

EARLY VISUAL MEDIA LAB

C I C A N T

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MIRRORS, PROJECTIONS, SCREENS:

CONTEMPORARY IMMERSIVE
ART AND CURRENT CHALLENGES
TO IMMERSIVE SPECTATORSHIP

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Abstract

The concept of immersion is addressed by a broad range of tools in contemporary art. Some techniques seen in large-scale installations, which have been used in museums and mass entertainment venues since the 19th century, such as physical visual effects and mirrors, continue to play a significant part. With newly developed digital technologies like projection mapping and large LED screens, immersion has reached enormous popularity in our time. As a result, there is a demand for a changing attitude in art spectatorship. Immersive participation does not only involve the viewers themselves but also their social media behavior. This challenges artists and curators to embrace the new model of spectatorship and find a balance between artistic design and market demands.

Keywords: *Mirror; Projection mapping; LED screen; Immersive art; Spectatorship*



Fig. 1 *The outer view of Sphere Las Vegas*
From The Sphere Las Vegas, Nevada Photograph by Lisa Harris, 2024, Flickr. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

There would be irresistible awe when people saw Sphere, the new media art and entertaining venue that opened in Las Vegas in 2023, whether they appreciated its appearance, aesthetic, or necessity. It must feel strange to look at it or at least elicit mixed feelings. The 112-meter-high and 157-meter-wide LED ball on the city's horizon is impossible to ignore. It offers 18,600 seats in the auditorium with a 16K resolution

wraparound interior LED screen and the most advanced sound system. Sphere is undoubtedly the most equipped digital immersive space in the world so far. Although this striking yet dazzling object may raise questions about its purpose and taste, it still draws significant attraction and on social media. Sphere is not only a landmark of Las Vegas but also a product and a “symptom” of contemporary mass

entertainment media exploding in human society. It is intriguing to think that precisely 140 years before the opening of Sphere, in 1883, when Anton von Werner's *The Battle of Sedan* Panorama launched its opening ceremony in Berlin, visitors might also have felt the same awe at that time. The most expensive painting of the time, with incredible length and size, was carefully assembled in a mechanical revolving view platform, with thoughtful lighting, and exhibited inside a purpose-built Rotunda. The viewers claimed the impression was so strong that it "was experienced as the real presence of a second world" (Grau, 2003, p. 97). The claim sounds familiar.

Among popular optical apparatus invented in the 19th century, few adapt to contemporary desires and avoid being forgotten or left behind. Panorama, although lost on the horizon behind photography, cinema, and other mass entertainment media in the 20th century, has come back into the public sight in the last two decades with a transformation through digital and conceptual change, which is about combining different technology and artistic expression to create an approximately immersed alternative reality. The concept may also recall Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art, in which the architecture, the landscape, the interior, the narration, the visual expression,

the music, and the technology all lead to one aesthetic journey. Wagner's experiments in Bayreuth are probably closer to contemporary immersive space because they value the viewer's multi-sensory experience even more.¹ In *The Battle of Sedan* Panorama, the immersion was through an enlarged and continued visual impression. In Bayreuth, the complex work of darkening the environment, arranging the seats and hiding the symphony creates a combined, multi-layered experience. It decreased the "escaping" possibility of a viewer's attention in a designed space and tried to make them "be there."

Since the panorama and Wagner's experiments in Bayreuth, the modern idea of an immersive perspective in artworks has expanded and become popular. It is as if human eyes can be tricked and the human body surrounded, embraced, and captured in both a physical and psychological environment. Contemporary installation art also uses immersion as a crucial concept. However, one significant difference is that the audience's participation has been required. When Wagner designed his new theatres, the aim was to "trap" the audience in their seats, where the view of the stage was carefully planned and calculated. This method was innovative and pioneering at that time. Nowadays, curators and artists aim to welcome

