

Discursive versus Immersive:

The Museum is the Massage

Mark Wigley

We live in an age in which everyday life is suspended within countless overlapping flows of information. Each of these overlapping flows operates as an immersive environment and as a discursive system of detection, analysis and visualization. To put it simply: all Google users, which is to say all users or all humans, since we have been redefined as users and we're only valuable in as much as we are users, are treated simultaneously as researchers and consumers. Perhaps it is time to rephrase Barbara Kruger's truism *I shop therefore I am*, into *I research therefore I am*.

This everyday confusion of research and consumption plays an important role in engineering multiple forms of sensitivity and awareness. Children – increasingly the most important visitors of our museums – for instance, are operating as an amalgam of curator, gallerist, archivist, researcher, consumer, critic, journalist, photographer and so on. The care with which a child maintains, or curates, their gallery of images to represent themselves and their friends is done with much more precision than most museum exhibitions. One could say that their engagement with everyday life, and the museum environment in particular, is displacing the institutions from which those activities were derived. Given this situation, what does it mean for museums to perfect the art of research, and by that I mean research by art? What does it mean to produce immersive and discursive shows in museums?

The museum system has already been condensed into a cell phone. Museums are therefore no longer the aircraft carriers of their own logic, despite all their increasing attempts to expand themselves. Museums have grown in size and scale as if they could still rule over the museum logic they created in the first instance, but they have yet to respond to the new asymmetric warfare in which their own arguments are now deployed with much more sophistication by literally billions of people. So how immersive is the museum experience of immersion? And is the

experience of immersion within the museum as detached from the world outside of the museum as they would like it to be? What role has the museum played in the history of immersion? And what kind of education would it be to stage immersion in a museum?

These remarks discuss these questions in very basic terms: in terms of space, and the design of that space. There seem to be two types of exhibitions: discursive and immersive. Each of them is a textbook lesson in composition. One positions itself on the side of the brain; the other positions itself on the side of the body. One involves putting more words into the gallery; the other removes all of the words. In an immersive space, words are unacceptable. After all, how can you be immersed in the space if you are reading something? Following this division, reading is placed in a different kind of logic, namely the logic of vision as opposed to the logic of the multi-sensory.

But before let's pause and look at the basic terms at play in a museum space. The space of the gallery, predominantly defined by its white walls, operates as a form of reduction. Every detail in a museum gallery, from the walls, ceilings, the little wooden frames declaring images as painting, as art and not say wallpaper, to the beautifully designed furniture, is set up to magnify the art on display – and to reduce you to your role as viewer. The museum gallery is structured in such a way that when you enter it is clear that the world of your senses and the world of art occupy separate spheres. You can look, but you cannot touch. To put it differently, the museum gallery is like a sensory deprivation tank, bringing everything down to the optical frame, producing an isolated subject and object that are spaced both physically and conceptually. Subject and object have clear protocols for behavior; they are disciplined and shown how to behave.

The immersive exhibition or installation represents a loss of this subject/object spacing by using the language of the multi-sensory as opposed to the language of vision. It embraces all the senses, creating a space where any gaps or sense of separateness are lost. Visitors are no longer treated as a subject detached from an object. To the contrary, often it is no longer clear what is going on, or if/where a distinction lies. Yet, sometimes, in what are bad examples of exhibitions labeled as immersive, *immersiveness* has become a kind of visual image, representing immersion without being immersive or multi-sensory. Immersion is the object framed by the logic of vision.

The trick of the Random International's 2012 *Rain Room* installation at the Barbican Curve, London, is of course that you don't get wet when you should get wet. This is the immersion you have when you are not having immersion, or don't want to be immersed. Olafur Eliasson's 2003 *Weather Project* in the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, London, also belongs to this category. The installation is more a representation of immersion than immersion *per se*.

