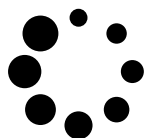


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by Valentina Bartalesi

Laure Prouvost

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# *I wish we could grab your image and touch you:* A Sensory Approach to Laure Prouvost's Work



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## Abstract

This contribution investigates the notion of immersiveness in Laure Prouvost's production, critically questioning the relationship between the environments designed by the French artist and the short film projected in them. More specifically, an attempt will be made to demonstrate how the activation of a sense of immersion depends on the fact that Prouvost's hypermedia installations act as both environments (*ambiente*) and settings (*ambientazione*). This study demonstrates how the immersive condition that the artist's film performance activates, while undoubtedly relating to the environmental context in which they appear, springs from a spectrum of strategies that Prouvost's moving images orchestrate. These include the layered and plastic quality of the moving image; the relationships between word and image within intermediary storytelling; the montage as a critical tool; and, more precisely, bodies that are not necessarily human as the locus of sensitive knowledge.

A theoretical framework that intersects the notion of the “system aesthetic,” Hugo Munsterberg’s prodromal psychological theory and multiple forms of haptic vision-resonance will define the guidelines of the argumentation, in parallel with tracing an inseparable art-historical genealogy to comprehend Laure Prouvost’s research.

Keywords

[Laure Prouvost](#)

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When we move by night at the speed of desire  
With you at the wheel my limit goes higher  
Just turn me on, you turn me on  
You are my petrol, my drive, my dream, my exhaust.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In November 2022, French-born artist Laure Prouvost, born in 1978, inaugurated her solo exhibition *Laure Prouvost: Above Front Tears Our Float* at the National Museum in Oslo.<sup>2</sup> As the exhibition constitutes an extraordinary summa of Prouvost's practice, a brief analysis of it allows one to enter the artist's universe(s). Like many of Prouvost's interventions, *Above Front Tears Our Float* boasts a properly spatial dimension. Described as an "immersive installation containing film, sound, performance, sculptures, textile and text,"<sup>3</sup> the exhibition takes up invading the Light Hall of the museum. Emerging from a dark corridor, the visitor enters an ethereal reinterpretation of a 19th-century panorama with light-coloured floors and water vapour banks simulating the clouds' rush. The dream of floating on the celestial vault is heightened by a herd of ornithological and marine sculptures blown in Murano glass and scattered among the clouds. A monumental tapestry celebrates the great theme of migrations, dear to Prouvost,<sup>4</sup> while a painted zoomorphic cave offers

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1 L. Prouvost, <https://www.reiffersartinitiatives.com/en/exposition/laure-prouvost-you-are-my-petrol-my-drive-my-dream-my-exhaust/>, accessed September 20, 2023.

2 Cfr. "Laure Prouvost. *Above Front Tears Our Float*, November 5, 2022-February 12, 2023," The National Museum of Oslo, <https://www.nasjonalmuseet.no/en/exhibitions-and-events/national-museum/exhibitions/2022/laure-prouvost/>, accessed May 3, 2023.

3 "Laure Prouvost. *Above Front Tears Our Float*," NOBA! Access Art, November 2022, <https://noba.ac/en/exhibition/laure-prouvost-above-front-tears-oui-float/>, accessed May 3, 2023.

4 The theme of migration underlies the environmental installation *Deep See Blue Surrounding You / Vois Ce Bleu Profond Te Fondre* presented in 2019 at the French Pavilion during the 58th edition of the Venice Biennale. See L. Prouvost, M. Kirszenbaum, *Laure Prouvost: Deep See Blue Surrounding You: vois ce bleu profond te fondre* (Paris: Flammarion-Institut Français, 2019).

soft cushions for lying down surrounded by a ceiling of soft stalactites and excrescences.

Two are the generating elements of this celestial ecosystem. The first is related to the already Freudian and Surrealist theme of the dream, which is not coincidentally among the topics most extensively treated in immersive experiences in virtual reality.<sup>5</sup> The second coincides with the founding role of the short film projected onto a screen of imposing dimensions. The short film *Every Sunday, Grandma* (2022, 7' 17") immortalises the flying experience of the elderly Celine. A similar phenomenon is reflected in the second environment of the exhibition-work. In a descending movement, the viewer lands in an anthropic landscape marked by the slime of the sewage pipes from which the artist's voice resounds. An archetypal lexicon of Prouvost's work, consisting of buckets, pipes, serpentines, tentacular elements, metal grids, debris, glassy zoomorphic sculptures, and iPhone-headed anthropomorphic figures punctuate this cataclysmic space. At the dividing line between reality and fiction, a structurally blurred boundary in the artist's production, paper baskets raised from the ground hold Virtual Reality headsets. Wearing them, the visitor would take over a duplicate of the Norwegian environment, now colonised by a banquet of sirens that invite levitation. With Celine, who does not fortuitously tell of dreams, the user floats in the ether from afar. However, this activation does not end in creating a "cinesthetic subject," as Vivian Sobchack aptly put it.<sup>6</sup> Instead, and this is precisely the

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5 For a recent and comprehensive essay on the subject see G. Grossi, *La notte dei simulacri: Sogno, cinema, realtà virtuale* (Milan: Johan & Levi, 2021).