1. Bayreuth Festspielhaus, opened in August 1876, executed Wagner's vision of a renovated theatre. The design includes hiding the symphony and displaying large landscape paintings and complex stage movements: Wagner and his designer Carl Brandt sunk the orchestra pit deeply beneath the stage, hiding the musicians from sight. Wagner called this pit the "mystic gulf" ("mystischer Abgrund"), from which the music of his works would arise as if by magic, from the navel of the earth. Before this pit, Wagner placed a second proscenium, which had the dual effect of further obscuring the mystic gulf and making the actors on stage seem larger and more distant through forced perspective. The stage itself was enormous – almost as large as the auditorium, with cavernous fly space – which allowed a great deal of room for the range of machinery Wagner and Brandt installed to create their theatrical illusions. To light this vast space, Brandt complemented the footlights with gaslights installed behind the second proscenium, an innovative and influential response to the problems of nineteenth-century stage lighting. Finally, and again for the first time in theatre history, house lights were darkened during all performances, forcing the spectators to direct their entire attention to the work. (Smith, 2007, pp. 30-31)

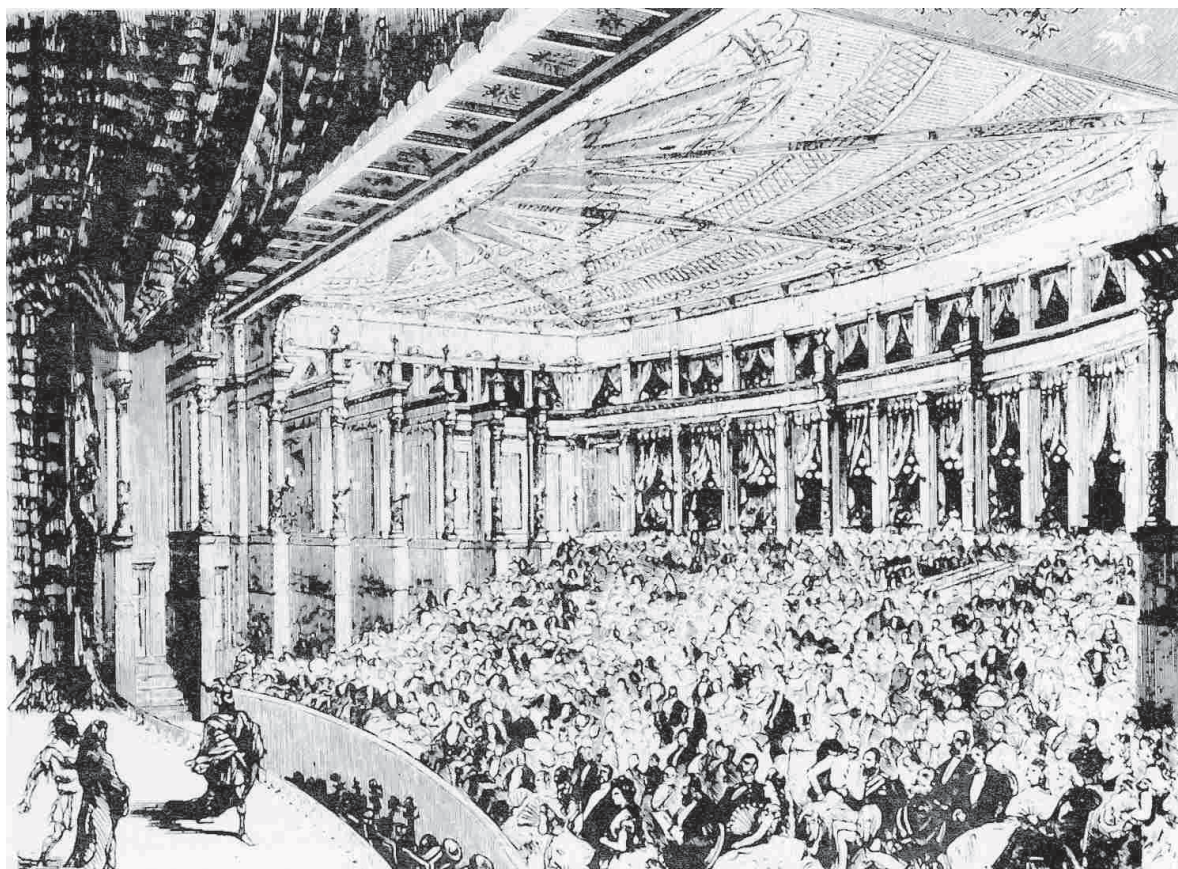


Fig. 2 The interior of Bayreuth Festspielhaus in 1876

audiences with a much more autonomous motivation to walk in and out of the installation of their own free will:

This introduces an emphasis on sensory immediacy, on physical participation (the viewer must walk into and around the work), and on a heightened awareness of other visitors who become part of the piece. Many artists and critics have argued that this need to move around and through the work to experience it activates the viewer, in contrast to art that simply requires optical contemplation (which is passive and detached). This activation is, moreover, regarded as emancipatory since it is analogous to the viewer's engagement in the world (Bishop, 2005, p.11).

