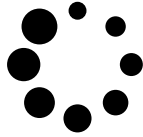AN-ICON

Immersivity as An-immersivity

by Stefano Velotti

Ordinary and immersive experience
Virtual reality and art
Experience economy
Control
Uncontrollability

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Immersivity as An-immersivity

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Abstract   The title of this project, "An-icon," refers to "images that deny themselves." Virtual reality may be viewed as a typical, though not exclusive, case able to illustrate this kind of image: we know we have crossed the threshold of an environment that consists of images (ontologically), but we experience it (phenomenologically) as if it were a real environment. Something similar can be said about immersivity, but reversing the perspective: we are (ontologically) immersed in reality (virtual or non-virtual), but (phenomenologically) we know and say we are, and for this very reason we reject the idea that we are *simply* immersed in an environment.

This applies first and foremost to our experience in general, regardless of the status of the experiences we gain through virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) or mixed reality (MR).

And yet, within this very general condition, human beings have over time created environments and works that carve out zones of "special immersivity," so to speak, *dedicated* to immersion. What are we looking for in VR immersivity? Are new immersive technologies merely refinements of older techniques, or can they affect our relationship with ourselves, reality, and others in novel ways? What are artistic practices called on to do when faced with such new technological practices?

An-Immersivity

The title of this project, "An-icon," refers to "images that deny themselves." Virtual reality may be viewed as a typical, though not exclusive, case able to illustrate this kind of image: we know we have crossed the threshold of an environment that consists of images (ontologically), but we experience it (phenomenologically) as if it were a real environment. Something similar can be said about immersivity, but reversing the perspective: we are (ontologically) immersed in reality (virtual or non-virtual), but (phenomenologically) we know and say we are, and for this very reason we reject the idea that we are *simply* immersed in an environment. If we were, we would have no way of becoming aware of this. In fact, to speak of immersivity, we must find our balance on an unstable boundary, which allows us to recognize the encompassing and intrascendible character of immersive experience while at the same time belying its closure, piercing it from within. To speak of immersivity therefore implies recognizing that one is in a condition of "an-immersivity," where the hyphen separating and joining the privative prefix "an" to "immersivity" is the sign of a paradox. It could also be said that the hyphen evokes the figure of an unstable threshold, referring to the co-presence of inside and outside.[1] This applies first and foremost to our experience in general, regardless of the status of the experiences we gain through virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) or mixed reality (MR).

"Special immersivity"

Before even considering the complexities and opportunities of virtual immersivity, it should be noted that

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1 In this I am comforted by the title of A. Pinotti's fine book, *Alla soglia dell'immagine: Da Narciso alla realtà virtuale* (Turin: Einaudi, 2021).

immersivity presents itself first and foremost as a feature of our being in the world: we are always already immersed in experience, in a given situation part of an indeterminate totality. Where else could we be? And yet, within this very general condition, human beings have over time created environments and works that carve out zones of "special immersivity," so to speak, *dedicated* to immersion, with different modalities, complexities, techniques, functions, and meanings, many of which – the earliest – tend to be beyond our understanding and perhaps always will.

Is it possible that the insistent recourse to "(special) immersivity" arises especially at times of deep crisis, when the very foundations of a civilization are felt to be uncertain, invested with a high rate of contingency?[2] To simplify: since forms of life do not allow us to feel at home in this world, which seems to have become foreign, indecipherable and threatening, one is drawn to limited and controlled spaces in which to immerse oneself, to feel more alive and safe, at least for a while. I think this perspective is plausible, though it is partial and, indeed, a simplification. What else are we looking for in VR immersivity? Are new immersive technologies merely refinements of older techniques, or can they affect our relationship with ourselves, reality, and others in novel ways? What are artistic practices

