

Nancy Farrington

2105127

ADAD4019

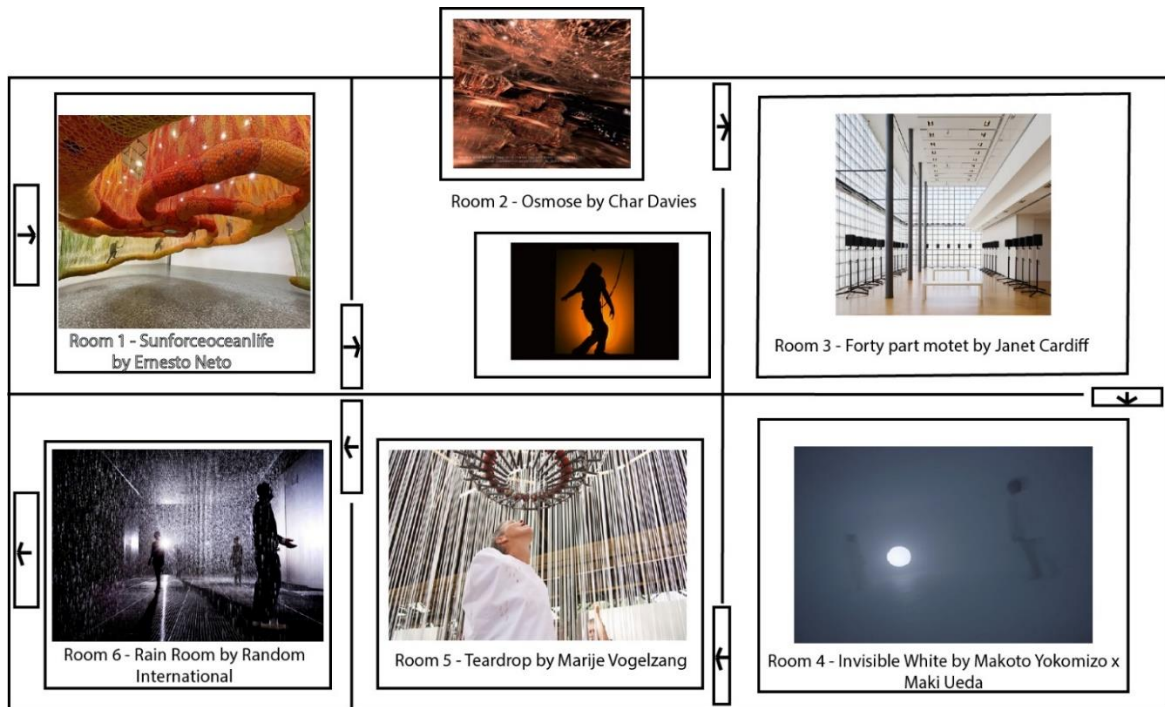
Design Crafts BA

Tutor: Julia Lockheart

Sense and transcendence: exploring the future of art as immersive sensory experience

Throughout history, the urge to transcend the reality of the mundane has been apparent in every culture (Huxley, 1954). As Huxley explains, "Art and religion, carnivals and saturnalia, dancing and listening to oratory - all these have served, in H. G. Wells's phrase, as Doors in the Wall" (1954, p.19). Video gaming, social media, drugs, extreme sports, and even Netflix binges are more present-day examples of transcending or augmenting our reality, some with more positive outcomes than others. This exhibition aims to explore Extended Reality in art and the future of transcendence - can the virtual truly replicate full sensory experience and is it at the cost of authenticity? (Simon, 1967)

The exhibition will take place in an empty multistorey car park. One reason for the use of a car park as exhibition space is to question what a space can do to a person, the feeling it gives and unspoken rules they have. Michel Foucault speaks of "simple givens: for example between private space and public space, between family space and social space, between cultural space and useful space, between the space of leisure and that of work" (1967, p.2). This idea of a "hidden sacred" is particularly interesting, as it makes us question what the underlying social and cultural rules are that we subconsciously accept to be true. A traditional art gallery is white, pristine, a reflection of middle-upper class values or aspirations, where we speak in hushed tones, like a church. A car park is where we park cars, a liminal space (Weiss, 2004) between our home life and whatever we are doing in our day. At night time, these types of spaces are typically left empty, which opens up opportunity for "pop-up" style events seen in cities in more recent years such as street food festivals, night markets and dance music events. Typically though, the notion of just going to a multistorey to hang out, have a picnic or play a game is not socially acceptable in our society, and it is interesting to see what happens if we are to show artworks there. The artworks may seem of less value once the viewer sees where they have been viewing them, or the participant may feel fearful or on edge in the virtual world, as they are aware that their experience is happening somewhere in the real world also; their body and movements must correspond with a space in reality. This combination of both childlike wonder and fear evokes a strange and "uncanny" feeling (Freud, 1919) and provokes us to contemplate the reality we accept to be true.



