothing changes, there is nothing to know about the place. David Bowen's *Tele-present Wind* (2018) and *Tele-present Water* (2011) register in real time the movement of the water in the Pacific and the movement of thistle stems. In the most recent Mars wind version, the Mars Environmental Dynamics Analyzer aboard Perseverance collects and transmits the data to Earth. In *Wilderness* (2021) the principle is similar to *Tele-present water* (2021), but *In Wilderness* a moving object—*twelve* plastic bags—makes the condition more eloquent. The bags replicate the Z movement of the Schmidt Ocean Institute Research Vessel Falkor travelling from Astoria, Oregon, to Honolulu, Hawaii, while the artist rode on the vessel in July 2019. The account of the trip is displayed in the form of the movement of the plastic bags. This movement translates the sensation of wilderness, showing it interrupted by occasional pieces of human-made debris.

In *Tele-present water* and *Tele-present wind* if there is no wind or the water is not moving, the installation is still and does not transmit any signals. When the place is in a state of change, however, the display is limited by an accelerometer (water), as well as by the number of movements—the mechanism can show just one of them, and it is a permutation of possibilities in a limited database, not the actual change that is at stake. The presence here is the real-time movement, the witnessing or affecting of the real-time movement. This means that presence is made up of either witnessing or affecting the otherwise motionless condition of the environment.

In Bowen's telepresent works, transmitted movement synchronises two spaces in a way that is analogous to the remote action of *Telegarden* or *Genesis*. The implication is that two places must share an affinity if the same action takes place in both of them. A transmission of movements is a translation of one space into the other. Remote action, reciprocity, and even mediated touch are excluded from the work. Moving objects in the space are mapped with the sensors; changes in their position are registered as data transmitted to other objects in the remote space. Thistle, plastic bags, two kinetic constructions imitating water – become the interfaces of contact with the remote space. Each interface limits and selects, while objects in the gallery space present the touch of different surfaces, properties of an environment meant to represent the environment itself.

These envelop the viewer to simulate aspects of being in another space, and TMT simulates the touch of the skin of the other with the touch of oneself. As well as *Ping Body* simulates being present in multiple spaces.

The notion of space and the task of positioning oneself in the telehaptic space are fragmental by their nature. If they are disoriented, people verify that they are in the same place by looking at the sun and its shadows, by seeing the same moon, and by looking at the environment. If the environments resemble one another, one place must be homogeneous to the other place. This is the logic of the telepresent works by David Bowen—in this case, the wind is the same, so the place is the same or at least very similar, since the water and the air move in the same way.

The question of being in the same place implies scale—we all are on the same planet (Zond 5 photo), or in a *planetary conviviality* (Roy Ascott). The next step down would be to be in the same country; in such a case, the legal, linguistic, and transportational issues are the proof. Being in the same city allows for a synchronization where everyday life is the scale. The space of being in the same room indicates the possibility of touch. Being on the same network, in a space of constant exchange, was understood as being akin to being in the same room in the 70s. Constant exchange over the network permits a feeling of acting in concert and being in sync, even when one is separated by space. Quantum entanglement is the notion of sharing the same effects, and there is also an idea of electrically intertwined imaginations (Roy Ascott). In other cases actors or objects are intertwined (as in tantra, meaning weaving is the Buddhist form of cosmic interconnectedness). We behave the same, modeling the environments as similar. Once the nature of a subject is transitive (as discussed in Stelarc, Rinaldo, Cassou-Nogues and Wagon contributions to the issue), it is a given action that the subject (or the subjects) can be defined and united by.

Works by Stelarc, Bowen, and Lancel and Maat explore the aesthetic possibilities of the internet. This exploration and utopian idea of the internet as a space for the imagination is characteristic of the 1990s; artists approach the media as archeological, related to a path that could have been taken by this technology. The internet in the 1990s, described as cyberspace, was seen as an embodied fiction (Novak), a liquid architecture, synonymous with virtual reality, a universal information space, a full human sensorium, connecting

imaginations, and a new way to inhabit with the body¹¹. Cyberspace was a space of freedom and imagination. By the 2010s it became clear that it had become a universal marketplace instead of a universal soul. The space is organised not by the imagination, but by predictive algorithms. The marginal direction of the virtual sensorium is developed with the limited capacities of the singular artists such as Stelarc, Bowen, De Nijs, and Lancel and Maat.

Indeed the brain gladly believes illusions and oftentimes reacts to what is happening in VR as though it were real. On these premises it can be argued that virtual experience shouldn't be regarded as second class reality, but in fact could be seen as the first class reality¹².

Empathy Machine

The immersion in addition to embodiment, the depth of the context and time of contact with a certain problem or a certain person should be definitive for inducing a person into the real action. It is tempting to look at the photos of the people in suits watching the Chris Milk's videos and believe that this will lead to change, however the early stages of the media seem to have an ability to be prophetic for the further habitual uses. This has been noticed by Lev Manovich in his early *Language of the New Media*: the experimentation with the letter by early modernists becomes the casual practice of today's user of the language processing software. Similarly the early CAVE VR work from 1997 by Maurice Benayoun *World Skin* is capturing the 'photo-safari' type of interaction of these several minute tours into the troubled places of the world. This seems to prove, contrary to what

World Skin was made for CAVE, (Cave Automatic Virtual Environment), and suggested unusual interaction by means of 'photographing' the images of suffering people. The experiencers armed with cameras were exploring the three-dimensional space that was

¹¹ Novak, Marcos, Liquid Architectures in Cyberspace. https://www.evl.uic.edu/datsoupi/coding/readings/1991_Novak_Liquid.pdf

¹²Chalmers, D (2022) Reality+. Virtual Worlds and Problems of Philosophy

filled with images of war taken from the media. Each visitor could take pictures and each photographed fragment vanished from the projection surface and was replaced by a black silhouette. The photographer would receive the printout of the image and, thus, a part of the *World Skin* disappeared with each exposure. The installation suggests contemplation of the significance of the image, “as it was via pictures that we took procession of the world”. The raw realities of unparalleled brutality that are shocking and hard to perceive are reduced to emotionally superficial level of a plane image. The context of violence and its duration in time is taken out of the perceptive field. In a way described by Susan Sontag we get used to the images and they fail to represent the horror that they are capturing.

