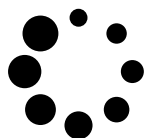


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Introduction: Transformational Experiences. The Role of Immersive Arts and Media in Individual and Societal Change

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Transformational Experiences. The Role of Immersive Arts and Media in Individual and Societal Change



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Introduction

We live in times of humanitarian and environmental crises. The effects of climate change add to the economic, physical, and mental suffering caused by social discrimination (e.g. gender, class, and race inequalities), while starting to affect not only those lowest in the power structure. These crises are unlikely to be resolved with technology alone – as post-work society and similar frameworks encourage to think. Rather, a better future for all relies on systemic changes with unknown consequences for each of our individual lives and society as a whole.

Such uncertainty and related fear of loss can create reactions of fragility, additionally contributing to the difficulties at hand: rather than building new teams across old borders, sharing resources to create new solutions to old problems, we tend to isolate and cling to what we know and have. At the same time, the vastness and complexity

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of the issues we face can create paradoxical cognitive and emotional reactions. We refuse or genuinely fail to grasp the problems affecting our very environment or societies. We respond with shock and horror when their effects hit particularly “close to home,” to just go back to be mindless about them shortly after – in seemingly paradoxical circles of blindness and surprise.

Encounters with and creation of arts have been suggested as a potential remedy,¹ offering safe spaces that allow to stay with the trouble² rather than running from it. Spaces that facilitate creative imaginations of a different future rather than manifesting the past. Spaces of transformational learning. Spaces of care. Spaces of change and collaboration.³ But what are the concrete chances that all this really happens? What does (not) work, under which circumstances?

The same questions, once appropriately re-framed, can be raised in relation to immersive media. The latter, and virtual reality more in particular, have long been associated with unprecedented possibilities of promoting attitude and behaviour change in relation to important societal issues. However, the enthusiasm for virtual reality as

1 R.L. Lawrence, “Knowledge Construction as Contested Terrain: Adult Learning through Artistic Expression,” *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 107 (2005): 3-11, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.184>; C. Hoggan, S. Simpson, H. Stuckey, *Creative Expression in Transformative Learning: Tools and Techniques for Educators of Adults* (Malabar: Krieger Publishing Company, 2009); T. Barrett, “Aesthetics, Conversation and Social Change,” in T. Constantino, B. White, eds., *Essays on Aesthetic Education for the 21st Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2010): 123-142; A. Kokkos, “Transformative Learning Through Aesthetic Experience: Towards a Comprehensive Method,” *Journal of Transformative Education* 8, no. 3 (2010): 155-177, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344610397663>; J. Blackburn Miller, “Transformative Learning and the Arts: A Literature Review,” *Journal of Transformative Education* 18, no. 4 (2020): 338-355, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344620932877>.

2 D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

3 J. Gabrys, K. Yusoff, “Arts, Sciences and Climate Change: Practices and Politics at the Threshold,” *Science as Culture* 21, no. 1 (2012): 1-24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09505431.2010.550139>.

an “empathy machine”⁴ has by now shown all its naivety.⁵ More structured and rigorous proposals, such as those connected to the domain of “immersive journalism,”⁶ are to date subject to continuous debate.⁷ Among others, a key aspect to be discussed concerns the actual expression of what has often remained merely a *potential* of virtual reality and similar tools: what are the appropriate strategies to ensure their effectiveness?

With these and similar questions in mind, for this issue of *AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images*, we selected diverse contributions investigating the role of the arts and media in rethinking (and acting upon) societal and environmental problems, focussing on immersive experiences in particular.

As a result, we present a compelling collection of seven papers that delve into the realm of contemporary art through various theoretical and methodological approaches. The papers bring to the *AN-ICON* journal new methods and practices, ranging from audio visual discourse analysis to a form of operational philosophy, in which art is a means of intervention rather than an object of discussion.

Contributions stand out in today’s scholarly landscape for their critical engagement with concrete art works and exhibitions far from mainstream, providing insightful case studies for scholars dedicated to research on contemporary art and immersive media. Each paper

4 C. Milk, “How Virtual Reality Can Create the Ultimate Empathy Machine,” filmed March 2015 at TED Talk, https://www.ted.com/talks/chris_milk_how_virtual_reality_can_create_the_ultimate_empathy_machine?language=de, accessed January 1, 2024.

5 A. Pinotti, “Autopsia in 360°: Il rigor mortis dell’empatia nel fuori-cornice del virtuale,” *Fata Morgana* 13, no. 39 (2019): 17-31.

6 N. De la Peña et al., “Immersive Journalism: Immersive Virtual Reality for the First-Person Experience of News,” *Presence* 19, no. 4 (2010): 291-301, https://doi.org/10.1162/PRES_a.00005.