The senses of sight, sound, touch, smell and taste are our tools for experiencing reality. The pieces chosen for this exhibition each represent one sense, to explore whether we can experience all of the senses in Virtual Reality. In room 1 representing Touch will be Ernesto Neto's colourful crochet climbing structure "Sunforceoceanlife":



Fig. 1

Neto's work has an interactive, playful element to it; Of Sunforceoceanlife, Neto himself is quoted to have said that its purpose is "inviting us to relax, breathe, and uncouple our body from our conscious mind" (Colossal, 2021). The positioning of this piece as first in the exhibition is important, as it draws people in and immediately breaks down the usual physical barriers of art exhibits, converting the spectator from being just an observer to an active participant (Ranciere, 2009).

As far as the VR element goes, this structure exists in both the real and virtual worlds to enable the experience of touch. In the VR version, however, the colours and textures are highly saturated to augment the experience into a heightened, dreamlike version of reality. Reflecting the liminality of the car park, this experience navigates a "between" world, where aspects of the experience are real and aspects are simulated.



Fig. 2 (left) and Fig 3. (right)

Osmose – Char Davies

Osmose is a virtual reality art installation that is one of the first of its kind; in a postmodern (Buchanan, 2018) time in the mid 90s when art installations were thriving, Char Davies created one of the first public VR experiences, wherein the participant can navigate through the series of virtual worlds using their body movements and breathing. Brian Massumi wrote in depth about proprioception, which is where we situate ourselves in a space, facilitated by our senses (2002). This piece represents Sight, but challenges the usual ways in which we navigate spaces, combining breath floatation techniques of scuba diving with strange, other worldly sounds and weightless, overlapping visuals. The participant can "move" between 5 different worlds, which do not have a set start and finish and blend into each other with layers of mist. This adds to the feeling of being unable to situate yourself, which can bring about fear and confusion. This feeling can be explained using Massumi's "dimension of viscosity" (2002, p.61), which in simple terms is the idea that viscosity (deep, primal emotions or intuitions) takes place in the processing time or space between what our senses are telling us and what our brain consciously recognises – in the Osmose world, as soon as you get a sense of what you are seeing it morphs into something else, or becomes enveloped in another layer of images.