In *Regarding Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag points to the photos of the civilian victims of the Francists. She looks at the photographs Virginia Wolf was looking at in her thought experiment in *Three Guineas* (1938) of answering the same question Russians of the Ukrainian war generation and the same Israeli and Palestinians ask: what can we do to prevent the war. Sontag summarises Wolf’s point: “Our failure is this of imagination, of empathy: we have failed to hold this reality in mind”¹³. Sontag later undermines it, stating that photographs may be true, and this may evoke various sensations: be it the cry for revenge, or the cry for pacifism, or be a fake and equally serve as a means of manipulation. Sontag ends the chapter with the case of Abel Gance and his 1939 film *J’accuse* showing the horrors of war, and the next day the war begins. I write this in Cite Universitaire that was founded in 1924, in the same fashion after the World War I, to create a shared space for people of different nations to communicate to prevent the next war. It started functioning as a university campus in 1933, the year when Hitler becomes Chancellor.

While mostly an experimental tool in the 1990s, 2010 - 2020s witnessed the use of the VR as an ‘ultimate empathy machine’, as a vehicle for training empathy and encouraging change in the world. This trend can be observed in the movement towards immersive documentary (Chris Milk) and immersive journalism (Nonni de la Pena) that was embraced for instance by such human rights giant as United Nations Virtual Reality (UNVR)¹⁴, or such a media giant as Guardian VR. The idea behind this tendency is quite provable

¹³ Sontag, S. *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 2003, p 10

¹⁴ <http://unvr.sdgactioncampaign.org/vr-films/#.ZEes1-xBzRY>

scientifically: once one embodies the experience of the other, even in the form of digital emulation of this embodiment, they would not be able to treat the other cruelly. While famous surgeon of the late eighteenth century Jacques-René Tenon writes of the hospital as a curing machine, the hope at that time was that VR could help build an empathy machine. Another use of VR includes its implementation in psychiatry and psychology for treatment of phobias and mental disorders. The third use would be social pedagogy and this includes the domestic violence offenders being embodied as women subject to a violent verbal and physically intimidating assault by a (virtual) man, and mothers being embodied as children interacting with a virtual mother. This was found to evoke empathy towards a child's needs.

The perception of empathy in relation to VR and the perception of empathy itself is not univocal. Grant Bollemer in the *Empathy Machines* article¹⁵ advocates for radical compassion industry as opposed to “empathy industry” of first-person narratives. Radical compassion, instead of eliminating differences through ‘feeling-into’ the experience of the other, contrasts and respects the differences that cherish the other’s experience. In my opinion, the other is equally present in the empathic and compassionate experiences, and the danger of appropriating the other seems to be too remote: if one feels the same as the other, the experience of appropriation would mirror the experience of appropriation of self. Also, it is highly unlikely that one would express violence or lack of care to someone akin to self. Thus, while the predicate of Bollemer’s reflections is convincing, the conclusion is not. Additionally, the practice of experimental artistic works and industry are not comparable and cannot be placed on the same plane. In this book, we mostly discuss the empathy machine as a communication machine, which simply disproves even the predicate of appropriation of the other.

Space for Empathy

The work of Aya Ben Ron looks into the systems of care and examines themes such as illness, trauma and recovery. “V. Hospital. The Curing Machine” – reads a card that was a part of All is Well (2013) during site specific installation at Maxima Medisch Centrum, Eindhoven. The card gives a quote from the book of a surgeon and reformer of Parisian

¹⁵ Bollmer, Grant (2017). Empathy machines. *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy* 165 (1) 63-76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X17726794>

hospitals of the eighteenth's century Jacques R. Tenon *Memoirs on Paris Hospitals*. Ben Ron explains how it was Tenon who made it clear to the general public and eventually to the authorities how to turn a hospital into a curing machine, reconfiguring the architecture, light, air, and temperature. It is the machine for empathy that Aya Ben Ron is attempting to build with the *Field Hospital X*.

In case we stick to this understanding of VR as an intensified sensorium, *Field Hospital X* of Aya Ben Ron could be perceived as a space build for enhanced emotional perception. The aim of the hospital seems to put the experiencer in the vulnerable condition of being a patient. I have first seen Aya Ben Ron's VR *Field Hospital X* at the 58th Venice Biennale in 2019, and after that I have been at Ben Ron's workshop taking the participants through the embodied experience of the trauma of the other. FHX was later established as a non-profit organisation in Israel. Since 2023 I have last encountered the project it has evolved into an app asking the user for 36 days how helpful she is to others. Additionally, it is hosted now by the University of Haifa, serving as a platform for experiential learning and socially engaged research.

The sequence I am describing is a principle that was repeated in most of the venues and was both explained and partially demonstrated by Aya Ben Ron during the workshop in Paris. At the entrance, the experiencer was greeted by the people in the white robes with the cross of Field Hospital "X" at place of red cross. In this *Reception* area the experiencer choses her *Care-Kit* to watch in the *Care Area*. The waiting space is designed to remind of a queue in a hospital, equipped with the screens. On the screen introduction to the *Field Hospital X* is given by the sound artist Victoria Hanna. Important part of the introduction is a mixed message of the presenter: it is not familiar to neither neutral, nor caring tone of a real care worker, rather it reminds of unscripted performer's talk in contemporary art, otherwise her exaggerated intonations can be attributed to the shock of having experienced the content of the care kits. She invites sympathetic perception: "Be patient, be a patient".

