

Un-immersed?

Michaële Cutaya

Apart from referring to a proliferating type of installation, “immersion” designates a peculiar form of viewership and has become a benchmark to measure the success of an art exhibition. On the face of it, its meaning appears straightforward enough: an immersive artwork aims to absorb or mesmerise the viewer into an all-encompassing sensory experience¹. One could wonder about the present desire for immersion, yet it is about non-immersive art I began to speculate: what could be described as an un-immersive encounter? In my attempt to answer this question, not only did the possibilities as to what a non-immersive art could be multiply, but, in turn, reflected back on the meaning of immersion, developing into a rather dizzying series of shifting contrasts and oppositions.

One way to approach our characterisation of non-immersive art is through the notion of aesthetic distance. Since the development of aesthetics as the philosophy of art in the

18th century, aesthetic experience has been understood as sensory contemplation, requiring both perception and intellectual appreciation. Immanuel Kant in *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) distinguished between taste as a purely sensory appreciation and judgement of the beautiful, or art, which requires the engagement of both the faculty of imagination and the faculty of understanding. The immersive experience, by prioritising sensory perception, seems to leave little room for the exercise of understanding.

Another way to think of the non-immersive is suggested by Bertold Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, variously translated as an estrangement, or a distancing effect. In his theatrical work, Brecht sought to create effects that would disrupt the audience's passive identification with characters and plots. This involved, he wrote, "stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them". Brecht used techniques such as direct address to the audience, harsh lighting and explanatory placards to provoke critical thinking and prevent the audience from becoming emotionally involved.

Brecht's conception of theatre was partially a reaction to Richard Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*: a 'total' or 'unified' work of art, which sought to realise a synthesis of arts and engage all the senses so as to absorb the audience. Wagner's vision can be seen as the ultimate prototype for immersive art. Yet, despite their divergent approaches, both Brecht and Wagner dreamt of transforming the audience into a people: a critical revolutionary one for Brecht, a unified *Volk* for Wagner². This raises a question about immersive art that is not easily disentangled and largely depends on the specific artwork: does it create a collective experience that would produce a sense of shared experience, or does it isolate the viewer – as the donning of the by now ubiquitous VR headsets might suggest?

If we take the immersive experience as isolating, then non-immersive forms of art could include such practices as participatory and socially engaged art³. Curator Nicolas Bourriaud had theorised artistic practices that take human relationships within their social context as their material under the name of Relational Aesthetics (1998). In this approach, the artist acts as a facilitator, empowering the audience. Bourriaud

states, “the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever scale chosen by the artist.” The artwork contributes to the elaboration of collective meaning, counteracting individual consumption. In this context, we can question the extent to which the engagement and interactivity claimed by many immersive exhibits can be considered genuine participation.

Bourriaud situates the artistic practices he discusses in the continuity of Guy Debord’s diagnosis in “The Society of the Spectacle” (1967). Debord defines the spectacle not merely as a collection of images but as “a social relation between people that is mediated by images”. In the society of the spectacle, representation has replaced authentic social life. Relational aesthetics can be seen as a contemporary variation on Situationism, attempting to counter the detrimental effects of the spectacle by creating moments that awaken authentic desires.

When Debord approached the image as part of the modern conditions of production, the image becomes, for Fredric Jameson, the

symptom of postmodernity. In his famous essay, 'Postmodernism and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', (1984) Jameson characterises postmodernism as "a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation... in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum". He sees Postmodernism as "the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense." Jameson see this superficiality exemplified by the multiple glass façades of new downtown skyscrapers. Debord's spectacle becomes in Jameson's writings the triumph of superficiality.

Yet, as recent articles on the immersive experience have pointed out, its aim is to awe the viewer through mind-blowing and multi-sensory encounters with art, that is to create a simulacrum of experience: a spectacle. Etymologically speaking, to be immersed is to be plunged into a liquid that is to be below the surface; to dwell in the depths. So we might mischievously wonder, what is the nature of the spectacle: its superficiality or its depth?

Conversely, a surface does not have to be smooth and reflective like a glass window or a flat screen,

a surface can be rough and rugged, its very asperities a welcome respite from the seasickness induced by a VR ride and the circumvolutions of theory alike.

In ‘A Questionnaire on Materialisms’ conducted by the magazine *October* in 2016, Giuliana Bruno wrote:

“On the surface of things, time becomes material space... Things retain on their surface, and transmit, the movement of circulation, the fabrication of difference, the texture of negotiation, the conditions of mediation, and many other forms of passage. Materiality, in this sense, is an archive of relations and transformation.”

When the immersive can come across as another form of distraction, to look closely and pay attention to the thingness of the art object, is perhaps the very definition of the non-immersive experience. And quite simply, it is at the surface of things we build our being in the world.

1. Several articles have been written analysing the “immersive” phenomenon, exploring its connections to new virtual technologies, its impact on the display and reception of art, and the emergence of new spaces and organisations that bypass traditional exhibition institutions. Coverage from the past couple of years includes: a special issue of *Art in America*, *The Art of Immersion*, January 2021. Available at: <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/immersive-art-1234580701/#!> (Accessed July 2023); Wiener, A. (10 February, 2022) *The Rise of “Immersive” Art, Why Are Tech-Centric, Projection-Based Exhibits Suddenly Everywhere?* *The New Yorker*. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-silicon-valley/the-rise-and-rise-of-immersive-art> (Accessed July 2023); Fite-Wassilak, C. *New Rules of Immersion*, e-flux criticism. Available at <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/538656/new-rules-of-immersion> (Accessed July 2023); Heardman, A. (June 2023) *Against Immersion*, *Art Monthly* 467.

2. Wilson Smith, M. (2007). *The Total Work of Art, From Bayreuth to Cyberspace*. Routledge.

3. Participatory art designates a form of art that directly engages the audience in the creative process so that they become participants in the event and socially engaged practice, an art that is collaborative, often participatory and involves people as the medium or material of the work.