6 As Sobchack notes "We might name this subversive body in the film experience the *cinesthetic subject* – a neologism that derives not only from cinema but also from two scientific terms that designate particular structures and conditions of the human sensorium: *synaesthesia* and *coenaesthesia*. Both of these structures and conditions foreground the complexity and richness of the more general bodily experience that grounds our particular experience of cinema, and both also point to ways in which the cinema uses our dominant senses of vision and hearing to speak comprehensibly to our other senses." V. Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 2004): 67.

turning point of the discourse, the immersive dimension correctly highlighted in Prouvost's work stems from a specific mechanism. In particular, that of the spatial translation of the sense of immersion generated by the short film and materialised by a hypermedia and intermediary system of works that extends the limits of the projection screen.<sup>7</sup>

### **From *ambiente* to *ambientazione*: Prouvost and “system aesthetic”**

Numerous syntagms have been formulated to classify Prouvost's research.<sup>8</sup> This polysemy is undoubtedly (and evidently) connected to the stratified nature of her praxis. From the second half of the 2010s, Prouvost's research presents certain recurring characters, fully evident in *Above Front Tears Our Float*. These include: the environmental dimension of the work; the almost systematic use of elements that function as displays and allow the artist to organise the exhibition space in terms of visibility and invisibility; the use of short films, inserted in the form of screens or projections; the coexistence of pictorial, sculptural, graphic artefacts, and even architectural structures.

It is possible to describe Prouvost's works in terms of multimodal, multimedia and possibly post-media environments.<sup>9</sup> However, it is necessary to disambiguate the meaning attributed to each category, which has been pivotal since the late 1960s and even more systematically

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7 This issue, part of a very long tradition, was recently addressed by E. Modena, *Nelle storie: Arte, cinema e media immersivi* (Rome: Carocci, 2022): 31-32.

8 Carlos Kong speaks about “immersive installation,” C. Kong, “Laure Prouvost, *We would be floating away from the dirty past* (Haus der Kunst, Munich),” *esse arts + opinions* 89 (2017): 84-85.

9 The reference is certainly to the “postmedial condition” as theorised by R. Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999).

since the 1990s. Consider the “Experiential Turn” codified by Dorothea von Hantelmann.<sup>10</sup>

First, by pointing out the meaning of the term environment, here adopting two distinct, though interrelated, definitions. In its broadest sense, the noun environment generically designates “the circumstances, objects, or conditions by which one is surrounded.”<sup>11</sup> It is no coincidence that Oliver Grau, author of one of the first systematic efforts to trace a genealogy of virtual art, claiming that “the suggestive impression is one of immersing oneself in the image space,” connected it with the experience of accessing a variably enclosed artificial space.<sup>12</sup> Immersion, a phenomenon punctually cited by Grau concerning the notion of the virtual, occurs first and foremost within an environment with its spatiotemporal coordinates, whether material or electronic. Entering an environment requires an act of immersion and surfacing, as Giuliana Bruno has extensively demonstrated in her latest research.<sup>13</sup>

In the environment, as with the “an-icon” theorised by Andrea Pinotti, one enters and comes out with the body, crossing the “threshold of the image” in inverted directions.<sup>14</sup>

Adopting a *lectio facilior*, it could be said that the immersive potential of Prouvost’s works depends on their presenting a 360° environment that surrounds the visitor. Although correct, such an interpretation risks being biased, simplifying the artist’s discourse. Therefore, within

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10 According to von Hantelmann: “Every artwork produces some kind of (aesthetic) experience. But as I would like to argue, from the 1960s onward, the creation and shaping of experiences have increasingly become an integral part of the artwork’s conception.” H. von Hantelmann, “The Experiential Turn,” in *On Performativity*, vol. 1 (Vineland: Walker Art Center, 2014), <https://walkerart.org/collections/publications/performativity/>, accessed May 5, 2023.

11 “Environment,” in *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2023), <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/environment>, accessed on May 3, 2023.

12 O. Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003): 3. The topic has been highlighted in E. Modena, “Immersi nell’irreale: Prospettive an-iconiche sull’arte contemporanea dall’ambiente alla realtà virtuale,” *Carte Semiotiche* (2021): 71-72.

13 G. Bruno, *Atmospheres of Projection: Environmentality in Art and Screen Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

14 A. Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell’immagine: Da Narciso alla realtà virtuale* (Turin: Einaudi, 2021): xv, passim [my translation].

a logic not of contradiction but of integration, the second part of the definition attempted above must be examined.

Consider the heterogeneous themes Prouvost's work has been interrogating for at least a decade. It is certainly no coincidence that the artist's concerted settings probe the realms of dreams, water, flight<sup>15</sup> and even cat-  
aclysm. In the heterogeneity of the phenomena enumerated, a presupposition unites them, making them optimal for tracing multiple genealogies of immersiveness.<sup>16</sup> Those conditions *ideally* (or even concretely) envelop the users' body and simultaneously determine a significant variation in their perceptive and peripersonal sphere.

Secondly, it is fundamental to conceive them within the semantic shift, particularly effective in the Italian language, from the notion of *ambiente* (environment) to that of *ambientazione* (setting). The term "*ambientazione*," coined in the early 1960s as a derivative of the predicate "*ambientare*," designates "a narration or representation."<sup>17</sup> Namely, it signifies the environment in which the story takes place, whether described verbally or artificially recreated. Prouvost's environments function as enveloping devices insofar as they constitute settings or rather narratological systems.<sup>18</sup> The sculptures, paintings, drawings, tapestries,

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15 In an orientation already entirely shaped by the invention of the Internet, Pierre Lévy already recorded the dual experiential level that characterises the experiences of immersion in water or flight: "Between air and water, between earth and sky, between soil and summit, the surfer or parachutist is never entirely there. Leaving the soil and its support, he rises into the air, slides along interfaces, follows vanishing lines, is vectorized, deterritorialized." P. Lévy, *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age* (New York-London: Plenum Trade, 1998): 43.