After leaving the *Reception*, the experiencer is accompanied to the *Care Area*. *The Care Area* is a space for individual perception of the stories of institutional abduction, xenophobia, transgenderphobia, Israeli occupation of Palestine, and family abuse. Ben Ron does create an architecture for care as formulated by Tenon. *Care Area* is made up of four distinct areas orchestrating different aspects of perception: *Safe-Unit*, *Care-Chair*, *Group-Monitoring*, and *Self Check-Up*. In the *Safe-Unit* the theory of a self-contained

shout is explained to the experiencer and that arms her with a tool to respond to emotional overload from the stories. *Care-Unit* is made up of medical chairs, they remind of something in between a chair of a dentist and a chair of gynaecologist, equally placing the experiencer in the position of a patient. In the *Group-Monitoring* area experiencers are watching the same video by Aya Ben Ron "On the right side". The video is presented on the split screen, where the left one shows the videos from the cameras on the beach, while right one the scenes of a person being drowned. The voice over is the victim comforting her family about this uneasy past. The narrative is loosely based on *he Girl Without Hands* (Das Mädchen ohne Hände), collected by brothers Grimm, the story of resilience and abuse featuring the sinless girl that devil fails to take, who marries the king, but before all that her father chops off her hands. *Self Check-Up* suggests the choice of places: school, hospital, institution, family. Once you have chosen the place you can choose either the role of abused or the role of the abuser.

Story-Kits includes a testimonial of either an experience of violence, mistreatment, or trauma. *Barik* (2022) by Dor Zlekha Levi, is a story of a refugee from Darfur, who has fled his home country as a child after his village had been destroyed during the civil war, and his difficulties to be accepted in the Israeli society. *Block of Clay* (2019), the story of an artist Roey Victoria Heifetz told by filmmaker Zohar Melinek Ezrahi is an intimately close gaze of the camera following the body of the character. In the shot the artist tells of her difficulties accepting her body and her recent decision to present herself in a more feminine way. The story of *Institutional abduction* (2019) by Idit Abraham originates from 1950s, the early days of Israeli state. This offence would later become known as "The Yemenite, Mizrahi and Balkan Children Affair," depicting kidnapping and forced disappearance of thousands of babies and toddlers from Mizrahi families supposedly to be brought up in the European Jewish families. In the kit three Mizrahi Jewish mothers give evidence about their kidnapped children whose destiny is not known to this day. *Nobody* (2017) is a combination of video and animation, a personal story of Aya Ben Ron and her experience of abuse in family. *Habit* (2019) by Anonymous Palestinian is a documentation of the personal resistance to the Israeli occupation. After the testimonial, the experiencer can watch two opinions about the situation by either lawyers, psychologists, or cultural figures.

The experience is tailored to be individual both as Israeli Pavilion at Venice Biennale (2019) and Muza Eretz Israel Museum in Tel Aviv. Each one from the flow of visitors is

given one *Story-Kit* to experience and does *Self Check-Up* individually as well to find her role in relation to violence, and surprisingly enough might reveal one as an abuser rather than a victim.

While the role and function of trauma-based art can be disputed, indeed, in case one needs psychological help it seems to be more productive to address for help directly rather than going through this immersive experience. The counter argument would be the necessity to tell these stories. And yet another problem is how to arrange their perception.

First the perception is slowed down and annotated. “Care needs time,”—pronounces Victoria Hanna in the introduction video. The patient of the hospital is not offered to see all the *Story-Kits*. Supposedly just one is overwhelming enough. Hypothetically, one could do it and still having to go through all the hospital’s procedures. The major part of the FHX care is aimed at focused perception. The experiencer opens up to being fragile with the self-contained shout or being placed at the medical chair. Two opinions model perception and the *Self Check-Up* invites active parallelism in the life of the experiencer.

Double Absence

The first VR experience that was moving to the point of crying (and everybody was discussing it at 2023 New Images festival) was the *Man Who Couldn't Leave* (2022) by Taiwanese director Singing Chen. The experience starts with a realistically designed sea and you find yourself in the middle of the waves, then the perspective is changed to a small barrack and an old man points to the frozen figures of young men. They sit on the wooden shelves and write, read or play games. Some of them have bandaged wounds on their bodies. The old man addresses to the experiencer, you are the same height as he is, he says he has been waiting for you to tell you a story. The perspective shift is staged smoothly, you know you are in the memories of the old man, and the reason you are in them is that you are related to one of the men on the wooden benches.

And then we dive into the world of A-Keun, one of the victims of White Terror in Taiwan in 1949. He is among the communist detainees of the Green Island prison. The plane shifts

from the prison to the memories of A-Keun. The sawing machine and a little child playing around, a wife and a daughter of A-Keun voice the letter to him. His wife is sawing a shirt. In the collar of the shirt A-Keun will put the letter telling his story. What we experience is the world of this letter. After A-Keun is tortured and shot down, his friend A-Ching hands the letter to the A-Keun's daughter the father never lives to see. The experiencer is the daughter slowly unfolding the letter to learn the destiny of her father. Neither the imagery, nor sound track, nor the story itself make the experience of the story more exceptional. Yet the rhythm, the music, and the perspective make the experience enter the viewers emotional world and stay there for a long time after the headset is taken off.

The tools that build emotional contact with the story space include the perspective that makes the experiencer the same size with the characters in the experience, the content of the fabula of the story of a man separated with his wife and a little daughter, he will never see, but who will receive his letter. Significant role in the experience, as in a film or a game, was played by a soundtrack, a song with a grave history *El pueblo unido hamas sera vencido* by composer Sergio Ortega and lyrics by Quilapayún. It is the song initially used by supporters of socialist Salvador Allende in their fight with the supporters of Augusto Pinochet in Chili in 1973, after that, the song was sung during the Arab spring and became a symbol of left "people's" movement. The song didn't exist in 1950s at the moment that is described by in *The Man Who Couldn't Leave*. It is sung by the women carrying the portraits of the dead urging other stories of fight to be told.