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2 O. Grau, *From Illusion to Immersion* (2001), trans. G. Custance (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003) offers a historical survey of artworks aimed at providing immersive experiences. In recent decades, however, interest in Paleolithic and "cave art" has been rekindled outside the circle of specialists as well, both as such – see, e.g., G. Rigal, *Le temps sacré des cavernes* (Paris: Corti, 2016) – and in relation to contemporary art, to this regard see again Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell'immagine* (especially the section on "Avatāra" in ch. V). Cfr. also M. Stavrinaki, *Saisis par la préhistoire: Enquête sur l'art et le temps des modernes* (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2019) and in particular the pages devoted to Frederick Kiessler's *Endless House* and Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio's *Caverna dell'antimateria*. Both of these works, created in the late 1950s, reflect the anguish connected to the atomic bomb, at that time perceived as a looming threat, later forgotten but always resurgent. The short-circuit between contemporary art and the Paleolithic seems to be related to the perception of a profound change in a civilization, if not its end, and thus to a need to revisit its origins, as if one had to start over. In this regard, in addition to a number of works of visual art that explicitly harken back to the Paleolithic, see also Richard Powers' symptomatic novel *Plowing the Dark* (2000), which I have analyzed in S. Velotti, "Art in the time of Pandemic: Three Terms," *Paradigmi* 39, no. 1 (2021): 127-140.

called on to do when faced with such new technological practices?

Nowadays the adjective "immersive" is used obsessively in the presentation of theme parks and other sensational "adventures" or "experiences" that promise to take us "inside" paintings and frescoes or into physically inaccessible places. The word invariably appears in the press releases of museums, exhibitions, performances, installations, but also in advertisements for apartments for sale or wine and food itineraries.[3] One way to understand the meaning of the word is "proof of the opposite:" what, for example, would a "non-immersive" visit to an apartment look like? Hard to answer, unless we specify restrictive conditions for what is meant by immersivity. Used loosely, however, "immersive" risks being meaningless since its negation does not seem to change anything. And yet it is precisely for this reason that it is an enigmatic adjective, hovering like an obscure object of desire in our social imagination.

Are we therefore to conclude that the attribution of immersivity is in vain since it neither adds nor detracts from the characterization of experience? I don't think so. However, we must first clarify in what sense each of our experiences is both immersive and non-immersive, or, indeed, "an-immersive." On this basis it will be easier to ask what peculiar traits are offered by the different uses of "special immersivity," by this form of reality that is VR, particularly in relation to art, which, if it is anything, is a way of understanding how we place ourselves in the world.

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3 A real estate agency in Rome advertises its luxurious apartments in the Parioli district with the following words, "Enjoy an immersive experience! Come visit your new home." The real estate company is called Pitagora because it is located near Piazza Pitagora, not because it is referencing the Greek philosopher; however, the agency's slogan is "Pitagora – the philosophy of living." Which, supposedly, explains its "unique and iconic character." As for food and wine itineraries, one can visit, for example, "The Temple of Brunello" in Montalcino (Tuscany), which actually offers "a station with VR viewers called InVolo" that "allows visitors to immerse themselves in the villas, castles, vineyards and hamlets that dot the municipality's vast and diversified area," https://www.orodimontalcino.it/tempio-del-brunello/, accessed December 24, 2022.

Fish and amphibians

At first glance, one would be tempted to say that we human animals are like fish immersed in water – to quote a famous apologue by David Foster Wallace about the difficulty of grasping the medium in which we are immersed: an old fish asks two young fish, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" and they in turn ask themselves, "What the hell is water?"[4] The element in which we are immersed is in this sense a medium that cannot be iconized or represented. In one respect, it is undeniable that we are always already situated, immersed in a concrete environment that resists iconic reduction. On the other hand, one must ask whether asserting this undeniable condition of immersion does not imply a partial denial of it.

The simplest critiques of a representational model of the mind often target a naive idea of representation, one that can be imagined as a frame or filter interposed between us and things, constituted by the spatio-temporal forms of intuition or by a priori categories, universal or culturally determined conceptual schemes. Access to reality "in itself" is therefore denied to us, because according to this account reality is always filtered through (inter)subjective lenses. On the complementary plane of our actions and productions we have mental representations enclosed in our head that we then try to externalize, technically, artistically or in other ways.