The eagerness with which the public joined in, dancing through the room or lying on the floor of the gallery while photographing themselves as part of the scenery – this self-performance –



Fig. 1 *Random International, Rain Room, the Barbican, London, 2012.*

actually indicates the lack of immersiveness involved here. And I would argue that the sense of self-forgetting, of completely merging with your environment, which is after all the nature of true immersion, might not be the thing anyone really wants. In other words, immersion where I could allow myself to bathe, to immerse myself, in, for example, a certain colored light and perform the act of losing myself there can take place in the highly controlled situation of an important institution, but I would send my child to a shrink if they did that on a regular basis outside of that.

The museum makes acceptable a kind of image of immersion that we wouldn't necessarily want anywhere else. It is not a true immersion, but the immersive exhibition is an opportunity to give visitors a sense of being detached enough from the world to reflect upon the world. The removal of windows in museums is a key part of this history in museums – even the making of that history. I'm a huge believer in museums and universities because both of them work with the fantasy that you can disconnect from the world to hesitate in order to reconnect differently. The whole point of going to the moon, for example, was the return.

In addition to positioning the subject versus the object in their own way, these two types of exhibitions also represent different ways of displacing the object. Again, I will address this in simple terms. It seems to me that the research exhibition transforms objects into documents. Even objects-as-objects become evidence, part of research files like forensic evidence becomes part of police dossiers. In the discursive exhibition, the (art)object transforms into evidence, whereas in the immersive exhibition the (art)object is transformed into its environment. So in one case the object is dispersed into an environment that you can occupy, and in the other the object becomes part of a system of notation that you can analyze. Or, the research exhibition expands the object by placing it into the discursive system of the museum. However, here, the art object is no longer the object *plus* label, *plus* wall text, *plus* brochure, *plus* audio guide, *plus* lecture, *plus* catalogue, *plus* website, *plus* public program and so on; this accumulation of things becomes *the thing*, over the thing itself. The object is magnified. It is no longer object *plus*, but the other way around: it becomes the plus with some objects around it. The objects are no longer understood as objects, but as evidence.

The immersive exhibition on the other hand pushes all of these discursive elements away. In fact, it pushes the whole museum system away, including the floor, the ceiling, the lights and the guards. Not just the words – which as we saw were a distraction to entering an immersive state – but also the architecture. Hence, where the research exhibition foregrounds the institutional apparatus (i.e. the frame), the immersive exhibition pushes this frame out of our perception. This raises another interesting question: what is the nature of a frame, or more precisely, what is the nature of perceiving a frame?

A frame has to flicker between perception and distraction in order to operate as a frame. The research exhibition pulls the frame into visibility, but it no longer operates as a frame – it

becomes part of the whole object. Yet, the most important gesture of the immersive exhibition is you enter the museum in order to leave the museum behind and enter the work. We might say that an immersive installation exhibition is just art that you enter; art that you wear, that you swim in, the kind of fantasy of unmediated experience, of an atmosphere. This is why 'forbidden things' that usually strike fear into the minds of people who run museums –rain, the weather, colour, sound, vibration, smell, things that cannot be represented by any other sense and cannot be placed in a kind of analytical frame – so often become the basis of the immersive show. Both experiences of the discursive versus the immersive are experiences relative to the white walled gallery. You could say the researched show puts the behind-the-scenes of the museum on exhibition, a magnification of the research capacity involved in even the simplest gesture of placing one object in one room. Whereas the immersive show puts the whole museum behind the scenes.

I want to make a series of four quick points about discursive and immersive exhibitions. The first point is that neither of these two types of exhibitions is new. The museum as we know it is a long derivative of the history of research; it is the beginning of the university. The museum of Alexandria 300BC was also the residence of over a 1000 scholars including Archimedes. It was a proto-university, a space of research, including the great library. This was revived in the 15th century in the context of collections like those of the House of Medici. Again, the collection involved what we would now call scholars. This moment in history, and the powerful image of thinkers and makers gathered in a garden, is the foundation for our contemporary understanding of what constitutes scholarship. From that moment it evolves into cabinets, then to royal and state collections, onto public education, public programs, lectures, research departments, documentation, publications and so on. Museums are very much in the research business. It seems that they could hardly exist without it.