In case of *The Man Who Couldn't Leave* the story itself is a conversation with the spectator. It is an investigation of a parallel for A-Keun's daughter time line that was not known for her in the past but now is accessible for her. The actual affect of the story is inaccessibility of the past and double absence of her father that she lived through as a child and now experiencing as an adult. The letter and the shirt is standing for A-Keun as a metonymy but is certainly failing to perform any of his roles, both of the objects as well as the story serve as memorials.

It is quite clear that the loss cannot be replaced with the story but what is it that can be done? **One of the roles of a disturbing VR space is the change of perspective of the viewer. This can be done with the help of carefully curated space of total installation.**

Transgressive Perspective

Paraphrasing the words of from the Aya Ben Ron

Manic VR and *Goliath* present the cases of being inside the world of people with mental disorders. Both of the cases summon experiencers in an unstable and different world of either a schizophrenic person (*Goliath*) or a person with a bipolar disorder.

Manic VR starts with a recorded message of the brother of the film director saying that it has started again. We are in a usual bedroom when the roof of it opens and we fly out in the sky. The flying out is not shown as anything especially unusual or unexpected. We perceive it as if it is a continuation of the real world. Then it gets even more strange as we follow this different vision to jungle where we see a bath and a couple of books soaking in it. The image is impactful in its unpredictable originality of an unfamiliar vision.

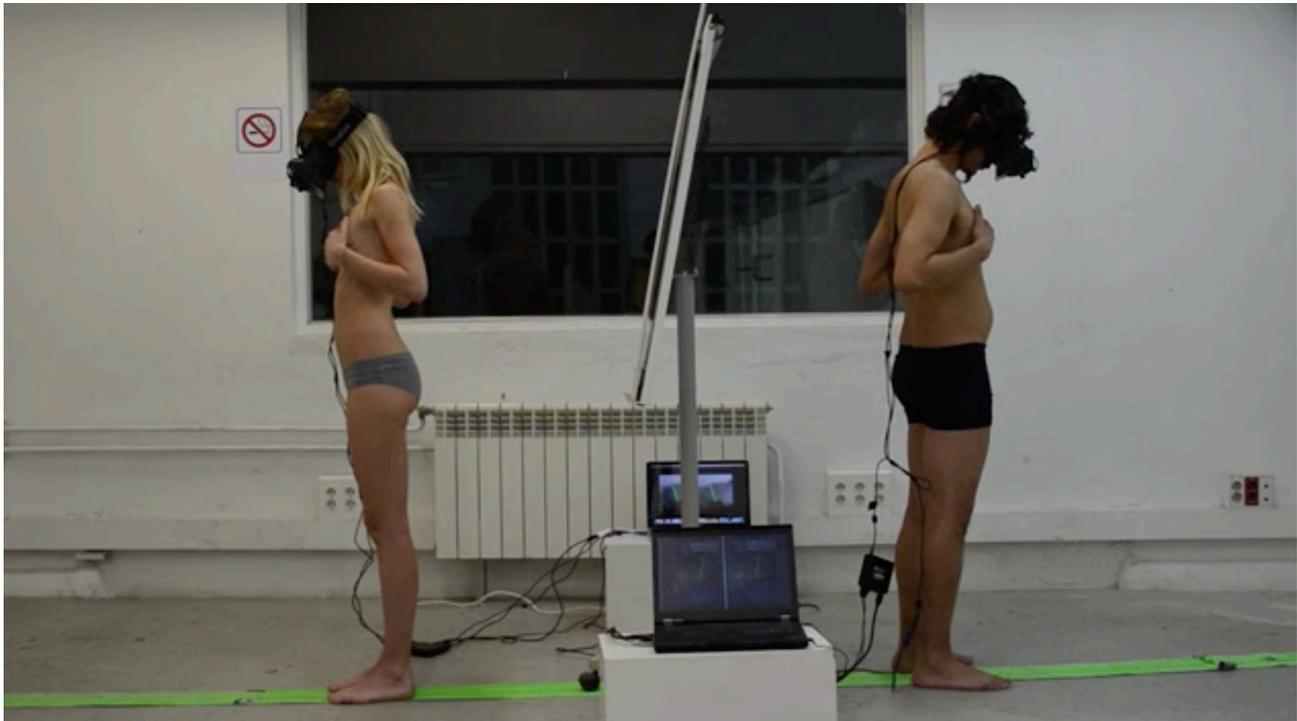
Here what is problematic is the perspective, since if we see it this way the story must be told from the perspective of one of the Kalina Bertin siblings who are suffering from bipolar disorder. However the recorded message puts the viewer in place of Karina herself and thus generates contradiction. Still what the experience allows to to unmistakably is to experience unrealistic images as a part of a visual narrative. The visual narrative doesn't allow immediate judgement and this makes space for respective acceptance of this alternative perspective. The experience shows how a vision or hallucination can be perceived as a reality.

In the *Goliath* the voice of Tilda Swinton warns that everything we will see is not real, but everything we feel is.

Role Taking. Virtual Body. Machine to Be Another.

One of the most minimal and, at the same time, most profound experiences that one can have in VR is the ***illusion of ownership of the body*** of another human they see in front of them. This possibly of seeing someone, and then a moment after embodying this someone, is the most literal way of building a machine to be another and this is one of the forms BeAnotherLab is using to research and train social empathy. This illusion of

inhabiting the body of another includes both the feeling that the body one sees in VR belongs to the experiencer, and a feeling of agency – the sensation that the experiencer is the source of the action taking place.



BeAnotherLab, Gender Swap Experiment, 2017

The image of the bodily self is actively constructed by the brain from multisensory afferents (neurons, carrying what we see, how the body is positioned, what we touch towards the central nervous system), motor efferents (neurons, carrying impulses to muscles and glands), and longer-term assumptions about self¹⁶. When the coherence between these different sensorimotor signals is manipulated, the sense of bodily self can be altered, and the illusion of inhabiting a different body can be induced. Two types of such illusion are normally discussed: the illusory limb identification and the first person full body ownership illusion. BeAnother Lab is focused on the full body ownership illusion.