There has been a change in perspective and attitude. Installation art has expanded to various genres that embrace immersion and significantly accept and get used to disordered attention² in different ways and degrees. This article focuses on the materials and technologies employed in large-scale immersive art installations and the obstacles we face in a social media-dominated society. It aims to discuss a contemporary

perspective on immersion through the lens of installation and mass entertainment media art.

Mirror: Infinite Extension

In 2012, Tate Modern launched Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Mirrored Room - Filled with the Brilliance of Life* (2011/2017). This series work of mirrors started in 1965, with the first piece, *Phalli's Field*, in which the floor is covered by phallic protuberances with red and white polka-dots stuffed with wadding to make a visually inflated tactile impression. To achieve the expression of accumulation and endlessness, Kusama installed mirrors on the walls to create a visual effect of infinite space. The use of mirrors to convey a notion of infinity reached new heights with *Mirror Room (Pumpkin)* (1991). This installation features a mirrored box in a room adorned with black and yellow polka-dot wallpaper. Some steps lead visitors to a square hole in the mirror box, inviting them to peep. Inside the box lays a field of papier-mâché pumpkins with the same yellow color and black dotted lines. The loop moves with the viewer's movements to peep in and look out. If the viewer is inside the exhibition room, the space has endless possibilities of illusional extension. In

2. Claire Bishop uses the term "disordered attention" to address contemporary spectatorship in art and performance: Attention is not a volitional state of focus that exists in opposition to distraction but is a collective phenomenon. It is structured for us by a situation and a set of external conditions (the work of art, performance, exhibition, concert, webpage, social environment), which in turn encounter our internal predisposition and desires. We can therefore analyze how any given work of art attempts to steer and structure our attention — but this success is never guaranteed and is contingent upon the audience (who may have competing impulses) and the context (poor acoustic, humidity, crowds). As a result, there is no 'ideal viewer', only a flow of possible approximations. We might feel obligated to be 'good' viewers and make a fair stab at looking at or watching everything in an exhibition, but equally feel overwhelmed and alienated by the number of materials it contains. We might want to be fully present for a performance and at the same time take a few photographs and a short video and send them to our friends and respond to their comments. The artist's desires and intentions continually come into conflict with the contingencies of staging and circulation and the audience's own orientations and needs. (Bishop, 2024, p. 35)

this way, the viewers can reflect on the relationship between alternative realities inside and outside the box.

After the pumpkin installation, in the last two decades, Kusama launched a series of mirrored dark rooms with colored LED lights. The recent one is a room with total surrounding

mirrors, including the ceiling and the pathway. A thin layer of water covered the floor, indicating an organic, slowly flowing, dynamic "mirror". On the ceiling are hundreds of colored, pulsing LED lights reflecting on the dimensions of mirrors all over the space. It is a space one enters and is immediately immersed in the ambient. The artist does not want to offer