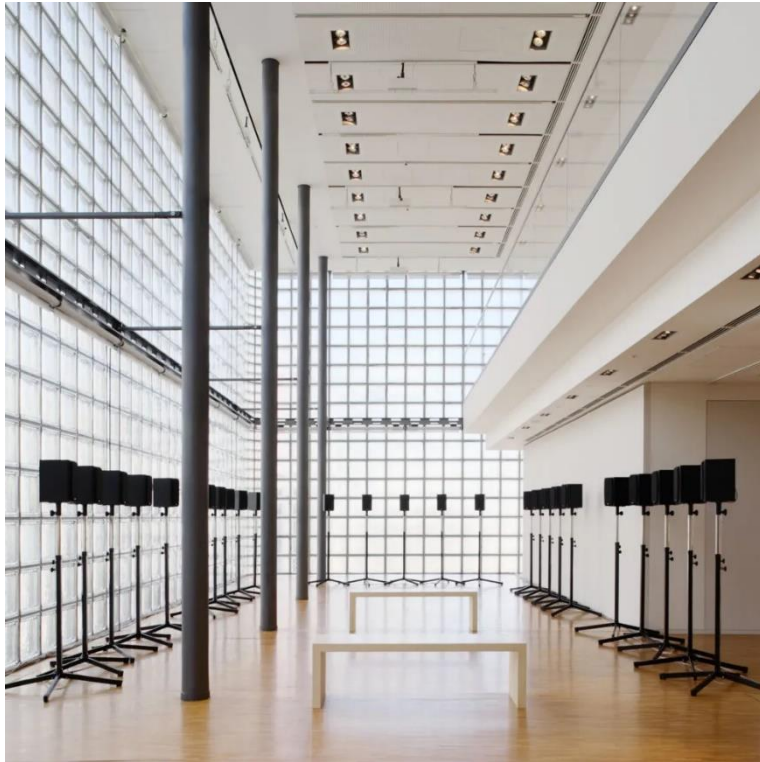


Fig. 4

Forty Part Motet – Janet Cardiff

This is a VR adaptation of forty part motet; each speaker is a 3D VR hologram which each plays an individual voice in the Salsbury Cathedral choir via the VR headset. As the audience moves through the room, nearer to and further from each individual speaker, the music is received differently as the volume of different voices sounds louder. Like Osmose, this may have quite a visceral reaction, but as is seen in the Youtube footage (KQEDARTS, 2015) also an emotional one, as is seen in the form of some members of the audience's tears and experience of "goosebumps". This is common when people hear opera music, hymns, chants national anthems etc. and is a perfect example of why Massumi used emotion to explain Affect theory, describing emotion as a "recognised Affect" (2002, p.61) – much of this emotional response to the external stimulus happens subconsciously and is out of the control of the participant, yet it is recognised as it happens. The element of being surrounded by the music, as Janet says in the video "like walking into a piece of music", amplifies and augments this feeling.

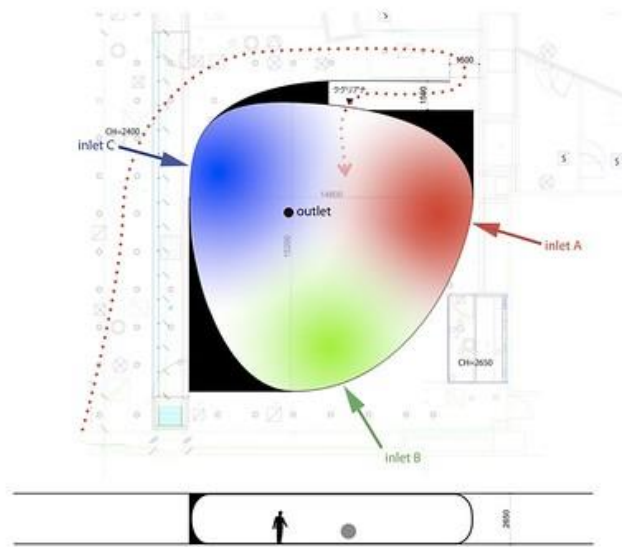


Fig. 5 (above) and Fig. 6 (below)

Invisible White - Makoto Yokomizo x Maki Ueda

Invisible White is a void-like room wherein the participant's sense of sight is limited, forcing them to navigate through the dimly lit space via smell, hearing and touch. Different scents are released in different parts of the space, as seen in figure 6. Brian Massumi uses affect theory to explain the non-linguistic ways in which we "affect" and are affected by the world around us. Massumi writes that "the measure of a living thing's potential interactions is its ability to transform the effects of one sensory mode into those of another" (2002, p.35). In this installation some senses are muted and our other senses become heightened; it is interesting to see the potentially synesthetic effect smell can have. Participants create an olfactory "map" in their heads, and proprioception may be affected with the white orb being the only constant visual in which to situate oneself.



Fig. 7

Teardrop - Marije Vogelzang

The “contact” senses of touch, taste and smell have long been considered to be inferior to sight and hearing (Ingold, 2000). However, taste can be extremely powerful, bringing about emotions of comfort, togetherness, nostalgia and joy in a way that cannot be truly described with words (Perullo, 2018). Teardrop is in room 5 because it is a fun and interactive installation and begins to wind down from the previous 3 exhibits which are fairly intense experiences. Some of the hanging strings are connected to one of the inner circle of pipettes containing a flavour, which is released when another participant pulls on the corresponding string. On these flavour strings, there are small sentences and poems that explore this connectedness of taste and memory. The element of surprise and trust bring another intriguing layer to this piece, as the participant pulling the strings has total power over the flavour dropped into the other participant’s mouth.