To understand the cognitive mechanics behind these illusions, it is helpful to distinguish between two fundamental concepts: the "body schema" and the "body image," as formulated by Shaun Gallagher. According to Gallagher, the body image consists of a

¹⁶Blanke O., Slater M. & Serino A. (2015) Behavioral, neural, and computational principles of bodily self-consciousness. *neuron* 88(1): 145–166. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2015.09.029>

system of perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs connected to one's own body. While body schema is a system of sensory-motor capacities, that function without the necessity of perceptual monitoring¹⁷. Body image addresses the question “to what extent, and in what precise way, does one's body appear as a part of one's perceptual field”. While body schema responds to “to what extent, and in what precise way, does one's body constrain or shape the perceptual field”. The brain maintains a representation of the body by integrating multisensory afferents—sensory signals arriving from the periphery—with motor efferents, which are the command signals sent from the central nervous system to the muscles. So the body schema is flexible and adaptable, and it is the body schema that is altered in the body swap experiences.

BeAnother Lab employs the perception of self as a body. This would mean that if you are in the body of another, you become another. Or, to be more precise, if the body ownership illusion is maintained through synchronised movements and synchronised sensual perception, then the experience of another can be internalised. What technically happens in this case, is a body swap. And a body swap is the use of perceptual illusion of embodiment, or full body ownership illusion, to literally make one ‘walk a mile in someone else's shoes’. The first person perspective of the body with the skin of a realistic colour switches on the body ownership illusion. This illusion puts the experiencer in the body of the emoter. The step of identification in Theodore Reik classification can be done away with.

And while perception of self is not limited to the perception of it as a particular body, still body ownership is one of the pivotal aspects of this type of perception. One can perceive oneself as a minimal self and this will make oneself an immediate subject of experience, unextended in time. While narrative self is a coherent self that is made up of the stories, in past and future, told by oneself and the others. The self can have a sense of agency is a sense that oneself is causing and generating an action, while the sense of ownership is only an acknowledgement that it is the oneself that undergoes an experience. So body ownership is perception of the self as an experiencer of an action, but not the actor. This is an intrinsically vulnerable position the *BeAnother lab* puts the participant in.

¹⁷ Gallagher S. (2005b) How the body shapes the mind. Oxford University Press, p 24

The immunity principle states that once the first person singular 'I' is used there can be no mistake about that. So once oneself sees herself as another she names this another – 'I' . And the implications of the body ownership are illustrated by the Proteus effect, in a virtual environment, the body of the avatar influences experienter's behaviour. If I am beautiful, I am more bold. So Proteus effect relies on on the user's social schemas, stereotypes and models. Under this effect an individual explains her attitudes and internal states based on observation of external references. Others look at me. The profile of the avatar makes the user infer her internal qualities. If others look at me like this, there is no way a can be not attractive. And the experienter is more confident, in the designed envelopment, if the avatar is more attractive, or the experienter tends to behave in more altruistic fashion if their avatar is a nurse, for instance. These situational clues lead to behavioural assimilation: engineering students behaved more creatively after having immersive experience in VR in the avatar of the inventor¹⁸, or experienter would play drums better embodying casually dressed black avatar¹⁹, than formally dressed white avatar. This behavioural assimilation returns us to the sensorium of the mind and reveals how much the perceived reality may differ from the physical, social, or emotional.

Machine to be Another (MTBA) is a social research project using VR technology as a tool. *Be Another Lab* (Arthur Tres, Christian Cherene, Daanish Masood, Daniel González Franco, Marte Roel, Philippe Bertrand) ask the research question: what would happen if one was able to see the world through the eyes of the other. The project was used to improve the relationships of different nature: be it mother-daughter relationship, a male and a female, people of different race, or different level of disability. And in the case of the results of the interaction they can be regarded more as social encounters than aesthetic experiences.

The lab works with variety of set ups including cameras, Google glasses, and Oculus—all implement the same principle of the synchronisation of the view point with that of another person to build a body transfer illusion. *The Machine to be Another* allows experienters to see themselves in the body of real human beings (captured by video) rather than generated graphics. While the group uses various technological set ups, the body swap is

¹⁸ Guegan, J., Buisine, S., Mantelet, F., Maranzana, N., and Segonds, F. (2016). Avatar-mediated creativity: when embodying inventors makes engineers more creative. *Comput. Human Behav.* 61, 165–175. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2016.03.024

¹⁹ Kilteni, K., Bergstrom, I., and Slater, M. (2013). Drumming in immersive virtual reality: the body shapes the way we play. *Virtual Real.* 19, 597–605. doi:10.1109/TVCG.2013.29

the most popular. In this installation, two users swap perspectives using VR head sets and first person cameras. Besides swapping perspectives and visiomotor synchronicity, the Body Swap set up is a form of presentation of real narratives by the ones who experienced them acting as performers. Over the years, the group has synchronised several performances by asylum seekers in a detention centre in Israel, and Iraq veteran in the USA, and African migrant in Spain and victims of police brutality in Brazil. The presentation of the stories varies – from social stigma to the stories of forgiveness – depending on the personal views of the performer.

The experiencers are instructed to move slowly, they slow down in order to reach synchronicity, while the artists provide physical interaction to simulate touch. The experience starts with the synchronisation of the body movement, that is normally a ten minute physical interaction: the participants explore the movements of their hands, arms and legs, they interact with objects such as mirrors, and, finally, they are placed face to face, so that an experiencer can shake hands with herself from the perspective of another person. Possibly a key aspect of the installation is that after the experience, participants can meet each other and implement the enhanced sensation in a real life situation.

What MTBA team suggests is the possibility to use VR for training empathic skills. They can be directed at interaction with people from other social and ethnic groups. Changing places with an asylum seeker or a prisoner can help edit the experiencers perception of this person and prejudices towards them. Exploration of the Proteus effect can equally be used to understand more context and experience of the other and lead to individuation. Or conversly, stereotypical altruistic avatar can model empathetic behaviour. The events in VR can promote experiencer's self reflection. For instance, there can be modelled scenarios of group behaviour in which a mistreated person has something in common with the experiencer (a T-shirt).