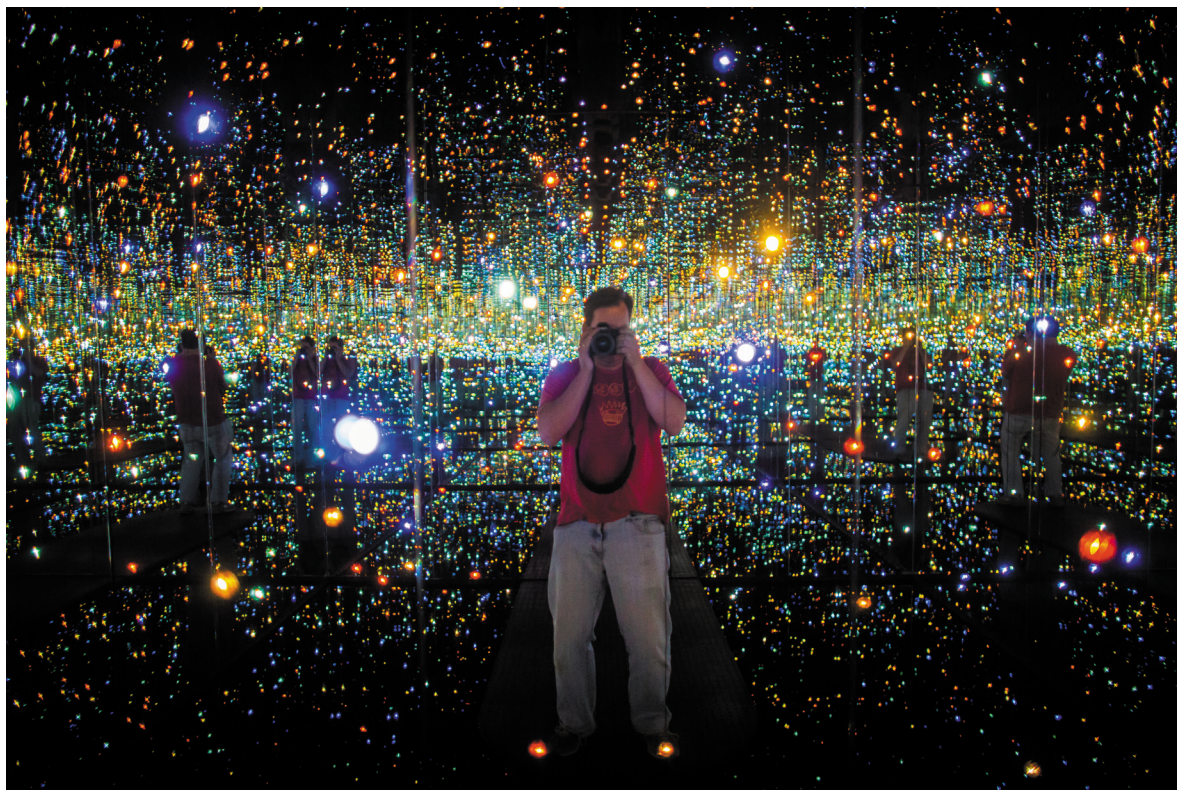


Fig. 3 *Infinity Mirrored Room – Filled with the Brilliance of Life* (2011/2017) exhibition
From Yayoi Kusama, *Infinity Mirrored Room - The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away*.
Photograph by Thomas Hawk, 2015, Flickr. CC BY-NC 2.0.

any chance for the audience to “escape.” The concept of the *Infinity Mirror Rooms* series came from Kusama’s long-suffering hallucinations of accumulation and her anxiety, which she fought for almost a lifetime. The installation is designed to lead the viewer to empathize with her interior world, whether seen as fascinating or insufferable. The reflection of mirrors, an illusional space that is not tangible, an alternative reality

as a reflection on the tangible reality, aims to make the viewer stay in the artificially created infinity.

The alternative reality created by mirrors is, in a way, more directly accessible to be immersed in. Without the need to put on equipment like in VR, the viewer is getting rid of the weight of a tangible machine and its constant reminder of a



Fig. 4 Projection installation that uses both mirror and projection
From Magic moments from #BFC24. Photograph by Lorenzo Basadonna Scarpa, 2024, Bright Connect 2024

digitized virtual world. We tend to trust the direct reflection into our eyes and are either amused or scared by the physical optical illusions they create. In Kusama's case, she only uses plane and flat mirrors; the straight and erect surface makes the reflected image undisturbed from reality with the same shape, size, and distance. With the infinite focal length of the plane mirror, which does not converge the light so the reflection continues endlessly, virtual space can duplicate and extend without a limit. However, one physical characteristic of mirrors is that they cannot offer a non-perspective image. For example, when two people stand at different angles but at the same distance and look into the mirror simultaneously, they will see different images. When the light waves converge through our eyes, since they are reflected from different places in the mirror, the image arrives onto our retina differently. In short, what a viewer sees in a mirror depends on where this viewer stands, even if it is just a centimeter difference. Mirror supports the sight of individuals and their unique position in the world. It unites reality with its alternative and, at the same time, shows personal margins and differences.

