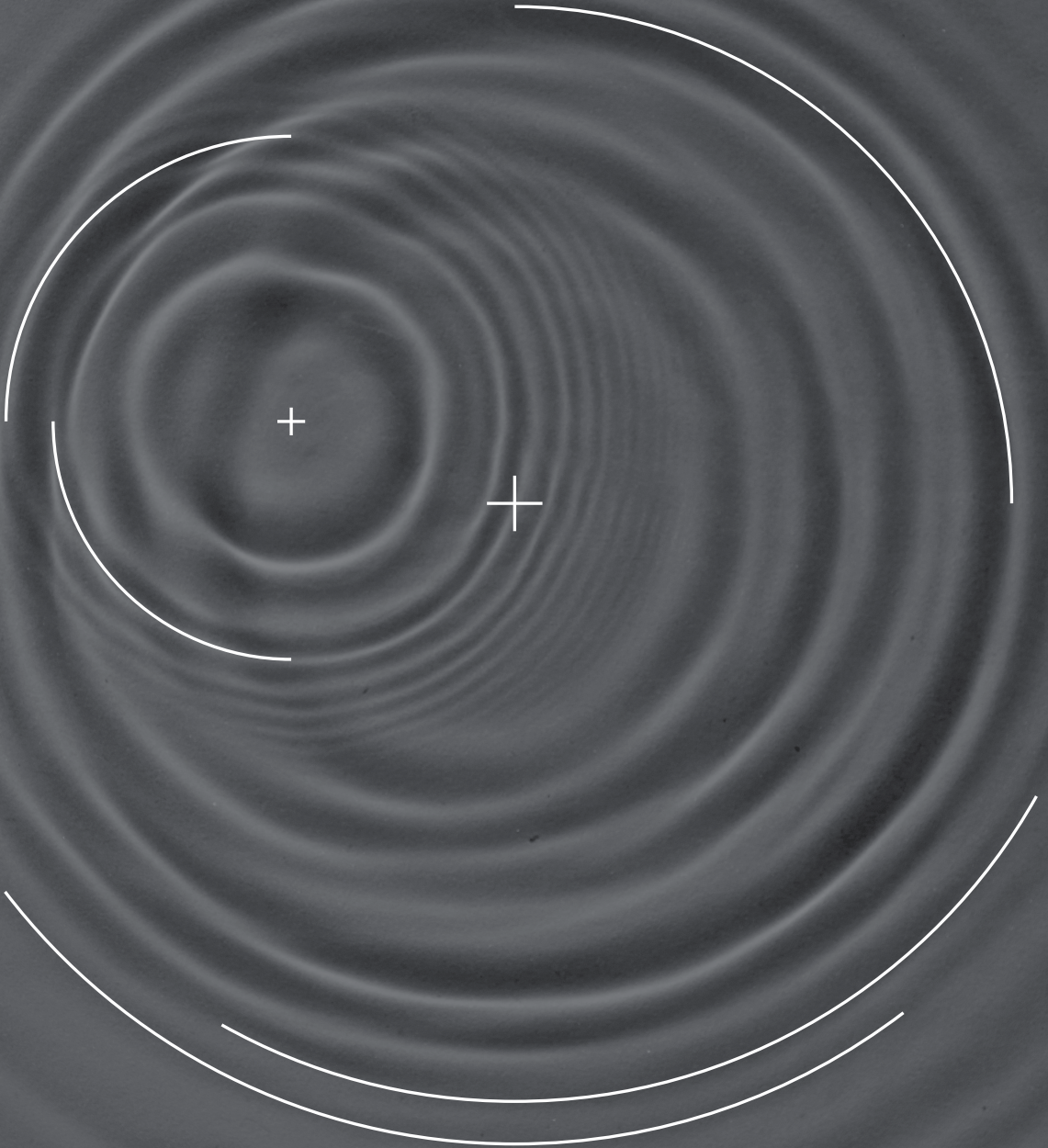


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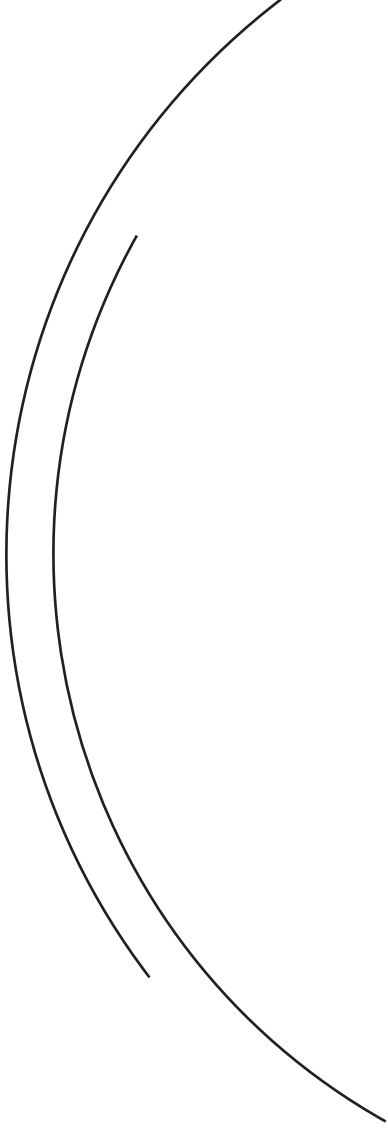
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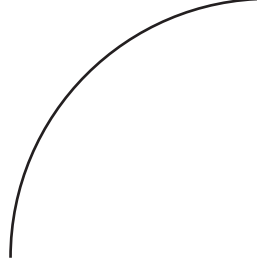
Aesthetic Histories of Design Culture