Various versions of enactivism oppose this view of the representational mind, rightly insisting that perception is an active way of exploring the material and social environment in which we are immersed, of experiencing affordances and building skills, not a way of corresponding

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4 D. Foster Wallace, *This is Water*, 2005. Commencement speech to the graduating class at Kenyon College, https://fs.blog/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/, accessed December 28, 2022.

more or less correctly to an already organized world.[5] Not least because, in order to see whether our representations "correspond" to the world, we would need to be able to have unfiltered access to reality. On another front, anti-representationalism is also endorsed by those who replace representations with immanent flows and forces, or who propose that we think of ourselves as "things among things," according to a "flat ontology" devoid of anthropocentric hierarchies, where all entities are equally agents and patients, from stones to plants, from artifacts to animals.

Yet, both the idea of a representational filter and the various versions of absolute immersivity run into the same problem: if we think these ideas and formulate them linguistically, as in fact we do, then they are self-contradictory. If they are true, then they are false.[6] For if we experienced the world through a filter, we would have to see the world, ourselves and the filter with a view from nowhere. And if on the other hand it were true, as in some ways *it is* true, that we are always immersed in a translucent medium like fish in water, we could not communicate this. We would just be immersed. The fact is that we discover ourselves immersed and emerged at the same time, more amphibian than fish. We realize that we see and do not see a frame, that we remain on this side of a threshold *knowing that we cannot cross it and therefore crossing it*.[7] Toward where? Toward an infinitely expandable context, the indeterminable totality of every possible experience in which

5 Cfr. J. Stewart, O. Gapenne, E. A. Di Paolo, *Enaction: Toward a New Paradigm for Cognitive Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010). For a recent survey of enactivism in relation to cultural contexts see C. Durt, T. Fuchs, C. Tewes, eds., *Embodiment, Enaction, and Culture* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2017).
6 Here I broadly trace the exposition of the paradoxes of experience articulated by E. Garroni, *Estetica: Uno sguardo-attraverso* (Milan: Garzanti, 1992).
7 Christian Stiegler acknowledges the liminality of the "liquid spaces" in which we are immersed, but then seems to unilaterally emphasize the disappearance of all frames: "Liquid spaces are moments of uncertainty, instability, and fluidity in mediated experiences. They emerge as thresholds between the physical and the mediated. These spaces create the feeling of immersion even beyond the mediation by eliminating critical distance and dissolving the frames of media." C. Stiegler, *The 360° Gaze: Immersions in Media, Society, and Culture* (London: MIT Press, 2021): 61.

we are already included, on whose horizon this determinate experience stands, which is such precisely insofar as it is "cut out" from that indeterminate and uncontrollable horizon of possibility.

What McLuhan says about medial awareness – summarized in the famous "rearview-mirror" metaphor recalled by Pinotti – is therefore not entirely true:

As long as s/he is immersed in a medium, the human being is as little aware of it as the fish of the water in which he swims. Only the moment that medium is overtaken by a later medium can it be retrospectively focused on and grasped precisely as the medium in which the experience had been organized: "we are always one step behind in our view of the world."[8]

We do not need the appearance of another medium to know that we are not like fish in water: the possibility of saying that we are is enough for us to prove ourselves wrong. Some philosophers, such as Thomas Nagel, have claimed that this condition of ours expresses "the absurd" of the human condition, which should be accepted with a little irony and without taking ourselves too seriously. In fact, unlike other animals that lack self-awareness and language, we cannot simply remain immersed and absorbed in our occupations, nor can we, however, install ourselves in a permanent emersion, in a transcendent dimension, because even the mind of the mystic is still playing one of the possible games situated in the concreteness of experience, not an out-of-this-world "super game." Because of this we are forced to accept this irreconcilable oscillation between immersion and emergence, adherence and detachment,

8 A. Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell'immagine*: 17 [my translation].

involvement in the ordinary tasks of life and the distance of a gaze that relativizes the latter or nullifies their importance.[9]