In the past twenty years, a digital transformation in immersive art experience has been widely exercised by combining different materials and technology in one installation. While still acknowledging the significant effect of mirrors, artists look for other elements to strengthen the viewer's experience. Italian media artist Stefano Fake created *The Immersive Mirror Rooms* (2006). He installs mirrors on the floor and ceiling while projecting psychedelic, laser lines accumulation, repetitive forms and colors on the blank walls. Together with experiments on sound and music, the installation is a symbolic work of immersion by manipulating both virtual and physical

extensions of space. The mirror symbolizes the reflected reality, allowing the viewer to see themselves "pressed" into an alternative reality created by projection. The lights become infinite, and the viewer appears in an endless dimension of reflection, becoming a part of the artwork. As mentioned above, audience participation is crucial in a contemporary immersive exhibition. Mirror installations often invite the viewer to be the origin of reflection. In 19th-century Panorama and Wagner's theatre, the undisturbed artwork was directly shown to the audience, which, in a way, still represents a classical gallery's way of thinking. But nowadays, an artwork addressing immersion cannot be accomplished without the viewers stepping onto the "stage" and becoming a part of the image.

Projection-Mapping and LED Screen: Beyond Euphoria

It is a different story for projection mapping, a technology born in the mid-20th century that began to take practice in artistic installations and on Broadway stages in the 1980s. During the last two decades, it became a widely used, popular large-scale exhibition technology, often presented on landmarks and buildings. Contrary to mirrors, a technically non-perspectival image is what a projector offers. The light projected onto the "screen" (building facade, wall...) does not change wherever the viewer stands. We see a naturally reflected image in the mirror with depth perception and in three dimensions because the angle between the object and the viewer is twice the angle between the eye and the direction perpendicular to the surface. It is a physics phenomenon. In the case of projection mapping, this balance is calculated. Depending on the distance between the projector and the shape of its "screen," a measurement of XYZ

orientation, position, and lens specification will result in a determined virtual scene.

If Wagner lived in our time, it would not be hard to imagine him using projection mapping to an extreme extent in theatres to strengthen the power of immersive experience. The movement of images created by a magic lantern and the mechanical,

carefully designed phantasmagory show tricks are now precisely calculated by computers to match our amazement in something that looks uncanny, even if it lasts only a moment of awe. The most crucial property of projection mapping is that it can present a wholly fantasized space, and the belief of the uncanny is tightly connected with the viewer's imaginative capability. Compared with a mirrored room, it is more like a dream



Fig. 5 Projection mapping show at the facade of the National Museum Singapore
From *Projection Mapping*. Photograph by Choo Yut Shing, 2023, Flickr. CC BY 2.0.

because nothing tangible is bound to the presented image and can have nothing to do with reality. Instead of reflecting, the projected space has no limitation for fantasies. The viewers are physically in a darkened space, surrounded by illusions presented on large-scale landscapes and constructions. There is a short emotional “shock” — a euphoria, from what we see before rational analysis starts functioning in our brains, and there lies the trick: for a moment, it is a pleasant, exciting feeling. Then, it may turn into a longer amazement of the artwork if the content is beautiful and meaningful. Or boredom from repeated, dull narration.

There is a chance that this euphoria may not be prolonged and give us the “see-sickness”³ like audiences in the 19th century when optical illusions overwhelmed society with great popularity for the first time. After the moment of excitement, which is short, we may have two ways to go further. In commercial entertainment events, the audience sometimes does not seek a deeper reflection. People go for a show only to pursue an excuse for something else: being with friends, romantic dates, or spending time with family. If it is stunning, the show’s content is not particularly required to be complex. However, in museums, curators and installation artists usually, even at the slightest level, require the audience to extend their understanding, acknowledge, and at least be more aware of the artwork’s intelligence and

creativity through the immersive experience. The installation has a meaning, and it is supposed to be perceived through immersion.

In recent years, another new function of immersive experience has emerged. Commercial entertainment events have been aligning their concept as an “art museum.” These projection galleries advertise themselves as “healing” and highlight the function of art therapy. The wholly wrapped environment may offer a sense of security, suggesting the audience eases some sense of alertness and anxiety. The advertising of these experiences speaks to making a peaceful mind and intriguing psychological and spiritual experiences, which are popular among busy metropolitan cities with stressed, fast-paced lifestyles.