In the same vein, just as museums and research have always been intertwined, it is hard to imagine that the immersive exhibition has just arrived on the scene as well. Take for instance the 1956 'Group 2' installation of John Voelcker, John McHale and Richard Hamilton for the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery, London, which aimed to activate a multi-sensory experience similar to the experience of a city. The group presented a highly immersive exhibition in which vision, light, noise, smell, vibration sound collided. Whenever someone walked on the floor, which was a bit spongy, a horrible perfume was released. There were movies, people's voices were picked up by a microphone at the entrance and transmitted to the other end of the gallery, etc. It was a multimedia extravaganza presented in the catalog as an activation of all the sensory bands of the electromagnetic spectrum.

But again, the installation at Whitechapel Gallery did not arrive in 1956 unannounced. All three artists were explicitly aware of the avant-garde Dada multi-media performances and were reacting and responding to that. Another example of a multi-



Fig. 2 John Voelcker, John McHale and Richard Hamilton, 'Group 2' installation for *This is Tomorrow*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1956.

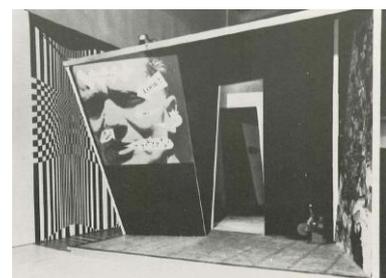


Fig. 3 John Voelcker, John McHale and Richard Hamilton, 'Group 2' installation for *This is Tomorrow*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1956.

sensory installation that should be mentioned here is Friedrich Kiesler's *Vision Machine* from 1937 and 1942. Kiesler, maybe on a deeper psycho-physiological level, shows how the object, even when displayed in galleries, is never detached from the viewer. It is fully absorbed into the biology of the body and all of its senses. In his drawings, Kiesler imagined it like a biophysical and neurological hook-up between the viewer and the object. His aim was to produce enveloping exhibition spaces of exhibition, and he transformed museums in this way. Of course, there has been a whole genealogy of these types of artwork and installations. It is possible to go on about the Constructivists and their experiments to blur art and life. Yet it is only a matter of time before we go back to the theatrical intensity of the cult-like proto "happenings" staged by different circles of artists in their respective art colonies under the spell of the term 'total work of art'. And how could we ever think of immersive as being half interesting without discussing the extraordinary influence of the idea of the 'total work of art', which is more immersive than anything one can ever encounter in the space of a museum. In this sense, contemporary immersive exhibitions, like research exhibitions, are not new, nor particularly extreme.

The second point is that research exhibitions are in fact extremely immersive. After all, don't they derive their attraction exactly from this dispersion of the discursive field so that it is experienced in a sensuous way, as distinct from the other modes in which research can be communicated? It is to move the body inside knowledge, inside information. To move the body not just in terms of receiving information, but being invited to be a participant in the production of such information. This seems to be the ambition or pretention of the research exhibition: to immerse the visitor in data, swimming in archives, in documentation, in conversation. Could it actually be that the universities have outsourced their representation to museums? Putting research on display in these ways is also a means putting the university on display as well.

Point number three is the reverse one: that immersive exhibitions always try to make a discursive point. Take the example of Olafur Eliasson. According to Eliasson visitors are supposed to enter the *Weather Project* as a phenomenological encounter and leave with a new sense of position in life. Furthermore, the language around immersive exhibitions is like that of 19th century perceptual experiments in which visitors are being tested. Therefore, the immersive experience in which the museum disappears requires the museum for participants to realize they are in this laboratory space. Sensory knowledge itself is something to be discussed through the senses through the language of experiment.

The fourth point concerns the frame itself; the very thing that either gets pulled into visibility or is repressed, and is itself a confusion of the discursive and the immersive. The 'white

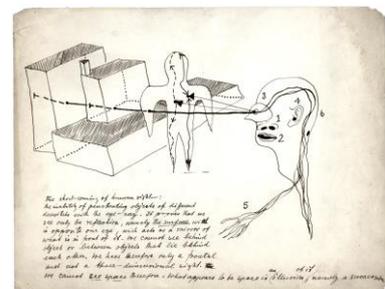


Fig. 4 Frederick Kiesler, *Vision Machine (Double Vision)*, 1937.



cube', if we can call it that since it never really was a cube, is in fact a code. The walls are white, but the floor may be wood and the ceiling may be dark. Its crucial operation is a horizontal gaze towards walls that are not supposed to speak. That is why it is white – it is not marked, or marked only by the work and the visitor that are both placed on display, or even that a certain symmetry between work and visitor is displayed, as if the visitor is infused by its own reflection in the form of the work.