7 A.L. Sánchez Laws, “Can Immersive Journalism Enhance Empathy?,” *Digital Journalism* 8, no. 2 (2017): 213-228, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1389286>; A. Sanchez-Acedo et al., “Metaverse and Extended Realities in Immersive Journalism: A Systematic Literature Review,” *Multimodal Technologies and Interaction* 7, no. 10 (2023): 96, <https://doi.org/10.3390/mti7100096>.

embodies a belief in the transformational potential of art while remaining critical of its actual realizations. They collectively underscore a significant gap in the art world's understanding of complex global issues such as climate change, social injustices, and conflicts. The authors highlight how traditional modes of representation are often entangled in systems of power, contributing to the very crises they depict. At the same time, they pay attention to how new representational solutions as well run the very same risk: technological innovation is not in itself sufficient to ensure a freer and more effective exchange with spectators and users, and thus social advancement.

In an issue dedicated to the transformational impact of immersive arts and media, the article by Philippe Bédard inaugurates the discussion with a cautionary tale. When speaking of “impact,” he reminds us, we must never forget that a given art or media product is simply one cog in the much larger system of an overall communication project. By focusing on the VR documentary *On the Morning You Wake (to the End of the World)* (Mike Brett, Steve Jamison, Arnaud Colinart, and Pierre Zandrowicz, 2022), Bédard examines two of its recent public exhibits to discuss some of the key factors that need to be taken into account when considering the effectiveness of immersive experiences addressing social issues.

A first-hand visit to an artistic exhibition is the starting point of Silvia Lavanco Livreri's article as well. With this contribution, we start delving more precisely into the topic of the current environmental crisis. The author provides a critical report of the Helsinki Biennial 2023, exploring its specific intersection of art with social as well as ecological concerns. Lavanco Livreri also reflects on the particular immersive nature of the Biennial: a concentric form of immersivity, so to speak, expressed not only by the characteristics of the single artworks but also by the

wider frame of the exhibition's physical setting on Vallisaari Island – an ecosystem with unique features, both fragile and resilient.

Shannon Magri focuses on the problem of empathetic response – or rather the lack of it – in immersive experiences concerning global warming issues. The seemingly paradoxical difficulty in conceiving global warming as a concrete threat, which we should all try to actively contrast to avoid disastrous consequences in the near future, is explained by the author by referring to philosopher Timothy Morton's notion of "hyperobject:" objects or phenomena that, from a human perspective, are massively distributed in time and space. Keeping this in mind, Magri argues, it is essential to devise immersive storytelling strategies that increase more effectively ecological awareness.

Concluding this cluster of articles, Eleonora Stacchiotti introduces the notion of Green Media, i.e. media conceived to persuade people to adopt more sustainable lifestyles, and more specifically Green Immersive Virtual Reality. Stacchiotti proposes to think of the latter as an instrument that works on the imagination of users, providing them tangible visions and experiences of speculative scenarios of the future. By adopting the methodological framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, the author analyses a case study – *Of Hybrids and Strings* (Lauren Moffat, 2021) – to provide support for her argument.

The next contribution, by Mariaenrica Giannuzzi, blends the topic of the environmental crisis with (de) colonial concerns. The author discusses a case study with both a didactic and a political purpose, i.e. the VR documentaries series *Biosphere VR*, supposedly taking the users on a virtual journey around the world through the eyes of local narrators, and broadcasting at international institutional summits on climate change. Giannuzzi takes a critical stance commenting how similar forms of communication

run the risk of prioritizing simplistic moralizing over nuanced engagement with complex socio-environmental issues, to the point that can create a feeling of *cringe* at the disproportion between their moral claims and actual results.

The encounter with *otherness* is at the core of the article by Manischa Eichwalder. To overturn the mainstream idea of VR as a straightforward “empathy machine,” promoting an unproblematic fusion between the users and the other, the author relies on the “strange encounter” afforded by Morehshin Allahyari’s *She Who Sees the Unknown: Kabous, the Right Witness, and the Left Witness* (2019). In this work, the others are not humans, onto which we can easily project ourselves, but monstrous beings characterized precisely by their deviation from human dominant norms, including colonialist and patriarchal structures. Interacting with these entities, Eichwalder claims, becomes an exercise in resisting our urge to reducing the other to something usual and familiar.

The figure of the monster is to be found as well in Antonio Ianniello’s paper, which concludes on the subject of the transformational role of immersive arts and media by circling back to climate issues. This article constitutes an original instance of “unorthodox philosophy,” not necessarily tied to abstract theory and discursive practices, but instead embracing the concrete activity characteristic of artistic practices. More specifically, Ianniello’s contribution describes *Infinity pool*, an artistic proposal that summons situated climatic monsters to encourage a specific education of attention. Articulated through heterogeneous media means and unfolding along the river Tiber, *Infinity pool* tries to invite a specific community to become more watchful with regard to their surroundings and act concretely to improve them.

Therefore, while the general tone is more critical than prescriptive, this issue does not end on a note of

despair. Rather, it is a call to action for deeper reflection and more refined critique, fostering hope that through such rigorous examination, new pathways for artistic and societal transformation might emerge. We hope you will enjoy.

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AN-ICONOLOGY

History, Theory, and Practices of Environmental Images



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"PIERO MARTINETTI"



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