But is this really the case? What if, on the other hand, it were sometimes possible to make such indeterminate totality transit – analogically, symbolically – in concrete, determinate experience? What if things, practices, concrete experiences were given that *exemplified* the indeterminable and uncontrollable dimension against which they stand out? What if this were not only a source of disquiet (due to the feeling of being in touch with the uncontrollable), but also a sensible pleasure, deriving from the fact that our vitality, the feeling of being alive, is increased by the simultaneous co-presence of immersion and emergence? Perhaps this is one of the ways of approaching some particularly sensible experiences, for example, those in which we recognize something as art: a set of practices, events or "things" that allow us to "see" (feel, experience, understand) the complex texture of our forms of life, our being in the world between immersion and emersion.

Before trying to articulate these still vague statements, and precisely in relation to what we have called forms of "special immersivity,"[10] it is necessary to go back to their homology with the an-immersivity of ordinary experience, also from the point of view of its limitations.

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9 T. Nagel, "The Absurd," in *Mortal Questions* (London: Canto, 1979): 11-23.
10 It should be made clear from the outset that what I have called "special immersivity" is obtained with diverse and heterogeneous forms that can be sorted into categories. For an excellent survey of immersive forms of storytelling, see E. Modena, *Nelle storie: Arte, cinema e media immersivi* (Rome: Carocci, 2022). Ultimately, however, as far as artistic practices are concerned, it is the singularity of the work that must be taken into account.

Limits of immersivity

Let us see the extent to which the experience of virtual immersivity, in its "special" meaning, can be equated with that of ordinary immersivity.

The three characteristics of immersive VR, summarized by Pinotti, are (1) the saturation of the 360° gaze ("unframedeness"); (2) the feeling of presence, of "being there," which can be further articulated as telepresence, selfpresence and social presence ("presentness");[11] (3) the experience of immediacy, due paradoxically to the great complexity of technological mediations that produce VR, making the medium as transparent as possible ("immediateness").[12]

It is easy to see that we could characterize our experience of the ordinary world using the same properties: nothing I see is potentially limited by a frame, I have the perception of "being here," of presence, and my experience seems immediate, that is, unmediated by a medium that interferes with reality. But, one might say, if by hypothesis VR fulfills these promises to the point of pushing itself to (illusory) indistinguishability from reality, then – from a phenomenological, though not an ontological, point of view – we would be thrown back into the reality we already know, and – except for the advantageous uses of it, related to various forms of telepresence and simulation – the experience we derive from it would be nothing new. Conversely, one can highlight the limits of these claims and emphasize the aspects that prevent illusion. Both perspectives, however, are simplistic. VR is not equivalent to ordinary reality, nor are the limitations of VR absent in ordinary reality:

11 E. Pett*, Experiencing Cinema: Participatory Film Cultures, Immersive Media and the Experience Economy* (New York-London: Bloomsbury, 2021).
12 A. Pinotti, "Prologo," in *Alla soglia dell'immagine*: xi-xviii.

■   It is true that in VR the frame has disappeared, but in a sense it persists: I am wearing a headset and in the future I will perhaps wear a headband, or be fitted with an implant connected to my neurons. On the other hand, even here, now, in non-virtual reality, I am partially framed by the actions that brought me to a given place and situation (I am aware that I occupy a limited or "framed" portion of reality), by attention variously focused on the scenario in front of me or the task I set myself, but also by the "frames" studied by Erving Goffman and those we do not pay attention to because they are "hidden in plain sight."[13]

■   Presence, being here, cannot be doubted. I am not elsewhere, or at least no more than I am elsewhere when I am immersed in a virtual environment.

■   Finally, the apparent immediacy produced by innumerable technological mediations also characterizes my real experience: we know all too well that what is felt as natural,spontaneous, obvious is intertwined with acquired habits and artificial constructions and prosthetic extensions: the normative, the perceptual, proxemics, social mediations, and all the ways of acting of a certain form of life.