16 For a survey of the topic in ideological terms, see: A. Giomi, "Immersion as Ideology: A Critical Genealogy of Immersivity in Digital Arts, Aesthetics and Culture," *Azimuth: Philosophical Coordinates in Modern and Contemporary Age* 20, no. 2 (2022): 197-215.

17 "Ambientazione," in *Vocabolario Treccani* (2023), <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/ambientazione/>, accessed May 3, 2023.

18 On the relationship between narration, immersion and the hypertensive, we refer to one of the (revisited) classics of literature on the subject: M.-L. Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2015).



objects, and the overall display that configure them operate as props or clues projected from the filmic narrative.

To understand the specificity of this aesthetic mechanism, it is not necessary to turn, at least in the very first instance, to the theorisations elaborated on Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR) and Mixed Reality (MR) – media with which Prouvost has systematically experimented. Instead, it should be assumed that the moment when the work of art as an environmental system was not only “invented” but most properly theorised represents a crucial research ground.

In this respect, the notion of “system aesthetics,” postulated by the art theorist Jack Burnham on *Artforum* in September 1968, proves to be an excellent source for Prouvost’s practice.<sup>19</sup> Although elements make Burnham’s proposal undoubtedly problematic – including the association initially proposed between such aesthetic and military strategies – two assumptions concerning immersiveness must be highlighted.

The first relates to the configuration of such a system. In the wake of Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy’s formulation that a system represents a “complex of components in interaction,” Burnham writes:

the artist is a perspectivist considering goals, boundaries, structure, input, output, and related activity inside and outside the system. Where the object almost always has a fixed shape and boundaries, the consistency of a system may be altered in time and space, its behavior determined both by external conditions and its mechanisms of control.<sup>20</sup>

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19 J. Burnham, “Systems Esthetics,” *Artforum* 7 (1 September 1968): 30-35. Caroline A. Jones has already provided a precise analysis of the text and its evolution: C. Jones, “Caroline A. Jones on Jack Burnham’s ‘System Esthetics,’” *Artforum* 51, no. 1 (1 September 2012), <https://www.artforum.com/print/201207/caroline-a-jones-on-jack-burnham-s-systems-esthetics-32014>.

20 J. Burnham, “Systems Esthetics:” 32.

For Burnham, the system is environmental insofar as it reflects the action of the historical, socio-economic, and cultural framework in which the work arises, generates, and, at least partially, undergoes. The second point pertains to the condition, which can be qualified as embodied and multimodal, of such a system experience. Analysing works by Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Carl Andre, Les Levine, Allan Kaprow and especially Hans Haacke, Burnham stated: “Sight analysis diminishes in importance for some of the best new work; the other senses and especially kinesthesis makes ‘viewing’ a more integrated experience”<sup>21</sup> (the reference here is to Andre’s celebrated *Floor Pieces*). Alternatively, in this case referring to Levine: “Here behaviour is controlled in an aesthetic situation with no primary reference to visual circumstances.” As Levine insists, “What I am after here is physical reaction, not visual concern.”<sup>22</sup>

It should be said that the immersive vocation of Prouvost’s works resides in their dual vocation as environmental systems: an enveloping space; a system of the individual units (artefacts, objects, and architectonic display) that configure the system environment (*ambiente*) as a setting (*ambientazione*), a system whose logic transcends the material boundaries of the work, seeing its narrative core in the projections of short films set up by the artist. Unlike Burnham, in Prouvost’s hypermedia installations each component, albeit integrated into the system-environment, also possesses its autonomous existence. Moreover, as already mentioned, a pre-eminence on the inventive exists. Indeed, the film performances shot and edited by Prouvost structurally shape her hypermedia systems, as this contribution tries to demonstrate.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.: 34.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

## Participation or projection? Historical-artistic sources on a subtle dilemma

At this point, the theme of immersion and its phenomenology hinges. Prouvost's production does not designate a *stricto sensu* interactive art since only in a few cases it involves complex interaction on the visitor's part. Yet, and in terms that are in some ways all too general, it is also true that Prouvost's practice shares those theoretical assumptions that Nathaniel Stern identified within interactive installations, whereby "with enter, for example, we move-think-feel the making of bodies of meaning, together."<sup>23</sup> The plexus constituted by the predicates "move-think-feel" – which, however, could also easily be applied to the experience, for example, of a minimalist structure – captures the specificity of Prouvost's discourse and, in this case, of its immersive vocation, based on a form of knowledge that is ideologically, as well as physiologically, corporeal.

Inscribing Prouvost's research within the so-called participatory art framework requires clarifications closely linked to the question of immersivity. Undoubtedly, a collaboration between the artist and the performers systematically occurs in her short films. However, the social collaboration postulated by the relational aesthetics of Nicolas Bourriaud at the end of the 1990s<sup>24</sup> and differently in the early 2000s by Claire Bishop<sup>25</sup> seems to be transposed by Prouvost into the relationship between the living being (human or non-human) and image, mediated by the display device.

In this sense, Bishop's observations on participatory art pondered in the wake of Jacques Rancière,

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23 N. Stern, *Interactive Art and Embodiment: The Implicit Body as Performance* (Canterbury: Gylphi Limited Book, 2014): 4.

24 N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), trans. S. Plaesance, F. Woods (Paris: les presses du réel, 2002).

25 C. Bishop, *Participation* (London-Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006).

would seem significant: “in calling for spectators who are active as interpreters, Rancière implies that the politics of participation might best lie, not in anti-spectacular stagings of community or the claim that mere physical activity would correspond to emancipation, but in putting to work the idea that we are all equally capable of inventing our translations.”<sup>26</sup> It will be necessary to deepen the functioning of such an unavoidable linguistic process that makes an enveloping environment (the hypermedia installation conceived by Prouvost) an immersive entity, starting with some art-historical observations.