A metropolitan society may indeed favor artificially created euphoria or treatment for tranquility more than a rural society. Compared with projection mapping, high-quality LED screens can present even more vivid, deceiving images, videos, and animations. Standing before the projector will create a shadow on the wall, but LED screens are undisturbed. Other than the Sphere in Las Vegas, in London, the street level of the Outernet complex at the corner of Charing Cross Road and Denmark Street contains five sections with surrounding LED screens, assembling for an alternative reality immersive

3. Goethe described his experience of the horizon on his Italian journey as a feeling of pseudo seasickness or a deliberately pursued strength and excitement from the inner world to overcome the outer. The term “see-sickness” is carried out by Stephen Oettermann: Seasickness and dizziness are certainly unpleasant sensations, and one conceivable reaction could have been to avoid situations that might cause them. The opposite was the case; people sought these sensations voluntarily and eagerly. To be sure they did not wish on themselves the extreme form of true seasickness, in which the sufferer would rather die than have such misery continue, but only a milder version. What they sought was the edge, a tingle of excitement in situations that were easy to control. (Oettermann, 1997, p. 12)

experience for the public. The usage — or dosage of enormous LED screens is not unfamiliar to us; they are constructed on city avenues, and even skyscrapers present a dazzling, sleepless, surrealistic feeling — or insomnia. We may look at it as an expanded immersion. Undoubtedly, it has become a symbolic and picturesque image of urban nights. Whatever symptom it creates is because it is an immersive life experience in the modern time.

Immersive Experience: Entertainment and Popularity

From September 2023, the Irish rock band U2 began a live concert residency at Sphere Las Vegas. It comprises 40 concerts at this venue until March 2024. The concerts presented a combination of live music and experimental videos in an apparatus with a significant size that nobody had seen before, in which all the visuals are carefully produced to create a more



Fig. 6 The Van Gogh immersive experience
From Van Gogh Exhibition: The Immersive Experience Photograph by FulAnd, 2024, Flickr. CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

powerful impact based on the unusual shape of the screen: "It's almost as big as an arena, but it feels somehow intimate like every audience member is close to you. The audience becomes part of it, in a way, and that's kind of magical" (Lanigan, 2023, para. 8). Frameless, an immersive art experience venue in London, presents the concept of combining the functions of entertainment, art therapy and education with the display of animated paintings from, for example, Paul Cezanne, Rubens, J.M.W. Turner, Monet and Seurat. The function of art therapy is represented by the yoga session in Frameless, in which a group of participants do yoga in a boxed room, totally projected with the animated paintings mentioned above. In this case, immersion is an ambient in service of something else out of purely exhibiting art. Narration in curatorship is not the primary goal, and the effort to make people immersed is a tool for other activities. This raised the question of whether a successful immersive experience depends on how it can serve a purpose other than the art itself. From the audience's perspective, this obsession with participative immersion seems natural. For example, in Frameless, more children are attracted to interactive projections. In the digitized Impressionism paintings, flower petals cover the floor, and the petals fly beautifully, following the participant's path. During the hours after school, it is observed that the room is often full of running children and flying digital petals. The audience also tends to take photos and videos of these movements.

In the last decade, projection mapping shows have been blooming. One of the most travelled and commercially successful is the Van Gogh immersive experience. Since 2017, the exhibition has hosted over 5 million visitors in 48 cities worldwide. Given the purpose of a mass media entertainment

show, although it is criticized as kitschy, there is no doubt that the show is all-age and social-media friendly, which are essential characteristics to attract the public nowadays to visit. It is curious to think of its popularity as if history repeats itself to the 19th-century panorama venues but with visitors carrying smartphones and making videos and selfies, not just with naked eyes and talking with companions. The participation of smartphones, as an extended participation of the human body, is another significant change and paradox in the concept and practice of an immersive space. It is hard to rule it out. However, most artists would instead try their best to decrease this "unnecessary" participation. Not to consider the problem of copyright, considering a smartphone will disturb the sensory uncanny and bring viewers to another virtual world in their social media. Nevertheless, paradoxically, the venue also wants social media popularity to achieve commercial success.

It is a dilemma more than the level of execution. Picking a smartphone and taking a selfie, this movement related to machines is turbulence on the wholeness of the alternative reality an immersive space created. It is interesting to think that when wearing a VR headset, it is hard to use phones because the physical ability is limited and occupied by handles and programmed vision. On a certain level, it is to "paralyze" a part of the viewer's physical ability, opposite to the concept of physically being in an "infinite" space. Although artificial, the "machine-less" environment that an immersive space intends to achieve is relatively easy to destroy by a tangible, familiar, handy machine, which can almost ironically be considered a "body part" now. One solution is that many producers and curators face this dilemma directly and intend to make peace

with it. In *Sphere*, asking people to put stickers on their phone cameras was only briefly considered. How many stickers does one need for their most advanced iPhone? — the logic does not work. The word “immersion” is becoming a commodity that erases its originality in depth while facing the market. But should we “give it in,” embrace the behavior and see it instead of considering it visual fast food and trying to fight back?