So, those characteristics that serve to phenomenologically distinguish the experience of a non-immersive image from an "an-iconic" immersive experience are not sufficient to distinguish the experience of immersive VR from that of ordinary reality. However, from here we cannot conclude that between "ordinary" immersivity and what we have called "special immersivity" there is no difference, not only on the ontological level, but also on the phenomenological one.

There are countless features of VR that distinguish it from ordinary reality. The most obvious, related first and foremost to the dimension of space, is the possibility of

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13 E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (1974) (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986); E. Zerubavel, *Hidden in Plain Sight: The Social Structure of Irrelevance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

becoming immersed in scenarios that cannot be found in ordinary reality or that would be impossible to experience because of scale or distance: entering an animal's bloodstream or its brain, acting at a distance, traveling through a body. Also, there is the cognitive conflict between proprioception in the real world and that in the virtual world – walking on water or plunging into an abyss while remaining firmly on the ground but feeling a sense of vertigo and fear (or, vice versa, I am immersed in the "magic circle" of VR and have an accident in the ordinary world).

I do not intend to try to list all the differences and perhaps imagine how some of them will be eliminated or reduced by technological progress, integrating our other senses,[14] nor do I intend to address all the possible ways of using VR, which is likely to become even more useful and indispensable in the future than it already is now for many of our practices, medical, architectural, forensic, social, professional, educational, recreational, and so on. Rather, here I intend to focus on what immersive VR can tell us about the human experience in general, drawing on the experience we sometimes have in our relationship with what we call artistic works or practices.

"Experience economy"

In the 1990s the idea gained ground – with anticipations already in the previous decades – that the economy most suited to our times – at least in the wealthiest societies – is not so much based on the production of goods, or even on services, but on experience. In those years, expressions such as "*Erlebnisgesellschaft*," "*Erlebnismarkt*," and "*Dream Society*" began to circulate, until James Gilmore and Joseph Pine II became the proudest

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14 Cfr. R. DeSalle, *Our Senses: An Immersive Experience* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2018).

proponents of the "Experience Economy" with a book that would have a certain fortune, followed by other volumes on related issues.[15] The key to their thinking is stated in the preface to the 2011 updated edition of their *The Experience Economy*:

So let us here be most clear: goods and services are no longer enough to foster economic growth, create new jobs, and maintain economic prosperity. To realize revenue growth and increased employment, *the staging of experiences* must be pursued as a distinct form of economic output. Indeed, in a world saturated with largely undifferentiated goods and services the greatest opportunity for value creation resides in *staging experiences*.[16]

The market for goods is saturated, and producers must offer products that promise to stage experiences. For this reason the watchwords are "mass customize," i.e. transform every service into a unique (mass) experience; "work is theater," i.e. "stage experiences" and train sellers in specific performance practices; and finally, ensure that the experience offered generates in the consumer ("prosumer" or "experiencer") an actual change, which must be properly paid for: "these transformations should themselves command a fee in the form of explicitly charging for the demonstrated outcomes that result from the underlying experiences. [...] We especially challenge enterprises in three industries: those that focus on making people healthy, wealthy, and wise."[17]

It would be all too easy to reiterate once again how the neoliberal creed attempts to infiltrate every aspect

15 G. Schulze, *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft: Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt am Main-New York: Campus-Verlag, 1993); R. Jensen, "Dream Society," *The Futurist* 30, no. 3 (1996): 9-13; J. Gilmore and B.J. Pine II, *The Experience Economy* (1999) (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2011); J. Gilmore and B.J. Pine II, *Authenticity. What Consumers Really Want* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007).
16 J. Gilmore and B.J. Pine II, "Preview to the Updated Edition: Beyond Goods and Services," in *The Experience Economy*: ix-xxii, ix [emphasis mine].
17 Ibid.