Fig. 8

Rain Room – Random International

A final, extra room has been added, wherein the participants can take off their VR set and view their surroundings as they really are. The rain room is a fake rainstorm, which uses motion tracking technology to turn off the water outlets directly above where the participant is standing, so they do not get wet as they walk through. This “real world” installation plays with the idea of the virtual – the “rain” seems real and the participant knows it is as they have removed their goggles, but it behaves in way that could never occur naturally in the real world, like an invisible umbrella. Each participant can walk freely around the Rain Room in their personal bubble, raising ideas about personal space and proxemics (Hall, 1990). People may stick to their own bubble, reflecting the unspoken social norms of using public space, or the novelty of the experience may enable people to join other people’s spaces. This room is extra to the 5 senses and positioned last, as it is intended to be a calming, reflective, and peaceful experience.

In current times, we cannot truly replicate the senses, other than sight and sound, in VR. However, this exhibition gives a taste of what is to come in the future of the art world, providing a novel experience that exercises the senses in a way that has never previously been explored.

Bibliography

- Aldous Huxley (1954), *Doors of Perception*, London: Chatto & Windus, available at: <https://www.huxley.net/doors-of-perception/aldoushuxley-thedoorsofperception.pdf> Accessed on 01/04/2022
- Benjamin, W. (2008) *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*, Translated by Underwood J.A. London: Penguin Books
- Buchanan, A. (2018) *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- McRobert, L. (2007) *Char Davies's Immersive Virtual Art and the Essence of Spatiality*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press
- Ebert, G. (2021) *A 79-Foot Labyrinth Crocheted by Ernesto Neto Hangs from the Ceiling of a Houston Museum*, [Website] Available at: <https://www.thisiscolossal.com/2021/06/ernesto-neto-sun-force-ocean-life/> accessed on 04/04/2022 accessed on 12/04/2022
- Foucault, M., translated by Miskowiec, J. (1967) *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1, (1986), Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press
- Freud, S. (1919) *The Uncanny*, available at: <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf> Accessed on 12/04/2022
- Hall, E.T. (1990) *The Hidden Dimension*, New York: Anchor Books
- KQED arts (2015) *One Collective Breath: Janet Cardiff's 'The Forty Part Motet'* [video] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZXBia5kuqY> Accessed on 12/04/2022
- Massumi, B. (2002) *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham and London: Duke University Press
- Rancière, J. (2009) *The emancipated spectator*, London & New York: Verso
- Simon, H. (1969) *The sciences of the artificial*, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press
- Weiss, T. (2004) *Translating Orients: between ideology and Utopia*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press

List of figures

- Fig. 1 – Neto, E. (2020), *SunForceOceanLife [installation]*, available at: <https://thespaces.com/artist-ernesto-neto-crochets-a-79-ft-long-labyrinth-inside-houstons-museum-of-fine-arts/> Accessed on 28/04/22
- Fig. 2 - Davies, C. (1995), *Osmose [installation]*, available at: http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/werke/osmose/bilder/5/unst_Netz | Davies, Charlotte: *Osmose* Accessed on: 28/04/2022

Fig. 3 – Davies, C. (1995), *Osmose* [installation], available at : <https://blog.kadenze.com/creative-technology/8-virtual-reality-artists-who-use-the-world-as-their-canvas/> Accessed on 28/04/22

Fig. 4 – Cardiff, J. (2001), *Forty Part Motet* [installation], available at: <https://publicdelivery.org/janet-cardiff-40-part-motet/> Accessed on: 28/04/22

Fig. 5 and Fig. 6. – Yokomizo, M., Ueda, M. (2013) *invisible white* [installation], available at: https://www.ueda.nl/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=290&Itemid=836&lang=en Accessed on 28/04/22

Fig. 7 – Vogelzang, M. (2013) *Teardrop* [installation], available at: <https://www.marijevogelzang.nl/past-projects/teardrop/> Accessed on 28/04/22

Fig. 8 – Random International (2012), *Rain room* [installation], available at: <https://inferno-magazine.com/2015/12/03/rain-room-random-international-pace-art-and-technology-new-york/> Accessed on 28/03/22