The immersive vocation of Prouvost’s research must be connected to the anthropological and art-historical sources the artist refers to, directly or indirectly. Sources, moreover, which appear potentially numerous. It would not seem rash to claim that the most ancient precedent alluding to the dual “installation” and kinematic connotation of Prouvost’s work is the Upper Palaeolithic cave, a space extensively recurrent in her production. As a lithic sacellum, the prehistoric cave develops on an intricate geological plan delineated by a maze of halls, corridors, and diverticula. Of this proto-cinematographic apparatus<sup>27</sup> and immersive space *ante litteram*, Prouvost experiments, even unconsciously, with the dual dimension of enveloping environments and of immersion-producing devices. In the first case, the artist creates hypermedia palimpsests, in which graphic signs intersect pictorial, drawing, collage, objects and screens of various sizes. So, it is the case of the luxuriant caveat of *Farfromwords*, a reinterpretation of a 19th-century Panorama resulting from the seductive short film *Swallow* (2013),<sup>28</sup> or of the “rocky” wall with which the

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26 Ibid.: 16.

27 Among the most pioneering readings on the subject see: M. Azéma, *L’art des cavernes en action*, 2 vols. (Paris: Errance, 2009-2010).

28 L. Prouvost et al., *Laure Prouvost: farfromwords: car mirrors eat raspberries when swimming through the sun, to swallow sweet smells ...*, (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2013).

Venetian itinerary closed. In the second case, Prouvost exploits the agency of the moving image that is projected, or instead materialised, in a cohesive network of artefacts, entities and people (the performers and the public).

From a medium-archaeological perspective, which places one of its most remote anthropological sources in the sanctuary cave, Prouvost's practice finds in the 19th-century Panorama and, above all, in the more modern halls equipped with seats and rows of screens a spectrum of different models united by a not dissimilar principle: that of defining a space of images acted out in movement and connoted on an atmospheric level. However, it would be misleading to assume that Prouvost's primary reference lies in "installation art."<sup>29</sup> More precisely, Prouvost's work places the spatialisation of filmic language (and video clips) as a systematic strategy since the early 2000s.<sup>30</sup>

In this case, the relationship between moving images and display present in numerous works by Prouvost would only be fully comprehensible with the filmic structures realized by Nam June Paik, Dara Birnbaum and John Latham<sup>31</sup> since the late 1970s. Particularly in the case of Birnbaum (a precedent not explicitly mentioned by Laure Prouvost), it is possible to find both the use of a lightning-fast alternating montage punctuated by captioning on black backgrounds – in one of the frequent lemmas in Prouvost's practice and style – and the construction of structures that intend the screen as a sculptural component

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29 According to Bishop, "An installation of art is secondary in importance to the individual works it contains, while in a work of installation art, the space, and the ensemble of elements within it, are regarded in their entirety as a singular entity. Installation art creates a situation into which the viewer physically enters and insists that you regard this as a singular totality." C. Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005): 6.

30 One of her first short films *Abstractions Quotidiannes* (2005) alternates frames of peripheral areas, monochrome backgrounds that shake the viewer's sensorium by bursting lightning-fast and capturing objects whose surface values are exalted. See in this regard: L. Prouvost, "Abstractions Quotidiannes," *Lux*, <https://lux.org.uk/work/abstractions-quotidiannes/>.

31 The influence exercised by the British artist John Latham, a revolutionary spokesman for English conceptual art for whom Prouvost had worked as an assistant in South London, is expressed along multiple lines: L. Prouvost et al., *Laure Prouvost: Hit Flash Back* (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2016): 32.

intended to activate the surrounding space. Presumably, Laure Prouvost's attention to the filmic representation of the body agent sees a fertile breeding ground in the American research of the second half of the 1960s (think of Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Robert Morris and Lynda Benglis). At the same time, the artist's familiarity with theories on expanded cinema and filmic experiments developed in the feminist sphere is extensively noted on a philological viewpoint.

For those reasons, it is necessary to search for the origins of Prouvost's approach within a similar line of artists whose formal and political reflection on the space of the work stems from the moving image. A tradition already historicised through the essay *Expanded Cinema* published by Gene Youngblood in 1970. And which spans from the seductive short film *Fuses* (1967) by Carolee Schneemann<sup>32</sup> towards the digital film *Pickelporno* (1992) by Pipilotti Rist,<sup>33</sup> passing through the homoerotic filmography of the feminist Barbara Hammer. In the wake of Godard, these artists have been constructing their narratives by extensively using close-up body parts in a lemma that was equally experimented with by Prouvost. In the case of Schneemann and Rist, the layered materiality of the film finds a further counterpoint in the construction of environmental installations aimed at rendering the experience of the film corporeal. Such a bodily vocation happens from an evocative point of view, for instance, with Schneemann's installation *Video Rocks* (1986),<sup>34</sup> which represents one of the most significant precedents of Prouvost's practice. This environmental installation, comprising a series of televisions, an imposing painted frieze and a path of fake stones modelled in

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32 See in this regard: C. Schneemann, *Carolee Schneemann: Unforgivable* (London: Black Dog Publishing Limited, 2015).

33 Cfr. L. Castagnini, "The 'Nature' of Sex: Para Feminist Parody in Pipilotti Rist's *PickelPorno* (1992)," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 15, no. 2 (2015): 164-81.