The image of the experiencer's body can be replaced with a plausible human body or with an inanimate object, and in both cases it is possible to create the illusion of embodiment. The image of self is plastic. Leaving the body and travelling to another body is an experience not uncommon, for instance, in shamanic practice. Just the fact that the full body illusion is sensed towards the inhuman bodies may serve to proving something very close to the ideas of jainism or animism. A human consciousness can imagine inhabiting objects other than a human body.

Immersive Theatre

VR headsets are oftentimes used in the immersive theatre as one of the ways of entering the world of an artwork. *Crari or not* by Emelie Anna Maillet with her company *Ex Voto à la Lune* is a result of a number of writing laboratories held with teenagers presented at the intersection of social media, live interaction with actors and VR. The writing labs according to the blog of the project the group of adolescents was reading the texts by Sylvia Plath, Marguerite Duras, William Shakespeare both with *Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Hamlet monologue (hence the name of the experience), Pierre Corneille, Moliere, Alfred de Musset, Jules Vallès,

The experiencer is invited to a teenage party and chooses to live it from the point of view of one of the ten sixteen year old characters. One choses a character by means of responding to the questions, similar to the ones that can be found in a women's magazine, except that the quote that characterises you best comes from a literary text of Marguerite Duras, for instance. In case the work is presented to the young audience the logic, according to Maillet, is the logic of horizontal empathy: the boy can experience being in the body of a girl traumatised by the male gaze. The background of the experience of a teenage party doesn't need to be explained: it is a space to demonstrate that all goes well. The work is also demonstrated to general audience. In this case the experience urges to stop viewing adolescents as superficial based on their activity in social networks, but see this activity as an existential crisis they are undergoing.

In the interview to France Culture²⁰, Maillet explains that it is in the age of adolescence when one first tries on the social masks. The blog of *Ex Voto à la Lune* suggests the reference to Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of the Author* (1921), a family drama, but also a play, challenging the borders between the theatre and reality, and bringing to the forefront the characters that were invented by an author, but were not put in a world of an artwork. The six characters are: the Mother, Father, Step Daughter, the Son, the Boy and the Child. They arrive at the theatre rehearsal of *Rules of the Game*,

²⁰ Guerithault, A. *Crari or not: une experience immersive dans le monde de l'adolescence*. 4 décembre 2023 <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/crari-or-not-une-experience-immersive-dans-le-monde-de-l-adolescence-6319997>

another Pirandello's play, and suggest that they tell their story on the stage. They strive to express themselves and act themselves out, they tell their stories and see them acted out by the actor's of the company. In the remarks Pirandello insists that they are not ghosts, but rather the masks expressing only one ingrained feeling: "which is "remorse" for the Father, "vengeance" for the Stepdaughter, "disdain" for the Son, "sorrow" for the Mother with fixed wax tears near the eye pits, down the cheeks and near the gapping mouth would liken the mask with the carved and painted images of the "Mater dolorosa" in the churches"²¹. Pirandello's characters are creations of art, so should the teenage characters look, as creations of art with the literary quotes coming from their mouths. With this reference, Maillet pleads for reappropriating the social media and taking their hollow emptiness as a stage for fictional characters to tell their stories, that according to the Father in Pirandello, can be more truthful than a person itself, but in this case, more truthful than the designed and filtered life pictures we scroll through in TikTok and Instagram. The genre of the short video suits well the theatre - it is enough to play a short monologue. Settings such as a party, graffiti covered wall, Louvre provide recognisable settings and create the illusion of reality already backed by the familiar interface of the Instagram.

One and Three Chairs

I didn't see too much when I tried on the *Unconventional Self* by Werner van der Zwan, Charl Linssen, and Martha Worner. at Ars Electronica 2023. The experience is far beyond trivial, it is an invitation to move around in the body of a foldable chair and to see the world from its perspective. Even though the foldable chair and its everyday mechanics is familiar to everyone, the locomotion of the human is not easy to translate into the movements performable for a foldable chair, it takes five stages. I failed to move far, I didn't get to see the others as chairs.

²¹ Pirandello, Luigi. Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore di Luigi Pirandello. Release Date: May 27, 2006 [EBook #18457]. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/18457/18457-h/18457-h.htm>



The process of embodiment starts with the synchronisation: the experiencer is welcomed to her new body. Once the experiencer holds the trigger on the back of the right controller, she starts to see from the position of the camera, mounted on the chair back. The image from the camera is pixelated and hard to see. Be it otherwise, that would have been a bit too trivial, pixelated image adds to the mystery of the journey in the body of the other. One sees herself as a chair through the camera of the chair, and this is stage one of the script.

Look around.
 What can you see?
 Can you see your own feet?
 Can you see the top of your body?
 Do you have a head?²²

This is more unusual to experience, yet quite possible to imagine. In the chair body the viewer does not see her feet, except in the mirror, yet the absence of a head is liberating.

²² from documentation provided by the authors.

Once the body schema is absorbed, the movements should be processed by the brain more smoothly. Now it is time to explore the movement of this body.

This is the stage two of script that has to do with primary exploration of the movement forward. The mirror is there to access the speed of the locomotion. It is also a place to get stuck, and hence the rotatory motion is introduced in the stage four. Moving the right controller vertically propels the folding chair ahead. The seat claps loudly with every move, creating a dynamic, slapstick effect.

Now let's explore the movement of your body.
Move the right controller up and down.
Explore this movement by moving towards the mirror.
Are you moving forward?
How slow can you move?
How does it feel?

It feels awkward, as it is supposed to. The next stage is looking at oneself in the mirror to see the full composition of the body, including the camera that you see through.

Stop moving and take a moment to look at yourself in the mirror.
Did you imagine yourself to look like this?
What does your movement look like from the outside?