of human life, putting a price tag on it. Instead, I have mentioned these marketing strategies to make some distinctions concerning the notion of experience. It is interesting to see how Gilmore and Pine respond to the obvious objection that an experience purchased from a catalog is a fake experience. Their line of defense comes in the central chapter of their next book, *Authenticity*, in which they draw on some philosophical references to arrive at the following conclusion:

there is no such thing as an inauthentic experience because *experiences happen inside us*. Therefore, we remain free to judge our experiences with any economic offering as authentic or not. Businesses that offer them therefore can, whether intentionally or by happenstance, gain the perception of authenticity. [...] Businesses can render their inauthentic offerings as authentic. Doing so requires embracing this essential paradox: all human enterprise is *ontologically fake* – that is, in its very being it is inauthentic – and yet, output from that enterprise can be *phenomenologically real* – that is, it is perceived as authentic by the individuals who buy it.[18]

The distinction between an ontological and a phenomenological point of view returns here in a particularly insidious way. For on the one hand, it is true that there is no class of "fake" immersive experiences ontologically distinct from a class of "authentic" immersive experiences. And the experience one has cannot be anything other than the experience of a subject, and in this sense it is obviously subjective (which, however, does not necessarily mean that it is only "inside us"). Kant himself, who entrusted to the principle of the judgment of taste even the possibility of making sense of experience in general and building a

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18 J. Gilmore, B. J. Pine II, "The Authenticity Paradox," in *Authenticity*: 89-90, 89 [emphasis mine].

system of nature, reiterated that I can judge anything aesthetically, material or immaterial, and that my judgment depends on what "I make of this representation in myself."[19] As is well known, however, Kant ascribed to such judgment a claim to "subjective universality" and "exemplary necessity," springing from a "free play" of imagination and understanding. In the perspective of the "experience economy," what we witness is a caricature of these claims: the freedom-spontaneity of the free play of the faculties becomes the consumer's "freedom of choice," a psychological choice expressed as a preference (however motivated or induced, as long as it has the desired *effect*). The impossibility of establishing ontologically distinct classes for what is "beautiful-sensible" and what is not is reduced to what the consumer "buys or doesn't buy" (in both senses of the word). Since nothing escapes human intervention and thus technique and money, the Las Vegas hotel "The Venetian" and the city of Venice possess the same ontological status, that of both being "fakes." The authenticity of an experience cannot therefore depend on "what" we experience (everything is equally ontologically "fake"), but only on something that "happens inside us," and can therefore be "phenomenologically real." The singularity of experience is completely annulled, and every object, practice, situation is identical to any other, as long as it produces *the same effect*: a novel or a pill, a bump on the head or a movie, a concert or a wedding.[20] There is no longer any trace of

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19 "It is readily seen that to say that it is beautiful and to prove that I have taste what matters is what I make of this representation in myself, not how I depend on the existence of the object." I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), trans. P. Guyer and E. Matthews (Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 5; 205.

20 Cfr. Wittgenstein's objection to the idea of aesthetic experience conceived as an *effect*: "There is a tendency to talk about the 'effect of a work of art'– feelings, images, etc. Then it is natural to ask: 'Why do you hear this minuet?,' and there is a tendency to answer: 'To get this, and that effect.' And doesn't the minuet itself matter? – hearing *this*: would another have done as well? You could play a minuet once, and get a lot out of it, and play the same minuet another time and get nothing out of it. But it doesn't follow that what you get out of it is then independent of the minuet." L. Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief* (Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967): 29.

recourse to an elaboration by the subject, to the exercise of a "reflective faculty of judgment" (as distinct from the objectifying exercise of "determining judgment"), to show the impossibility of constructing classes of "beautiful" or meaningful things or experiences. Instead, once again, it is the "invisible hand" of the market that knows best how to allocate the "resource" of authenticity.

The perspective of control

On a photography information site, I find a review of Richard Avedon's recent exhibition, *Relationships* (Palazzo Reale, Milan, September 22, 2022-January 29, 2023). The reviewer informs us right away that it is "an enjoyable *immersive* experience in the artist's photographic universe."[21] What is of interest here, however, is not the indiscriminate use of the adjective, but one of the most famous quotes attributed to Avedon, which stands out in one of the rooms: "I think all art is about control – the encounter between control and the uncontrollable." Referred to photography, or to a certain way of doing photography, the statement easily lends itself to multiple interpretations.[22] I believe, however, that Avedon was right: *every* art form is characterized by this encounter and, indeed, it could be argued that every experience worthy of the name is.