34 C. Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003): 267.

ceramic by the artist, places its narrative fulcrum in the content transmitted: the bodily crossing of the stones. Although not verifiable on a documentary level, the knowledge of the environmental experiments on cinema conducted by the Dutch artist Jeffrey Shaw must be included.

Consider the monumental PVC dome of *Corpo-cinema* (1967), on which surface films were projected from the outside and visible from the inside. The underbelly of such an intracorporeal hall was saturated by the injection of inflatables, fumes, and smells, making the experience of watching audio-visual content altogether multimodal.<sup>35</sup> It would appear to be a similar tradition, and not necessarily one connected to the creation of practicable spaces – from Walter De Maria’s earthy rooms to Gianni Colombo’s *Spazio Elastico* (1967) or Franco Mazzucchelli’s giant inflatables and Piero Manzoni *Placentarium* (1961) – which interests Prouvost. Although the influence exerted by one of the founding figures of digital art such as Hito Steyerl, should in no way be underestimated, it should not be overlooked that while Steyerl’s immersive installations attest to a political component, Prouvost’s counterparts, where present, introject it on a sensory – and hence different – level.

Therefore, Prouvost’s research can stand at a crossroads between interactive, participatory, and relational art, only partially fitting into each category. The impression of being immersed in her works is determined by the peculiar phenomenon whereby, at the same time, Prouvost’s interventions act as environments and as settings for a narrative that happens elsewhere. According to the logic of the aesthetic systems mentioned above, this elsewhere has a fully recognisable positioning: that of the moving image. Experimenting with that pun so recurrent in Prouvost’s work, the dissimilarity between the notions of environment and

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35 Cfr. J. Shaw, et al., *CORPOCINEMA: Photographic, Diagrammatic and Textual Documentation of This 1968 Artwork Presented in the International Exhibition “Discoteca Analitica”* (Fribourg: Fri Art Kunsthalle, 2019).

setting reveals itself to be substantial. If the short film were not projected and the viewer was to access the environment, she or he could likewise grasp its meaning. There is thus a bodily and sensorimotor immersion. The visitor enters an atmospherically connoted environment, as Böhme<sup>36</sup> and Griffero<sup>37</sup> put it, experienced by walking, sitting, lying down, listening, smelling, eventually touching.

For such an immersion to rise from being an eminently spatial affair to an aesthetic system of interacting components, the action performed by the moving image is pivotal. In this case, the storytelling provided by the short films, as will be seen below.

### **Theoretical Framework: in the (fictitious) wake of Münsterberg**

Prouvost's storytelling has codified characters closely related to the artist's biography.<sup>38</sup> As Fanny Fetzer has already pointed out, in the events narrated by Prouvost, the boundary between reality and fiction, document and joke, becomes dangerously (and even ironically) blurred. Nevertheless, the proprium of her narrative does not lie in its content. More precisely, what Prouvost is interested in about the process of semiosis and its transmission pertains to the filmic configuration of the sensations of such a narrative, materialised in hypermedia settings. In this respect, storytelling constitutes an eminently sensual and sensory

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36 G. Böhme, *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2013).

37 T. Griffero, *Atmosferologia: Estetica degli spazi emozionali* (Milan: Mimesis, 2017).

38 Laure Prouvost was born in 1978 in Lille, France. Winner of the French Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2018, contrary to the national approach of the prestigious award, Prouvost is first and foremost a European artist. Indeed, her French residence is limited in time, having moved to Belgium at thirteen and been academically trained in London. This apparently marginal information is helpful to highlight how, even for biographical reasons, language plays a crucial role in Prouvost's practice. Francophone by birth and Anglophone in adulthood, Prouvost systematically exploits her status as a bilingual subject, experimenting in an irreverent and humorous manner with the rhetorical figures of homonymy, homophony, alliteration, *jet de mot*, false friends, and grammatical error. See in this regard: Z. Pilger, "The Sun on Your Face," *Frieze*, no. 166 (September 24, 2014): <https://www.frieze.com/article/sun-your-face>, accessed May 3, 2023; L. Prouvost, K. Archey, E. Coccia, *Laure Prouvost: "ring, sing and drink for trespassing"* (Paris: Les press du réel, 2018).



strategy. It is certainly no coincidence that Prouvost's writings are punctuated by references to the unattainable desire to set up universes of "pure sensations."<sup>39</sup>

In the history of Western philosophy and aesthesiology, the subject boasts an illustrious tradition stemming from the 19th-century notion of empathy.<sup>40</sup> An early attempt to systematise the imaginary sensations of contact arising from the experience of the representation of movement in the static, specifically pictorial image, is to be found between the second and third quarters of the 1890s with Bernard Berenson. Berenson's theories, for which it remains complex to establish a direct derivation from the works of Wölfflin and Lipps, had however a declared reference to the *Psychology* of William James.<sup>41</sup> A lustre before Gertrude Stein, Bernard Berenson had been a student of James at Harvard University. Not coincidentally, it was at the Harvard Psychology Laboratory, founded by James in 1875 and rehabilitated in 1893,<sup>42</sup> that the first systematic reflections on sensory perception, attention and emotions were developed.

From 1892, while the science of haptics was being invented on a theoretical and empirical level, Hugo Münsterberg was called upon to run the laboratory, one might say, an immersive space. In the rooms subdivided according to senses, as Giuliana Bruno has already punctually

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39 Among the themes extensively investigated by Prouvost, there is an attempt to "grasp" the real in interacting and configuring through a body that feels. On several occasions, the artist asserts that she is not interested in processes of representation or "re-presentation" but instead in creating a world of pure sensations for the viewer, including, for example, "that sensation of sun or sensation of swallowing or walking" (L. Prouvost, Z. Pilger, "The Sun on Your Face"). In this sense, as the artist emphasizes in conversation with Fetzer, her environmental filmic performance invites us to critically rethink the tangible world that the individual inhabits (L. Prouvost, F. Fetzer, *Laure Prouvost and the Concept of Fantasy*: 208).