Of course, you have never imagined yourself like this, but the act of combining this new body schema and this body image is radical. The chair looking at the chair is a healthily absurd moment, the prophecy of the objects representing themselves formulated in the chapter *Parliament of Things* of the seminal book *We Have Never Been Modern, 1991* by Bruno Latour is as close as it gets. The absurdness of the mirror scene may be explained by its familiarity: right now I am sitting on the chair, there is a narrow mirror opposite me. I can see the chair that I am sitting on in this mirror. Imagining that the chair can also see me is unsettling.

Compositionally, the image of the chair looking at oneself in the mirror calls to mind iconic *One and Three Chairs (1965)* by Joseph Kosuth. Both works feature a chair and the image of the same chair. The installation famously includes a wooden chair, a photo of the same chair, and a dictionary entry defining the chair, it is a classical conceptualist artwork that confronts the object and its representation. In the *Unconventional Self*, the perspective of the chair itself is added to the picture, making case for the fourth chair. I



would imagine the fourth chair commenting on the photo of the chair and the use of the word from the positions of the chair as a moving and sensing entity. The fourth chair would be a sensorium of the chair.

Experimental, conceptual and technological art oftentimes deals with the trivial objects at hand. This trope maybe understood with the logic of estrangement, seeing the familiar anew to go in depth. And embodying a chair perspective, however strange it may seem, is experimenting along these lines. It is hard to experiment with something that is not accessible. That is why Werner van der Zwan normally works with trash, discarded objects. In this case the object not being valuable is very easy to see as discarded. The chair of Joseph Kosuth is also a ready-made.

The table, not a chair, but still the classic entourage of a writer, or any other intellectual worker, is in focus in the essay *Third Table* of Graham Harman, an American thinker, who formulates his practice as object-oriented philosophy. We would assume that what is written there about the table, as an equally trivial object, would be applicable to the chair. Graham states that there is no such thing as trivial objects, but all objects are equally

deserving attention, and not as a sum of qualities that we come in contact with, but in their entirety. Then the three chairs would be the scientific chair made of molecules, the practical chair, and the *real chair*. And the practice of looking at oneself in the mirror as a chair is connecting the experiencer to the real one not less tightly than Graham's reasoning.

Our third table emerges as something distinct from its own components and also withdraws behind all its external effects. Our table is an intermediate being found neither in subatomic physics, nor in human psychology, but in a permanent autonomous zone where objects are simply themselves.

As mentioned above, where Harman writes 'table', we will write 'chair'. So the chair is distinct from its components, and it is an intermediate being that does not exist neither in physics nor in psychology. It exists in an autonomous zone, and it is exactly this zone that the *Unconventional Self* invites us in. No more divide between the subject and the object.

It is from the mirror that the mechanics of the movement of the chair continues to be explored in the stage four. One needs to not get stuck and steer right or left from the chair.

Do you see the black limb on your bottom left?

To activate this limb, hold the trigger of the left controller while making a circular motion.

Now you are rotating to the right.

Explore this new movement.

To rotate to the other side, move your limb until you reach the floor.

Look to the left and down to see if the floor is reached.

While you are touching the ground with your left limb, try the up and down motion with the right controller.

Face the mirror again by using these combinations.

Please don't be impatient. You just learned how to walk a minute ago.

Explore which other movements you can perform.

Can you jump?

Can you sit down?

How can you dance?

Despite the flapping forward locomotion we have experienced before at stage two, by itself a foldable chair would be an unlikely object to move sideways, a cyborg steering organ is needed. The body of the chair is red to contrast with this black organ. And at this stage the experiencer engages in the remote control of the tripedal locomotion of the chair avatar by rotating her left hand. Mastering this translation of rotation of the hand into the steering of the direction of the locomotion is a minimalist and practical exercise of exploring the body with a different mechanics than one's own. In case one mastered it,

the chair continues flapping and squeaking to move sideways.



And then once an experiencer grows more accustomed to steering herself as a chair, and confidently translates the movements of the left hand and the right hand into the tripedal locomotion of the foldable chair, the social interaction is offered in the final stage, stage five, and ideally one sees herself surrounded by other moving chairs. This is the third stage of the script. Reminiscent of Gordon Pask's *Colloquy of Mobiles*, 1968, where male and female machines communicated through light and reflection, each of the chairs is equipped with a car light. They flap to move as I do, they touch or collide, they communicate by flashing the light, by flapping, or by colliding, or by standing still and watching one another with their cameras. Their vocabularies are simple: to move towards one another, to move away from one another, not to move and to stare instead, to flap with the seat, or to collide. May be roughly translated in the standard language of emotions as follows: to be attracted; to be uninterested or disgusted; too be interested or surprised; to announce one's presence not dissimilar to "hello world"; to be aggressive, or clumsy.



The fifth stage was dependent on whether another person was there, sometimes, when this was not the case, the objective was not to meet the other chair, but to escape the scene and meet your human self as the controller. This often caused people to have some kind of a “click” moment, where they felt like they were in the chair body, as they were looking at their human controller²³.

The project of the Dutch artist Werner van der Zwan is about the reviving of the found objects, or rather about studying different aspects of life with the help of the found objects. *Shelter* (2023 - 2024) breathes as well as *Hunch* (2024) does. The shelter is an attentional environment designed to withdraw the experiencer from the external stimuli. She looks in the small screen to see the tent breathing among the pine trees. The *Hunch* breathes through the noses cut from the legs of discarded furniture. The air is pumped into the nostrils through tubes attached to the bellow or attached to the bicycle pump. Zwan seems to be looking for the crystallised forms of human relationships left in the furniture that is trashed. Trashcans, vacuum cleaners and drainage pipes breathe in the *Muttering Void* (2023 - ongoing), being transformed into moving and sound sculptures. *A Breather* (2024) inhales and exhales, suspended from the glass ceiling of the hospital – breaking down the trichotomic model of space of its predecessor – the tree. *A Breather* hangs down instead of growing up and to the sides: it breathes down and to the sides with the mechanism from the hospital foldable bed. In Zwan’s work, the motors are not neutral, they unite with the form of the kinetic sculpture, as the work is connected with its meaning.