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Disegno

JOURNAL OF DESIGN CULTURE

Double-blind peer-reviewed, open access scholarly journal

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Disegno publishes original research papers, essays, and reviews on all aspects of design cultures. We understand the notion of design culture as resolutely broad: our aim is to freely discuss the designed environment as mutually intertwined strands of sociocultural products, practices, and discourses. This attitude traverses the disciplinary boundaries between art, design, and visual culture and is therefore open to all themes related to sociocultural creativity and innovation. Our post-disciplinary endeavour welcomes intellectual contributions from all members of different design cultures. Besides providing a lively platform for debating issues of design culture, our specific aim is to consolidate and enhance the emerging field of design culture studies in the Central European academia by providing criticism of fundamental biases and misleading cultural imprinting with respect to the field of design.

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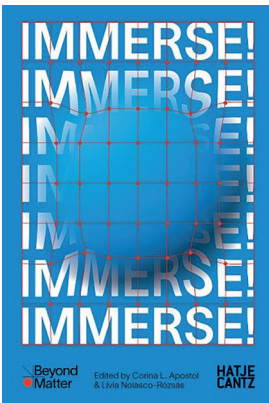
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Art Hall Immersion

Corina L. Apostol and Lívia Nolasco-Rózsás, eds:
Immerse!

Martha Kicsiny

https://doi.org/10.21096/disegno_2024_1mk



Corina L. Apostol and
Lívia Nolasco-Rózsás, eds.
*Immerse! Berlin: Hatje
Cantz, 2023, 184 pages.*
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The catalogue entitled *Immerse!* was published to accompany the exhibition of the same name that took place at the Tallinn Art Hall Lasnäme Pavilion in Estonia. The focus of the exhibitions was immersion. Immersive technology is only gradually being embraced as a medium of contemporary art, and, due to its high-tech nature, is mostly present in countries with strong Western economies, which Eastern European countries struggle to keep pace with. The show, and thus the catalogue, was the result of a long-term collaboration between two curators, twenty Eastern European visual artists, and three institutions: the Tirana Art Lab, the Tallinn Art Hall, and the ZKM Centre for Art and Media in Karlsruhe.

The critical standpoint I adopt in this review is informed by my practice. My experience as a visual artist working with, and researching media art, has led me to question the consensus of framing immersive media solely as cutting-edge, high-tech art, that lacks a significant historical past. Discourses of immersive media, and new media art in general, are rarely placed in historical, sociological, and technological contexts. Similarly, issues of accessibility and the environmental impact of the required complex technology are rarely discussed. My aim is not to argue against immersive media but rather to promote a more layered conversation by addressing these issues with the help of media archaeology and new materialist studies. I hope this can assist in the acknowledgement of immersive media as a form of art that has centuries-old roots while keeping in mind the large ecological footprint it can leave behind. This could, in turn, encourage a more critical attitude and create an appetite for a “variantology” (Zielinski 2006) of immersion offering less carbon-heavy alternatives. A recurring strand of criticism of the texts reviewed below concerns their environmental reflection, highlighting friction between two highly prevalent strands of contemporary thought: tech-positive utopias and non-human-centric ecological movements, epitomised by Lukáš Likavčan’s (2023) essay.

Published in 2023, *Immerse!* opens with four introductions by the curators of the exhibition (Aguraijua, Nolasco-Rózsás, Lehtovuori, and Stern), followed by further introductions from additional editors of the publication. It continues with visual essays by the exhibiting artists, then concludes with four essays on the topic, which are partly inspired by the artworks.



FIGURE 1. Reddit post featuring a homeless person using a virtual reality headset in San Francisco. (elishalewisusaf 2021).