This "encounter," however, takes place less and less often in everyday life: control and self-control, exacerbated also by digital technologies (surveillance, quantified self, digital self, etc.) seem to run more and more *in parallel* with an increasing loss of control (sense of powerlessness,

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21 E. Dal Verme, "Richard Avedon: Relationships," *Fotografia.it* (September 22, 2022), https://www.fotografia.it/articoli/opinioni/richard-avedon-relationships/, accessed January 5, 2023 [emphasis mine].
22 Cfr., e.g., R. Kelsey, *Photography and the Art of Chance* (Cambridge MA-London: Harvard University Press, 2015) and some observations in S. Velotti, *The Present of Photography and the Dialectics of Control,* in M. Delogu, A. Dandini de Sylva, eds., *Fotografia: Il presente* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2015): 21-29.

acting out, addictions, panic attacks, conspiracy theories etc.), without the two dimensions ever converging. Although often untied in our impoverished everyday life, the knot that ties control to uncontrollability is very complex and cannot be reduced to the "society of control" preconized by Deleuze.[23] The problem is complex, but here, in conclusion, I would like to put forward only a few questions about control in relation to "special immersivity," or, more specifically, immersive art practices. On the one hand, the most mundane experiences of "special" immersivity are meant to be forms of sensational entertainment (*Caravaggio experience* and the like), or reassuring bubbles where all contact with what is uncontrollable and indeterminate is preemptively sterilized. On the other, they promise they will allow us to "get lost" in immersion. (Of course, there may also be a more subtle pleasure in "letting go," relying on someone else's control, as artist Janet Cardiff argues when speaking of her extraordinary AR "walks"[24]). However, this is an unresolved problem for the "experience economy," which on the one hand wants the prosumer/experiencer to feel that he or she is in control of his or her own choices (with reference to the alternatives offered) to ensure their authenticity, and on the other hand knows that the provider must remain in control of this offer, if only to justify the fee the prosumer/experiencer has to pay for it. There is nothing wrong with buying an "organized immersive adventure"– which may be fun, exciting, unusual – but the doubt remains: either it is not an adventure, or it is not organized. Even in valuable academic contributions, the question of control appears repeatedly,

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23 Cfr. S. Velotti, *Dialettica del controllo: Limiti della sorveglianza e pratiche artistiche* (Roma: Castelvecchi, 2017); H. Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World* (2018), trans. J.C. Wagner (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).
24 C. Christov-Bakargiev, *Janet Cardiff: A Survey of Works Including Collaborations with George Bures Miller* (New York: P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, 2003): 35.

yet without being thematized – it remains opaque, ambiguous, if not contradictory.[25]

What if, instead, the "special" immersivity of VR were employed to *reveal*, by *exemplifying* it, the paradoxical an-immersivity of ordinary experience, usually overlooked or misunderstood? What if certain uses of "special" immersivity were able to bring out from within not the illusory simulation of ordinary reality "as it is," perhaps displaced into fantastic scenarios, nor sensational and amazing experiences, but the most ordinary experience, making it visible and understandable as an "encounter" of controllability and uncontrollability? Then we would *not only* have a bubble, a vacation from ordinary space, an interruption in the web of a life lived obtusely, but also the concrete exemplification of the antinomian forces that render us alive: on the one hand, the need and satisfaction of exercising some control over ourselves, the world, and others – of being agents endowed with "efficacy," not powerless and systematically frustrated agents. On the other, the equally essential need not to remain entrenched in such control, which can only become *animated* in the "encounter" with what is and remains uncontrollable: the indeterminate totality of experience, the unpredictability of our multiple relationships, the infinitely rich grain of reality.