What Now: Changed Attitude

In the past few years, a Japanese group [mé] by artist Haruka Kojin, director Kenji Minamigawa, and production manager Hirofumi Masui created *Masayume* (2019/2021), a hot air balloon in the shape of a human head, floating above the skies in Tokyo. Perception and its alignment with the physical world are presented robustly. About a symbol and its relevance to creativity in both realities, the life-like “human body part” has been lifted into the sky and become a part of the urban

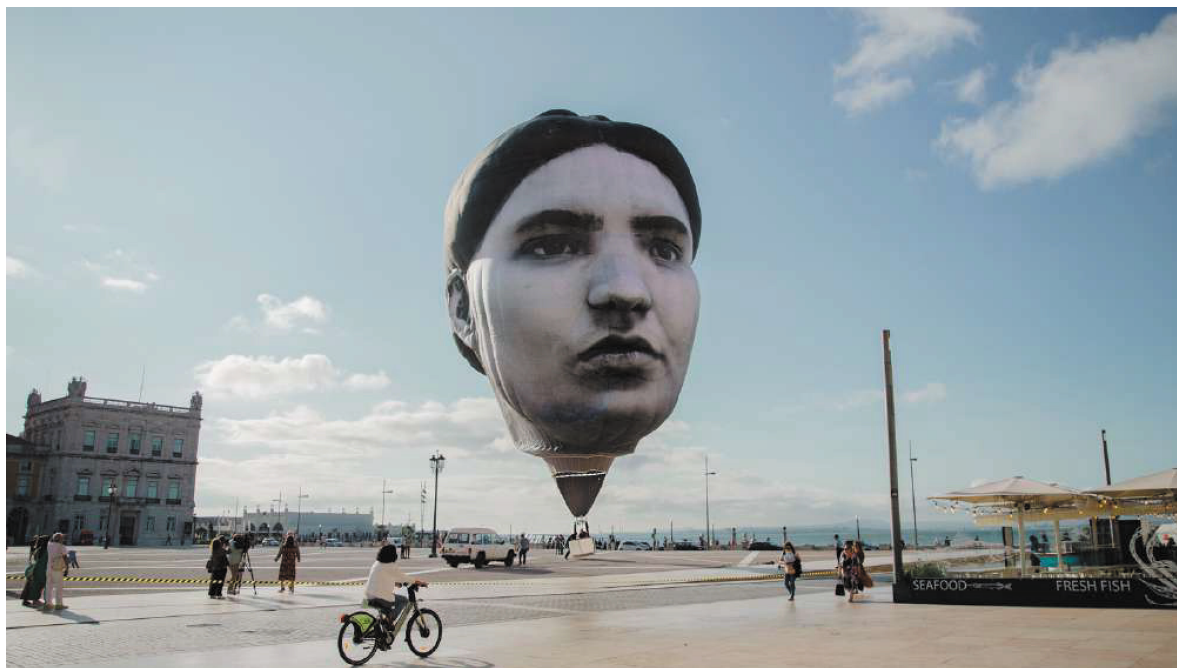


Fig. 7 The hot air balloon of *Masayume* (2019/2021) floating above the city
From *Instalação Masayume no Terreiro do Paço*. Photograph by Joanna Correia, 2023, CAM-Centro de Arte Moderna Gulbenkian, Lisboa

landscape. Like a reflecting plane mirror, which extends infinity light, our gaze has been “reflecting” on the sky and staring at ourselves. This work has shown us the attitude to comprehensively include a sort of surrounding gaze and a deep participation in the artwork from the viewers. It penetrates almost all aspects of social life.