40 For a recent contribution on the subject see: S. Lanzoni, *Empathy: A History* (New Heaven; London: Yale University Press, 2018).

41 W. James, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), 2 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, 2012).

42 R.B. Evans, "Haptics in the United States before 1940," in M. Grunwald, ed., *Human Haptic Perception: Basic and Applications* (Basel-Boston-Berlin: Birkhäuser, 2008): 70-71.

investigated,<sup>43</sup> the empirical study of sensory perception was parcelled out in a registry of sensory rooms equipped with special instruments and measuring protocols.<sup>44</sup> In 1916, twenty years later, Münsterberg published one of the cornerstones of psychological theory on cinema, organising it around the four categories of “depth and movement,” “attention,” “memory and imagination” and “emotion.”<sup>45</sup>

It is unlikely to assume Prouvost’s knowledge of the thought of Berenson, James, Stein or Münsterberg. Yet, it is suggestive to recognise a similar laboratory method in the analysis of the modes of the subject’s perception. A century later, Prouvost seems to return to the principles of film and its experience to immerse the visitors in their own narrative. Münsterberg had already revealed himself fully aware of one of the main perceptive problems connected to the filmic experience. Specifically, that relates to the “difference between an object of our knowledge and an object of our impression” in an awareness consequent to the presumed evidence that “the photoplay consists of a series of flat pictures in contrast to the plastic objects of the real world which surrounds us.”<sup>46</sup> Concerning the question raised by Münsterberg, for whom “we may stop at once: what does it mean to say that the surroundings appear to the mind plastic and the moving picture flat?,”<sup>47</sup> Prouvost seems to render this perceptual issue “systemic,” generating a short circuit in the statute of the image.

By turning on the environment, the viewer enters physically the setting of the short film. Here, Prouvost’s hypermedia systems fulfil the desire, first pictorial and then cinematic, to give body to movement and depth.

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43 G. Bruno, “Film, Aesthetics, Science: Hugo Münsterberg’s Laboratory of Moving Images,” *Grey Room* 36 (2009): 88-113.

44 See in this regard: D. Parisi, *Archaeologies of Touch: Interfacing with Haptics from Electricity to Computing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2018).

45 H. Münsterberg, *The Photoplay. A Psychological Study* (New York-London: D. Appleton and Company, 2016).

46 H. Münsterberg, *The Photoplay*: 53-54.

47 *Ibid.*: 54.

The characters of the film performance, whether a fish, an iPhone, or a painted frieze, being reified in a sculpture system, act as projections of the moving image. Nevertheless, they occupy physical space mainly in a semi-static manner. The dormant status of such settings composed of rotating sculptures and sculptures that act as fountains, makes them resemble huge dioramas or photograms borrowed from a dream. What instead allows for a relevant exchange between the planar image transmitted by the screen and the environmental system in which it is projected are the rhythms of the body.

On this point, moreover, Münsterberg's early 20th-century observations prove prodromal. The Hungarian psychologist had identified three levels characterising the sphere of attention and its threshold. The first is related to the nature of attention, which is always embodied and multimodal. Two further stages, however, are implicitly associated with the notion of immersion. "If we are fully absorbed in our book," Münsterberg notes, "we do not hear at all what is said around us, and we do not see the room; we forget everything."<sup>48</sup> This phenomenon of evasion from reality and immersion in the fictitious narration for Münsterberg depends on specific psychological mechanisms. In describing them, the psychologist provides a pseudo-physiological (and intermedial) reflection on the experience of immersion. According to Münsterberg, as well as to Prouvost, the core of the experience of the work, be it a book, a sculpture, or a film, lies in the phenomenon and awareness according to which "we feel that our body adjusts itself to the perception."<sup>49</sup> In this regard, the psychologist compiles a practical reflection that can be applied to Prouvost's film performances and her settings:

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48 Ibid.: 93.

49 Ibid.

Our head enters into the movement of listening for the sound, our eyes are fixating the point in the outer world. We hold all our muscles in tension in order to receive the fullest possible impression with our sense organs. The lens in our eye is accommodated exactly to the correct distance. In short, our bodily personality works toward the fullest possible impression. But this is supplemented by a fourth factor. Our ideas and feelings and impulses group themselves around the attended object. It becomes the starting point for our actions while all the other objects in the sphere of our senses lose their grip on our ideas and feelings.<sup>50</sup>

From a psychophysiological issue, when read in Prouvost's work, attention becomes an immersive strategy through which the environment is rendered a sensorial, active, and immersive setting.

### **Activating immersion: a world of pure sensations**

To be surrounded by the environment and to be swallowed up by the work and its space: the objects and artefacts that generate Prouvost's intermediate installations (*ambientazioni*) catalyse the attention and the sensorium of the visitor by constituting three-dimensional projections of the filmic narration.<sup>51</sup> By inhabiting them, the viewer inhabits the meta-space of the film. More specifically, he covers it by adopting a logic of content fruition hypothetically based on Augmented Reality. In what terms does this happen? Due to a mechanism activated by the close relationship between the screen and the environment-environment (*ambiente-ambientazione*) derived from moving pictures. By

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> M. Roman, *Habiter l'exposition. L'artiste et la scénographie* (Paris: Manuella Éditions, 2019): 231; G. Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1970).

experiencing Prouvost's short films, the visitor stands on the threshold of the image.<sup>52</sup> The audio-visual document introduces us to the artist's universe and to storytelling that represents the substratum of her practice.