The discursive, as argued before, pulls the white system into attention, whereas the immersive pushes it back into distraction. Both gestures are actually spatially quite difficult to achieve. On the one hand the white cube is obviously an extreme editing of the senses, isolating vision from sound, smell, humidity, vibration and touch. All of these – sound, smell, humidity, vibration, and touch – must be expunged from the discursive exhibition, and museums spend enormous amounts of money to do so. This huge effort is in order to privilege vision; the primary sense that has always been understood as the one sense that could bridge beyond the sensuous into theory itself. The underlying idea is not to remove all senses, but the fact that vision itself is not understood to be a sense. Yet it is immersive, you are submerged in white; you can only experience the separation of subject and object in an immersive space. To be clear: one can only produce this analytical detached gaze through immersion. Similarly, the highly controlled environment of the museum is evidence of its disciplinary authority. It is not a tangible thing; it is an ideology. A museum visit is a highly immersive and choreographed experience with protocols for sound, humidity, light, etc. In fact, the gallery is such an immersive environment that most of its elements are unseen. The visitor is framed just as much as the work. Again, the object and the viewer are super disciplined by tactics of immersion.

Yves Klein's work on the void indicates this principle clearly. Only in this, the white is itself framed by blue; the blue curtains as you enter the gallery, the blue invitation... And blue famously makes white look whiter than white. With Klein, the void does not indicate emptiness, but fullness. It engages a sensory intellectual capacity, which could then be misconstrued, with his actions seen as an institutional critique. The point is that the white cube, or space, is itself immersive, and that the system in which this very division of immersive and discursive is produced is highly immersive.

To remind us, the white wall was only really institutionalized in 1939 in the Philip L. Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone-designed building for the Museum of Modern Art, which opened at the same time as the New York World's Fair. If we go back another ten years to 1929, museum walls were not white; they were off-white, creamy or beige. The white wall hit its stride in the late 1930s and it has become whiter ever since.

Let's for a moment go back to Joseph Maria Olbrich's Vienna Secession Building, completed in 1898. This is an astonishingly radical building that was only supposed to last one year, but it



is the building in which, I argue, the infrastructure of the modern museum is put into place. It is not just the whiteness of the building, which does play a role in the polemical evolution of white, but the mechanisation of gallery conditions. The building is a factory with a clearly defined exterior but no definition to the interior. In fact, the interior is not experienced as such. Each exhibition constructs a different set of display spaces. One cannot help but hesitate on one of the early exhibitions of Josef Hoffmann in this space in 1903 where a perfected white on white cube gallery complete with its own paintings was suspended within the industrial mechanism. A whole other discussion, would be to fully explore the meaning of exhibiting this white exhibition space -- which was a response to the first white room that was exhibited by Charles-Rennie and Margaret Mackintosh inside the same space in 1900 -- and how the conflict between Hoffmann and Adolf Loos contributed to the modern museum logic we are still obsessed with. At the Secession Building, architecture is used to control the senses. The windows are blocked to prevent any light from coming in from the sides. All the light comes down via the industrialized skylights, filtered by a horizontal fabric to produce an overall evenness and of lightning conditions whatever time of day, an industrialization of light. No matter the size or nature of the installation, all are shown and experienced with the same light, creating an accepted understanding of default conditions. Also, all exhibitions are entered through the same highly ornate entrance, which can best be described as a kind of anti-industrial lobby that that detaches itself from both the world inside and the world outside, like the air-lock in a space station. This highly sensuous gesture of double detachment, which did allow the display space to be a kind of space station, enabled the Secession experiments with the 'total work of art' and alerts us to the many paradoxes of the modern gallery and its countless infrastructural supports.