²³ a comment of W. van der Zwan after having read the first draft of the text.

Old leather chair with broken legs meets another chair. The *Life Coaching for the Inanimate* (2020 - 2021) starts. Lights on. Lights off. The long rectangular light panel hangs parallel to the wooden swing. The swing sways slowly squeaking. It starts spinning and snapping, moves up and down, continues squeaking. It is impatient. And then it is not a swing but an autonomous vertical wooden limb that makes its appearance from the dark. Another one, tipped with the broom head, snakes across the floor. It is curious. Both can move as they are equipped with a motor from the windscreen washer. The lamp on metal legs looks down with sympathy. Lights on. Lights off. The leather chair has two broken back legs, while the Viennese bentwood chair has the broken front legs. (I remember taking a chair just like this from my grandparents apartment in Kharkiv to St Petersburg, which explains, how common this design of the chair has been even before IKEA standardised and made hallucinatory recognisable interiors across the globe). This seems to be a reason good enough to exchange. They both move; they seem to complain – or is it a dance? Lights on. Lights off. The broom that crept in is a double-headed broom, with one head at each end, it undulates on its belly, as a snake would, and does not move as each of the heads moves in its own direction. Moving on the side does not bring it much further. Nearby, the former swing that turned out to be a rack is undulating. They are impatient, there is energy in their movement. The description suggests desire, I see energy²⁴. Lights on. Lights off. The dialogue between the leather chair and the ironing board is dramatic. The board flaps energetically, its metal frame clashing with a sudden burst of aggression, as if the leather chair is to blame. The leather chair stumbles hesitantly, trying to walk away from the scene as the broom creeps in. Lights on. Lights off. The Viennese bentwood chair is falling apart solely. Lights on. Lights off. The falling apart Viennese chair and the leather chair are being watched by ten brown leather chairs, arranged in two rows. Are they doctors, or spectators, or family members? Lights off.

The use of furniture by Zwan recalls that of Jakob Tonski and his hundred fifty year old sofa standing on one leg *Balance From Within* (2010 - 2013). The sofa inevitably collapsed, and this was a deliberate part of the irony, a part of the installation practice. In the documentation video once the sofa falls, the artist preparedly comes up and re-assembles it. As IKEA furniture. This fragility, as the sofa disassembles itself, makes the balance realistic. This is how the human relationships function. Tonski explains that the sofa is the most social place: it is wear people rest, sit, lie, they may be conceived on the

²⁴Life Coaching for Inanimate (registration pt 1). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJnL7xsNppQ>

sofa, as well as die. Thus, the sofa, by means of metonymy, becomes a comment about the human relationships as a process: they balance and they collapse.

What processes does Zwan show with the discarded furniture? These are the processes that are also organised by the principle of metonymy: what happens with the people is close to the furniture, it happens on the furniture, rarely with it. Humans and their furniture are connected by proximity. People are one step away from furniture, they rhyme with their objects, as any tool or technology is crystallised relationships between people. This is the chair I sit on when I feel vulnerable, this chair is weak and vulnerable. How do I act when I am weak and vulnerable? I move clumsily, colliding with objects around me, as if anticipating collapse and failure. By moving in this way, I drag out into the open the drama flailing within me, metonymically the objects express it convincingly.

Empathic Space

In case we had to compare a VR space to a tourist experience, that would be in an experience of being in the designed space in the designed body of a local. VR experience implies a possibility of experiencing a place different from experienter's physical reality and doing so in the body different from that of the experienter. Normally, such experience would be an experience of leaving the body be it shamanic travel, or clinical death. This possibility without such extremes is based on the plasticity of the body schema, responsible for orienting in space and predicting the movements of the environment and the body.

The chapter suggests that some places, that can be either restagings of existing places or imaginary places can be more empathic. Empathic space is a space that enhances empathic perception. We have been saying above that empathic perception is a vulnerable perception, translating the experience of the other in the body and experience of the experienter.

Empathetic perception is something that happens naturally between the humans. According to Robert Kaz, it happens even more often once the object of empathy is this or that way similar, perceivable by the subject. This may mean the similarity of the ethnic or social group, similarity of age, or gender: this or that way of entering the possibility of imagining one having similar experience as the subject.

The artistic projects I describe is to create the empathy ecologies: the plane where the range of prospective empathetic subjects is being increased by means of rendering the experience of the other imaginable. Surprisingly enough, this rendering oftentimes happens through explaining the difference between the experiencer and the object. The artist shows the complexity of the entity its physical and temporal scale, the factors that are sensitive for the entity.

Naming and describing the factors is akin to learning a language, but as if one was learning a sport, swimming for instance, with the correct position of the head, correct position of the body. First one learns the technique of exhaling through the nose, and inhaling once they are above the surface. Then one learns the correct way of positioning the head, the fact that it should not stick out, should be the same level with the body. The whole body needs to be parallel. Then one learns the strokes and how the hand enters the water, how it pushes from the water, then how the legs join with the movement of the arms. It is a language of moves that is shaped by the water setting. What one learns once they empathise with a new creature is what is their setting and what shapes them. In the case of an emotional experience of another person, it is the language of meanings of events and their succession.

However, for the impression to become empathetic the artist needs to render this language of the umwelt, world of being, of the other creature renderable. It is normally done with the variety of devices: a video or an audio explaining, an immersive VR experience, a process that happens with the entity in question. Supposedly each of these even though being a representation of something happening elsewhere is also playing out this elsewhere here and now.

In case we were witnessing the process, we would also be seeing, hearing, being in it physically, observing the mechanics of the similar process. In any case this representation becomes less arbitrary, but rather attached partially to the process happening elsewhere.

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