The extension of the digital image distinctive of AR must be understood from this relationship. The logical principle probed by Prouvost seems to emulate the goals of the most futuristic "spatial computing technologies," which "assist our transition from a current flat or small-scale global data network to an emerging immersive global data ecosystem with spatial awareness and characteristics, conferring virtual properties to physical objects and vice versa, and augmenting our sensing and execution capabilities."<sup>53</sup>

The short film represents the inventive motor of Prouvost's work. What conveys the transition from the moving image to three-dimensional space, acting precisely as "spatial computing technology," is the system of artefacts, objects and displays which, directly or indirectly exhibited by the filmic narration, materialise in the exhibition space. For this correlation to achieve the value of an "aesthetic system" and not of a static display, it is necessary for the setting to stage what Prouvost's short films aim to convey. That is an embodied conception of the relationship between image, storytelling, and user. In attempting to determine how this can happen, it will emphasise how this synesthetic dimension finds its place of invention on the screen and its place of multimodal projection in the setting.

Here we argue that the immersive matrix of Prouvost's filmic performances can be understood as arising from a plexus of factors, including the dual function of the screen; the editing of images; the typology of shots;

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52 Cfr. A. Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell'immagine* (Turin: Einaudi, 2021).

53 S. Mystakidis, V. Lympouridis, "Immersive Learning," *Encyclopedia of Social Science* 3, no. 2 (2023): 396-405, <https://doi.org/10.3390/encyclopedia3020026>.

the selection of subjects; the linguistic element; the sound component.

The screen boasts in Prouvost the dual meaning of “interface,” according to Giuliana Bruno a “surface” that connects,<sup>54</sup> and of an Albertian window. Not a window hinged on a mono-focal perspective, but a mobile opening that, almost like a GoPro or the eye of a bird (an archetypal figure in the artist’s practice), frames reality, producing a kaleidoscope of views. The window screen leads into Prouvost’s sensorial universe. Shooting in the first person, first with a camera and since 2007 with an iPhone, Prouvost has made amateur films, editing her stylistic lemma.<sup>55</sup> The fact that the footage is often shot subjectively, with medium or low-quality frames, and changes in manual framing orientation heightens the remote participation of the viewer. Not only (and not so much) because according to McLuhan’s meteorology and otherwise Laura U. Marks’ “haptic criticism,”<sup>56</sup> such an image must be integrated perceptually by the viewer.

More specifically, through embodied simulation mechanisms, the visitor tends to activate a form of gestural simulation concerning the artist’s movements. The movements of the artist and the characters immortalised in the films – human and non-human beings touching and being touched, walking, crawling, dancing, jumping, licking, eating, swallowing, and swimming – are simulated on a neuronal level by the viewer.<sup>57</sup> This procedure is crucial

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54 G. Bruno, *Surfaces. Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press: 2014): passim.

55 L. Prouvost, F. Fetzer, *Laure Prouvost and the Concept of Fantasy*: 208.

56 L.U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota: 2002): IX-XVII.

57 Cfr. V. Gallese, M. Guerra, *The Empathic Screen: Cinema and Neuroscience* (2015), trans. F. Anderson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 145-180.

to feeling immersed, on a perceptual plan, not in the environment but in the narrative.

The extensive use of close-ups of living beings and things with a specifically connoted texture favouring a “haptic” or “tactile” gaze to use two expressions of Rieglian ascendancy by Marks and Barker, respectively, respond to this objective.<sup>58</sup> Close-ups of touching fingers, devouring lips and teeth, pressing feet, as well as enlargements on the fleece of large cattle, shelled eggs, oozing viscous substances, and the smooth screens of smartphones – in a series of recurring frames in *Swallow* (2013) and *A Way to Leak, Lick, Leek* (2016) – reflect similar premises. Nevertheless, Prouvost’s aim is not to make the image’s content (i.e., the subject) *better seen* but rather to make it *felt* by the body. In this sense, the sequences of enlargements return a motor circumnavigation around the object. In the wake of Maya Deren and Gertrude Stein’s verbal “cartographies,” Nevertheless, Prouvost’s aim is not to make the image’s content *better seen* but to *feel* it by the body.”<sup>59</sup>

The fact that the lemma of hands making things occupies a predominant role in Prouvost’s iconology reinforces the impression that the entire narrative is built on the mechanism of embodied simulation – for which, let it be remembered, the activity of the hands is a fundamental indicator. In the words of the prehistoric anthropologist Hellen Dissanayake, the “hands-on” ability constitutes one of the earliest faculties developed in the *Sapiens* species, linked

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58 L.U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*: passim; J. M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 2009).