The point is that the discursive and the immersive are intimately interlinked. The real question is: under what conditions is an exhibition, or any event, discursive or immersive? If the whole space of the white gallery is immersive already, and the museum is already thoroughly involved in a research mission, under what conditions could we ever declare an exhibition to either be a research exhibition or an immersive exhibition? Or what is immersion?

Immersion is experienced as a loss of limits, of lines, of boundaries. Here is it necessary to refer to Anselm Franke's observation of Foucault's point that a limit is established in the moment you don't see it, and that this capacity of not being seen is precisely the power of the limit. The experience of a loss of limits could therefore be a dangerous moment, a moment of experiencing no lines, including the lines between yourself and the other, other visitors and other objects alike when those very lines are having their greatest impact. A museum can only produce the effect that you no longer have any sense of who or where you are, whether you are on the inside or outside, or even if there is there is no an outside by having already established a whole regime of limits. To illustrate: fish do not have a concept of water precisely because water is the total environment for the fish. It is not experienced as such. The fish might only experience water when removed

from it, saying 'I have an idea, I'm going to call it water and I want to get back'. Only then once it is back in the water, could it have the sense of being immersed. Or, in another example, we might only be aware of being fully immersed in the air of this room if that air would be removed.

Environment is precisely that which cannot be experienced. Following Marshall McLuhan, discovery of the environment is only made possible by the production of an anti-environment, which allows the environment itself to be seen. Not so much lifting the object up, but in this case lifting the environment up. This is why the current climate change debate seems so fundamental to this question. It is literally the environment as the object of study. When we could see the earth from the spacecraft in the famous image, no longer immersed within it, the earth itself was put on exhibition, as if in a gallery. We seem to have spent all of our energy over thousands of years in trying to changing the shape and color of this object. Is it maybe that we are in the process of making the ultimate aesthetic statement in bringing about the demise of our own species?

Immersion – the sense that you are deep – requires you to also have a little sense of the outside. Paradoxically, immersion can only be experienced as immersion if it is not fully immersive, which creates the possibility of a political project. Following the logic that the sense of a loss of limits marks the moment in which ideology is fully operational, then an awareness of what is on the outside might be the beginning of a critique. So one conclusion might be that immersion can never be complete and the discursive can never simply operate through one sense only. All the senses are involved in both types of exhibition. It is even in the very nature of senses, if we can say that, that they are more palpable when temporarily removed.

We often see museums as fortresses of authority, but it is better to see them as extraordinary experiments in manufacturing humans, not just disciplining a subject, but actually manufacturing that subject. I would even argue that the museum as an apparatus is more dominant than any form of institutional critique has ever put forth.

The full weight of the museum as apparatus in the sense of the training of attention – or rather the training of distraction – cannot by definition be fully grasped by anything that falls under the label of institutional critique. This production of distraction might be compared with the point Walter Benjamin made that the city and its architecture is experienced mainly through distraction. However, in a world of hyper-surveillance, with every citizen a journalist, how does one manufacture distraction?

Marshall McLuhan again is the appropriate guide here. His 'training the senses' in 1964 was the report that led to his understanding of the medium as message. According to McLuhan, understanding media is all about one sense being displaced by another sense, and it is this displacement of the senses that is crucial. McLuhan refers to Aristotle's *sensus communis*, the idea of one sense combining all other senses. From this idea, he thinks through the evolution of humanity in

terms of a constant rearrangement of senses through new technologies, each of which produces massive degrees of blindness because humans cannot handle the shock of the new body and brain that we occupy. In 1960 McLuhan described the city itself as the best example of the *sensus communis*. Orchestrating and rebalancing the senses produced by technology, he thought the city was the classroom and the computer was able to organize a total media experience, which absorbed and brought all the senses back to consciousness. This 'total work of art' was understood as a necessary operation. Hence, the idea of isolating a sense like vision in the museum is a remarkable psychophysiological experiment. It is not just an optical instrument; it is as if you have had a set of eyes that is now freed from all the other senses.