This converging level formed a historical combination with Odilon Redon's *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon Mounts Toward Infinity* (1882). The form of the two works is similar, a hot air balloon flying in the sky, both with the eye's image and the sense of gazing, delivering the meaning of seeing and observing. However, between Odilon and [mé], the point of *who* is seeing is very different. As an early surrealist, to Odilon, it is already an alternative reality that is seen. It is a spirit, an unformed hovering energy born from human reflection. The shape of the eye is giant and out of proportion, presenting an abstract symbol, a supreme gaze to the undiscovered. In *Masayume*, it is also a “human being” that is seeing, but much more realistic and without emotion. It almost feels like a depressed figure or an indifferent, overly calm personality. A century and a half has passed, and the attitude has changed.

From the 19th century till now, public taste in art has been moving to approximate relatedness and empathize, highlighting the importance of humans and their relationship with each other. A sort of “supreme” goal is not as enthusiastic as before, and the psychology of immersion shifts its focus from a look for discovering somewhere else towards a look at our society and ourselves. In the 19th century, European urban society's entertainment activities were much led by the city middle-class and bourgeois, which shows their attitude



Fig. 8 Odilon Redon's *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon Mounts Toward Infinity* (1882)

towards the obsession with discovery and colonization, the excitement within the performing of their self-characterization of lofty, elegant and adventurous. During the centuries when colonization reached its feverish level, it is hard to say what percentage of this attitude has to do with politics instead of art. The two are usually inseparable. The changing attitude from the 19th century until now contains traits of social and political history through mass entertainment media

and art. Along this path, technology development has played a crucial role. However, what has not changed is a complex weakness in psychology, which, in short, is the constant pursuit of a favorable self-characterization: to boast about their hobby and tastes discreet may suggest a more favorable social tag, which may fit the purpose of building a perfect social media personality to attract more followers. Nowadays, being likeable on social media has become necessary for many, considering economic and psychological factors. Ironically, this situation contradicts the initial premise of immersion.

Curators and artists often wish their audience to “shred off” the real world outside and be true to themselves, not the opposite. But this wish contradicts the general attitude of how we participate in art and live in a social media world nowadays. Maybe that is why one may feel shivering when looking at [mé]’s head-shaped hot air balloon above the horizon, looking straight at some void. Maybe it is inherent to feel uncertain about our uncanny behavior. Still, if it disturbs our true reflection, we cannot return to the original point of seeking immersion. Perhaps this changed attitude could answer the question of where we put our smartphones in an immersive experience. For many people, taking a selfie in the museum exhibition room and sharing it on their social media is mainly for delivering a joyful mood and trying to make their friends “participate” together. It is an appreciation and approval of the artwork, at least in one aspect: technique, content, originality... It may be seen as a part of the audience’s unofficial and almost unaware remarks and seriousness about the artwork.

Conclusion

We are witnessing a new interpretation of immersion through the development of technology. This concept leads us to a place where digital and media artists try to make the artificial alternative reality approximately converge with reality. This requires using as many materials and methods as possible to keep the viewers inside the structured space. The room should be dimensional and occupied by artificially produced illusion, so the chance of “escaping” the immersion would be as slight as possible. However, there also cannot be an awareness of a machine like a VR set since it is a constant reminder of an artificial illusion. The viewer must retain their freedom to control their body and to move without disturbance.

Mirrors, projection mapping technology, and LED screens are commonly used to execute this immersion. The physical reflection property of a mirror offers an optical illusion of infinity; it enlarges the space, duplicates the participants (objects, lights, and human bodies), and creates a dimensional endlessness. The projection mapping technology allows an image to be free of material; it can be presented on different surfaces, and the content of the projection can be anything. It offers the chance to present a purely imagined illusion and can show images from one’s dreams in front of one’s eyes. LED screens, which used to have the limitation of being flat and small-sized, are no longer restricted in this way; they offer the most detailed, vivid, lifelike images and are also free from the bounds of reality. These three sole or combined methods are often used to execute the artists’ vision. However, whether the viewer can “stay” or not also depends on their purpose

of participation. The attempt at this contemporary “total work of art” closely relates to the viewer’s will to complete it.

All these separate strands point to a new understanding of immersion, one that eschews an absent-minded relinquishing of control and encourages a degree of freedom and personal assertion. The rupture and distraction introduced by the proliferation of mobile devices and social media are the necessary ingredients to secure the financial and experiential feasibility of many such immersive art experiences. They carve a new layer of signification out of the audience’s agency while simultaneously strengthening its feeling of presence and engagement. The recurrence of reflections in the artworks considered throughout the article should perhaps be taken quite literally. In the end, the (reflected) audience is the actual means of immersion.

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