Nolasco-Rózsás's introduction presents immersion as a novel phenomenon in art and technology, overlooking its cultural, political, and historical contexts. Although this text is full of insights, the reader's attention is too easily distracted by the accompanying image from a Reddit thread of a homeless person using a virtual reality (VR) headset on the streets of San Francisco (fig. 1). Although this image understandably caught her attention, it is unfortunate that her analysis of the scene is superficial, without consideration of how unusual it is. This could be regarded as a distorted parody of first-world problems, rather than a fitting example of the escapism offered by VR. The parodic aspect of this image is partially due to it being an extreme example of the presumed motivation for a person desiring to escape into a digital dream world. Could VR be considered even momentarily satisfactory even though it can never provide true solutions for a homeless person's hardship, such as a lack of safety, food, heat, and hygiene? And might it not be dangerous for someone in that situation to cover their eyes, making them even more vulnerable to the external world? Without fitting contextualisation and insight, this anomalous scene is, in my view, a too extreme example.

Her text goes on to focus on immersive media as technology-assisted immersion and escapism, and how this poses the threat of addiction

to users. Her standpoint seems to lack cultural reflection by which she could position this topic within the field of fine art. Instead, she focuses on its digital technology aspect, without unpacking its complex underlying layers, such as its method of mediation, technological development, and ecological impact. For the production and distribution of VR projects, the requirement of costly technology, specialised knowledge, and resources excludes large regions from access. Thus, countless individuals and even institutions are unable to develop and experience VR projects. Acknowledging this global inequality is the first step, the second would be action to democratise the use of VR, as well as to develop immersive projects that have less of an economic and environmental toll. The exhibited artworks are diverse in their application of technology; however, the catalogue unfortunately does not provide insight into their creative processes or their use of technology. Publications featuring artists' choices and processes of applying immersive technology could provide valuable insights for those not fully aware of the technological ins and outs that define immersive media.

The catalogue does not aim to conventionally document the exhibition and the exhibited artworks, but rather offers tasters of each project in the form of visual essay spreads designed by each artist, consisting of a combination of images, screenshots, collages, texts and QR codes. The mediation of mostly digital and virtual artworks onto the centuries-old medium of the printed press is undoubtedly a challenge. While this approach could provide a relevant alternative to the commonplace photographic documentation of the physical view of an exhibition, the result is unconvincing. Since only hints are offered of complex and innovative artworks, we will not become properly acquainted with them via the publication alone if we have not previously encountered them in the gallery space. Especially as some QR code links are not live anymore, within a year of the catalogue's publication.

The featured essays are reflective and critical in a variety of ways; however, as a collection of essays, they are fragmented and without a concise overview of immersion, which is lacking in the introduction. Helen Kaplinsky theoretical text "Mystical Virtualities" provides the only historical viewpoint and the most cultural context regarding the medium, content and technology of the artworks she focuses on, which range from painting to VR projects. This grounding encourages the reader to consider the roots of these projects and their complex significance in our times.

A beautiful and unexpected parallel debated by Kaplinsky is the similarity between contemporary virtual reality and mediaeval Christian religion, which could be considered as that age's governing technology, functioning as a portal to "a "mediaeval virtual" imagination of salvation and purgatory" (Kaplinsky 2023). She goes further to

state that this parallel implies that current-day VR “operates through a spiritual belief in the transformative potential of digital technology,” raising the question of whether our contemporary belief in the significance of everything virtual and digital could be seen as abstract and transcendental as the life-defining religiousness of the Middle Ages. Kaplinsky combines historical reflection and feminist discourse, aiming to understand the current cultural significance of mediaeval female visionaries by focusing on the story of Emerentia and its influence on the practices of contemporary feminist artists today.

In contrast, the first essay titled “Immersion, Saturation, Ingestion” by Matthew Fuller merely focuses on the theoretical aspect of immersion driven by an artwork of somewhat dubious quality, namely *Net-surfer* by Gianluca Lerici a.k.a. Professor Bad Trip. Both the artwork and the theory constructed based on this image is a crude explanation of the connection between “surfing the internet,” virtual reality, and the ocean. VR still battles for equal recognition as a form of art, equal to other more canonised forms of art, however, such simple explanations driven by banal imagery, without rich cultural and historical insights only intensify the audience’s scepticism.

Later in his text, Fuller draws connections between Christina Sharpe’s *The Wake*, as Sharpe also uses the sea as a central motif. Sharpe (2016) unravels the historical trauma of the transatlantic slave trade still present in both the bodies of the descendants of its victims and in the ocean itself. This topic could provide a potent opportunity to pitch how VR and AR (Augmented Reality) are apt media to convey the omnipresence of history, especially in seascapes. In her book, Sharpe defines the expression “residence time” as covering the long-term presence of salt in ocean water that originates from the bodies of thousands of slaves thrown overboard dead or alive. To consider the connection, even on a molecular level, between the past and the present, the individual and the environment, and the historical and the biological is a task so complex that the utilisation of simultaneously spatial and temporal media, such as VR or AR, could be a perfectly suited.