It is not that people outside the museum have a rich sensory life or even a natural sensory life, and inside the museum there is only vision. New senses are being invented all the time, new balances of interactions between senses. The museum is not a singular space with a particular sensory apparatus; it is experienced in terms of what came before, after, during and during the day and its own longer history. Museums are very much in time; this sort of spatial argument about immersive versus discursive is based in time. The real question is; when do you enter the museum? That would be the big question here. What does it mean to enter the museum when the outside is coming into the museum in your pocket, your cell-phone. And not just in your pocket, you're attached to your phone, and feel more than naked without it, and you are. You are now a fleshy attachment to this more personal object. What happens when your phone brings you into the museum? That is a very different situation. And what about the opposite, if the museum comes out into the world? That is what museums are aggressively doing of course.

The basic point is this: I don't think there is a kind of default technology of the white room, which is as it were threatened by new technologies outside and new forms of humanity. Quite the opposite, the astonishing success of the white wall is fully integrated into the evolution of the global ecology of technology. The museum is a model of detachment from the everyday, but this now detachment is ubiquitous, this sense of detachment has become the environment. This apparatus in your pocket, or you inside itself pocket, which operates as the default system, raises doubts as to whether an exhibition can ever be critical, or even whether the world where the gallery claims it is detached from could be seen from the gallery at all. Or, that the gallery could itself be seen through some kind of institutional critique. It also suggests at the very same time, though, that the museum might also be a crucial acupuncture point. The most important art is the art of hesitation. The best artists and thinkers provoke hesitation, which obliges you to reflect and make decisions. Perhaps the very old technology of detachment represented by museum is in a unique position to stage new forms of hesitation.

Yet within this the artwork has almost no role to play. In this system, any object, production, or expression can have its meaning and direction turned so easily by the mechanism. So it would be difficult to put hope in the individual products of a

particular artist or form. Certainly since Marcel Duchamp and Yves Klein we have understood art not to be about what is made, but what is made of what is made. That's partly why so many artists have moved into the curatorial mode, and why most artists totally dominate the interpretation of their own work with relentless professionalism. The objects they produce only exist in the imagination through that obsessive and calibrated work of framing. It leaves it impossible to say that there will be certain individual works of art or kinds of work that make everybody hesitate. It would be more like a multi-layered military campaign; somebody structures a disturbance of these systems so that for a moment other realities become visible to see.

So the question at the end of all this is, are we stuck with the white cube? And the way I see it, the white wall is an integral part of the shared negotiation in the face of industrialization and globalization. It comes out of debates in 19th century, starting in England, moving to Austria and Germany, then eventually to the United States and then is redistributed. It is part of developing an idea of design and space in a frictionless way in order to engage with the horror in the moment machines become organisms and people become machines. The fear was so graphic in 19th century England that it led very smoothly to the privileging of the white surface, as well as to the central role of the word 'design' that has gone viral today.

If it is true that the white wall is an anaesthetic, a mirage of detachment from the expanding world we can no longer comprehend or visualize, it is paradoxically a vision system for exactly when we no longer believe we can see the world we occupy. That is, when the world we have made becomes bigger than the world.

What follows are two things. The first – a scary thought – is that you don't need the white wall for the white wall to do its work. Even if you paint a museum wall black, it is experienced as a white wall that has been painted black. In fact, that's what you should do if you want to emphasize your museum walls are white; like MoMA is currently celebrating it has some walls that are not white. The white wall is so engrained in our defensive way to negotiate with globalization as a means of distinguishing human experience that it continues to have its effect everywhere in the biggest institutions but also the smallest details of everyday life, including the interfaces on cell phones. This is the megalomaniac side: you can do nothing about the white wall. It is bigger than any of us.

The second and strangely more uplifting final thought following those thinking about the anthropocene, is that there is another wave of shock that goes beyond the 19th century trauma that 'I don't know what a machine is and what a human is.' One step further is: 'I can feel my own extinction, I have produced my own death'. If the white wall was an integral part of the defensive reaction against the fears of the 19th century that continued to be radicalized in the 20th century in such an immersive sea of white that the white no longer even has to be there to be there, it is possible that a new thought, emerges out

of the problems faced today in belated reaction to the perception of the whole planet as a doomed work of art.

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