Possible examples of such successful "encounters" abound in contemporary art practices. Here I would like to cite just one, which I think is particularly significant because of its apparent incongruity and which would

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25 See for example C. Stiegler, *The 360° Gaze*: "If all the frames, stages, and technologies dissolve now, we are about to confuse different concepts of realities […] They emphasize *the dissolution of boundaries and control*"; but, at the same time, he writes that in the use of avatars "Nonhuman characters can activate the same emotional alignment and level of acceptance as human characters. Elena Kokkinara and Rachel McDonnell confirm that even though photorealistic imagery supports acceptance and engagement, authenticity depends much more 'on the levels of perceived ownership and *sense of control* (agency) we feel towards this virtual character.'" Stiegler, *The 360° Gaze*: 92 [emphasis mine].

deserve a much deeper analysis:[26] about 50 years ago, an Australian theology professor, John M. Hull, noticed that he was going blind, and decided to tape-record a diary of this dramatic progression. In 1990, these recordings became an extraordinary book, *Touching the Rock. An Experience of Blindness*. In the preface, Oliver Sacks wrote, quite rightly, that if Wittgenstein had gone blind, he would probably have written a similar book. A short film, a feature film and finally (in 2016) a virtual reality application, *Notes on Blindness: Into Darkness*, are based on this book.[27] It is "an experience" that takes place at the intersection of multiple authorships: Hull, the creators of the work in VR, and, it must be added, a partial interactivity on the part of the "experiencer." The latter wears a binaural audio device – the same sound reproduction technique used by Cardiff for her assisted "walks" – coupled with a 360-degree VR headset. Beginning with Hull's experience of blindness, the making, as well as the enjoyment of the experience, are the work of the "non-blind." It is not about disavowing the tragedy of losing one's sight, nor is it about telling a story of "redemption." Rather, what happens is that the blindness of the person wearing the VR headset – and the related loss of control over the outside world – is not replaced by images aiming to immerse the person in a realistic, broadly illusionistic environment, but rather "into Darkness," one of the most obvious manifestations of the loss of control over the environment. What we find in this VR, however, is not total darkness, but the disjointed and fragmented world described by Hull's words. The apparent obviousness of ordinary visual perception is suspended.

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26 See C. Roussel, "If Blindness Creates a New World," *CJDS* 8, no. 6 (2019): 108-130, which documents and analyzes the genesis and structure of *Notes on Blindness VR* in the most comprehensive way. E. Modena, building on Roussel's analysis, devotes some of the finest pages to it in her book *Nelle storie*: 84-87. See also the presentation of the project by A. Colinart, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=im3CpA14jEQ, accessed January 8, 2023.
27 Cfr. e.g., A. Noë, *Learning to Look: Dispatches from the Art World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

It involves participating in the reconstitution of the unity of experience almost "from scratch," which depends on acoustic signals that "bounce" back to us from objects if given certain environmental conditions: wind or rain make the world perceptible. Perceiving requires our activity, which is partially controllable, and a "collaboration" of the world that is usually beyond our control, i.e. weather events (in the app, the experiencer can control the triggering of such uncontrollable conditions). The idea that seeing is not obvious, that we need to learn how to do it actively, and that art is a way of "learning to look," I think is right, as long as "looking" is translated into a more global "perceiving" extended to the whole body. What we see in the virtual scenario are not really images, in the sense of figures, but sketches, elusive and ghostly graphic patterns (like Kantian image-schemes)[28] correlated to sound. A silent world would be dark. This reduction of figurativeness is much closer to a staging of our ordinary perception than any mimetic or fantastic imagery. Like blindness for the non-blind, our perceptual life in its entanglement with the world cannot be properly depicted visually. However, the suspension of ordinary sight opens up an understanding of a usually occluded perceptual experience, revealing, I believe, the paradoxical an-immersive interweaving of controllability and uncontrollability that constitutes us and toward which we are becoming increasingly blind.

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28 E. Garroni, *Immagine, linguaggio, figura* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2005).

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