Furthermore and since we have mentioned the slave trade and colonialism of the past, it is important to highlight the comparable exploitation that is present throughout the manufacturing of our contemporary technology. The equipment of immersive media is also strongly tied to modern slavery and neo-colonialism. Besides its toll on exploited and underrepresented millions of people, the materials and energy required for XR production also has a considerable negative impact on our natural environment. While of course this technology and its ecological impact are no different to that of other technology we use daily, it is nevertheless important to voice these concerns to ensure we do not believe the purported “weightlessness” of digital technology. For example, although the internet is allegedly immaterial and

weightless, in reality it too has a physical presence and impact, as server farms and internet cables are hidden in the depths of oceans and far lands (Parikka 2015). I believe it is key to raise awareness of this issue among creators, theoreticians, and the wider public, to encourage a more reflective use of technology in the age of climate crisis, climate consciousness, and climate anxiety.

The last issue I would like to raise regarding Fuller's text is his inclusion of the lesser-known Brazilian movement of anthropophagy in the debate. What drives this connection is the image of the Net-surfer, with a somewhat forced symbolism. The ties with the topic of the text and this movement remain vague, and further explanation is needed for a newcomer to understand the significance of this theory in this context.

Lukáš Likavčan's (2023) essay "A Planet of the Selfless: Immersion as an Aquatic Metaphor in a Post-Digital Context" takes the project *Collectivize Facebook* as its starting point and delves deep into a utopian vision of a planetary polis. As a political community it would go beyond nations, states, and private property to offer democratic ownership of all physical and virtual assets, which are currently owned by a few tech billionaires who exploit our data. His dream of a transnational public cooperative is however merely wishful thinking that remains unfounded and superficial since he does not address all the aspects that would make this vision unachievable. With the acknowledgement of the complexity of our contemporary situation, a practically, or at least theoretically realistic alternative to the systems and power structures of the neoliberalist late capitalism dominant today cannot be outlined.

Likavčan states that this transnational public cooperation would not only offer an equal place to the human residents of the globe but also robots, online bots, and autonomous vehicles. However, this would inflate this alleged democracy, with humans losing the assurance of their voices and interests getting heard. For example, to date, we live in a world where there are already far more microchips than humans (Das 2008), so, technological entities could easily suppress the human population in the not-so-distant future. Therefore, if in the future we wish to live in a "democracy" that equally represents the interests of technology, we might as well acknowledge our submission to artificial intelligence. If the author is so concerned with decreasing the dominance of the human species, why is he not instead arguing for a multi-species community? The unrelenting climate crisis would probably be better tackled when taking into consideration all living organisms on Earth, instead of industrial products whose creation and functioning is based on the exploitation of the planet's resources. With the focus on the interests of technology, the pressure placed on our environment will surely only grow exponentially.

Later the author goes on to analyse various theories of interconnectedness between humans and their environment, mostly regarding the extrapolation of the human economy to the planetary economy. He does not draw parallels and conclusions between this topic and the one discussed above, which could have created a more grounded and richer context for his proposals. Nonetheless, he continues to focus on questions of freedom, immunisation, and the ideal synthesis between our civilisation and the metabolism of the planet. In conclusion, Likavčan states that the key to equal cohabitation is self-limitation—which should not be confused with Christian self-denial—to achieve the “planet of the selfless” (Likavčan 2023).

The essay by Zsolt Miklósvölgyi and Márió Z. Nemes (2023) closes the catalogue, offering a somewhat positive interpretation of immersion as more a kind of “digital swimming” than “drowning.” They state that as we live increasingly digitally, we use our understanding of our natural environment to decode the digital as pseudo-nature, a digital ecology naturalised by metaphors. They go further to point out how the dichotomy of analogue and digital has now been surpassed by the post-digital technosphere in which we do not experience disembodiment but rather a reinterpretation of the boundaries between the body, the environment, and the virtual. Submersion in water transforms human perception, offering an alternative to our current form of interpretation, which the authors reflect on via various theoretical and literary examples. Yet, visual art projects seem to be absent throughout the development of their concepts of aquatic states. Instead of influencing their theory, artworks are only later brought in to illustrate their point. At least these examples are analysed in depth, focusing especially on the ocean as a site of remembrance of and reflection on the transatlantic slave trade.

All in all, this catalogue is rich in complex theoretical essays regarding various aspects of immersion, branching out to connect with a variety of fields, such as medieval studies, posthumanism, techno-futurism, and literary studies. It is an ideal starting point for those interested in contemporary theories regarding immersion and virtual reality, however, there is unfortunately a lack of fundamental reflection on the history and culture of immersion that would help readers to contextualise and fully understand this complex topic. However, alongside a publication of the rich essays, the catalogue fails to function effectively as an archive and remediation of the exhibited artworks for those who have not visited the exhibition and consequently renders the attempt to create a less schematic format for documenting a media exhibition ineffective.

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