59 A. Michelson, “Bodies in Space: Film as a Carnal Knowledge,” *Artforum* 7, no. 6 (February 1969): 55-63.

to a dynamically embodied and even emotional knowledge of the surrounding environment.<sup>60</sup>

It should also be emphasised that, in Prouvost's practice, such a process of body simulation is also activated by the image and its rhythms. Prouvost's montages often present a pounding rhythm. Generally, the narration alternates frames with black screens, often occupied by direct statements. Visitors must calibrate their attention to the qualities of these moving images as if they were holding an iPhone in their hands. This happens firstly by aligning oneself with their rhythm, as aforementioned above; secondly, by confronting the images of agent entities that act and wish to act on their user, as Gell<sup>61</sup> put it. In this regard, the video installation *We Know We Are Just Pixels* (2014)<sup>62</sup> proves crucial in showing how this dynamic of control and immersion takes on a disturbing tone. Exploiting the well-known alternation between moving images and utterances, the artist directly addresses her viewer, assuming the binary unit's point of view: the panoptic pixel would like to meet us, replace us, touch us, weigh us, and grasp our image. Additionally, Prouvost, who works primarily on and with digital images, frees the latter of their acting as mimetic imago. The black frames with statements – from which the artist derives paintings based on the same logic – do not display anything on a strictly iconographic level. The propositions transcribed in capital letters (the predecessors here are Birnbaum and On Kawara) announce actions that, being denied on an iconic level (they are substantially black monochromes), must be imagined by the viewer. At the same time, the sound component of the short films, in which the artist whispers stories of doubtful veracity, builds the discourse on consciously incorrect use of grammar and

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60 E. Dissanayake, *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began* (Washington: University of Washington Press: 2000): 99-128.

61 A. Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

62 L. Prouvost, F. Fetzer, *Laure Prouvost and the Concept of Fantasy*: 208.



syntax, elaborates periods based on the crisis between French and English words and addresses her viewer in the first person, all contribute to the creation of storytelling that fulfils the main character of immersion. In this sense, in the words of Katja Mellmann, “The fundamental characteristic of aesthetic illusion is the mental state of ‘immersion’, that is, of having one’s attention caught by a stimulus which is not co-extensive with the actual situation but, for instance, only with a single object or action, or the content of one’s own imagination.”<sup>63</sup>

## Conclusion

The combination of the phenomena enumerated contributes to immersing the visitor in the storytelling unfolded by the short film. Prouvost composes three-dimensional settings triggered by the audio-visual image for this immersion process. From an observer of the film, the visitor becomes the protagonist of its environment setting. The factor linking this transition is the spectator’s synesthetic participation. How to describe it?

It is no coincidence that, although Prouvost’s environmental installations are always practicable on a sensorimotor level (and sometimes, as we have seen, present components with which one can also interact tactilely), these settings remain essentially projections – hence the difficulty in framing their practice in the realms of participatory, interactive, or relational art. By materialising it, they extend the projection plane of the moving image. They represent the environment in which, for immersion to occur,

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63 K. Mellmann, “On the Emergence of Aesthetic Illusion: An Evolutionary Perspective,” in W. Bernhart, A. Mahler, W. Wolf, eds., *Immersion and Distance: Aesthetic Illusion in Literature and Other Media* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013): 65-88, 72.

the viewer must make an effort to imagine being part of the narration.

In an eloquent statement to this effect, Prouvost argued to Bina von Stauffenberg: “I am not showing you something, you have to imagine it.”<sup>64</sup> The multiple strategies aimed at soliciting the viewer’s embodied imagination are subject to what constitutes, to all intents and purposes, the immobile engine of Prouvost’s practice: desire, whose activation mechanisms the artist explores from a medial and multimodal point of view. In an interview with Natasha Hoare in 2017, the artist argued that “voice and seduction” do not represent tools but rather a “method to let you come into the work.”<sup>65</sup> By simultaneously listening to and reading conflicting subtitles, the visitor actively immerses himself in the performance’s storytelling: employing “their voice to articulate” and decode it, they finally “become the protagonist.”<sup>66</sup> This linguistic dimension is exacerbated by the latent will to satisfy the visitor’s egotistical drives: “my works are seductive,” Prouvost points out, “in the way they pretend you’re the only one they want to talk to.”<sup>67</sup>

At the same time, Prouvost demonstrates herself completely aware of how integrating the plane of art with life constitutes a strenuous, if not even impossible, purpose. As the artist confessed to Zoe Pilger in an interview issued in 2014: “I know that I’m never going to fully grasp life in my art.”<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, Prouvost identifies specific aesthetics and technical strategies capable, if not of fulfilling, at least of approaching such a utopian aim. It is precisely on this point that an immersive hypothesis hinges on moving images whereby “you can hint at the smell of

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64 L. Prouvost, B. von Stauffenberg, “Laure Prouvost. An Interview:” 41.

65 N. Hoare, “Laure Prouvost on Seduction, Language, and Bodily Provocations,” *ExtraExtra Magazine* (2017), <https://extraextramagazine.com/talk/laure-prouvost-seduction-language-bodily-provocations/>, accessed May 3, 2023.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 L. Prouvost, Z. Pilger, “The Sun on Your Face.”

lemons in a film with the image of a lemon being cut. The brain is capable of connecting elements quite quickly, especially with video.”<sup>69</sup>

This perceptual mechanism, as well as having been the subject of analysis in neuroscientific circles,<sup>70</sup> appears consciously by Prouvost herself. The “video” represents for the artist an “amazing tool” precisely because of its “amplifying human sensations” innate aptitude, exploiting the “sensory memory” of the percipient subject and the reactivation of the “smells of our childhood.”<sup>71</sup> Not only to amplify, but also to *spatialise* human sensations: this represents the secret factor of immersion in Prouvost’s *ambienti-ambientazione*.

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69 Ibid.

70 A. Leaver, “Perception and Association of Visual Information in the Imagery of *IT*, *HEAT*, *HIT* by Laure Prouvost,” in I. Leaver-Yap, ed., *8 Metaphors (because the moving image is not a book)* (London: Lux, 2011): 71-73.

71 L. Prouvost, Z. Pilger, “The Sun on Your Face.”

# **AN-ICONOLOGY**

## **History, Theory, and Practices of Environmental Images**



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