

Curating *Immersion. The Origins, 1949–1969*

Behind the Scenes and Some Afterthoughts

Choghakate Kazarian

I must admit I was surprised to be invited to speak about the exhibition *Immersion. The Origins, 1949–1969* (that I co-curated with Camille Lévêque-Claudet)¹ at a symposium on Virtual Reality. I understand this to be a computer-mediated system that constructs immersive environments to project participants – primarily through visual means – into a simulated world, in contrast to our three-dimensional, tactile reality. It came as a surprise because the exhibition was prompted in response to virtuality and the multiple, online ersatz of real-life experiences implemented during COVID-19 at various levels of our physically constrained lives. The exhibition project was born out of a discussion with Lévêque-Claudet, who was angered by exhibitions such as *Immersive Van Gogh* or *Immersive Klimt* that garnered a huge enthusiasm and that he felt denatured those artists' works and overshadowed the existence of artworks that were immersive by nature. The problem with such spectacles was not their immersivity but the fact that they obtained such a feature by merely projecting distorted and altered images of bidimensional paintings that were never meant to be immersive. Meanwhile, many artists of past generations have made works that are inherently immersive: physical constructions that enclose the viewer, rather than two-dimensional works digitally cast into a wraparound display. For example, the Argentine Italian artist Lucio Fontana realized the pioneering *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera* in 1949, a work that I exhibited in 2014 in the retrospective of the artist that I curated at the Musée d'Art moderne de Paris.²

1 *Immersion. The Origins: 1949–1969*, Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne (Switzerland), 4.11.2023–3.3.2024.

2 Fontana's pioneering contributions to the genre (that he called *ambienti spaziali*) were later the object of an entire exhibition: *Lucio Fontana Ambienti/Environments* at Hangar

Not only did we feel the need to restore some justice by looking at properly immersive artworks but this act of historical correction also answered a more general need for IRL physical and polysensory experiences that we were deprived of during covid, when everything (experiences and human interactions) was reduced to visual or textual information delivered through screens.³ The exhibition was thus born in opposition to virtual reality: we wanted to offer an experience of the here and now instead of projecting visitors into somewhere else (the geographically elusive space of internet).

From the outset, our project positioned itself against the logic of substitution that undergirds most virtual reality: the promise to replace here with elsewhere. Our wager was that immersion need not be a digital prosthesis but a condition of the body in space – a compound of friction, weight, temperature, smell, resistance, and social proximity (fig. 1). The exhibition did, however, share certain features common to virtual reality, such as immersivity (the core concept of the exhibition) and interactivity. To some extent, immersive art installations also propose an alternate reality, not through a simulated environment as in virtual reality but by constructing a space within the space of the museum disconnected from its real-world context.

This is how our curatorial proposal came to be associated with virtual reality in the symposium – as a sort of prehistoric, predigital, low-tech forerunner that challenged the contemplative process of viewing traditional art forms. Several works read, in retrospect, like proto-VR interfaces: Gianni Colombo's *Spazio elastico* diagrammed a navigable, wireframe-like coordinate space while USCO's *Fanflashitic* orchestrated multi-sensory cues to tip visitors into a different attentional regime. In this sense, the exhibition functioned as a laboratory for VR's core ambition – how to suspend the ordinary and intensify presence – while insisting that such intensification could remain resolutely IRL, with all the contingency, risk, and reciprocity that physical co-presence entails.

Bicocca, 21.09.2017-25.02.2018, curated by Marina Pugliese, Barbara Ferriani, and Vicente Todolí.

3 IRL (an acronym for In Real Life) has been in use since covid to distinguish reality from the online world.

MUSEE CANTONAL
DES BEAUX-ARTS
ENNA SNA L
Immersion.
Les origines: 1949-1969



4.11.2023–
3.3.2024

mcba.ch



fig. 1: Poster for the exhibition *Immersion. Les origines: 1949-1969*

In the following essay, I bring up the often invisible processes that underlay the production of the exhibition, revealing the curatorial decisions and logistical challenges that are necessarily absent from the official catalogue, which was completed prior to the exhibition. By foregrounding these behind-the-scenes dynamics, I aim to reveal the contingent nature of exhibition making, highlighting how meaning is constructed not only through the works themselves but also through the labor and choices that organize their presentation and their activation by the public. Furthermore, I offer some afterthoughts on the

exhibition's reception by the public in order to explore the dialogic relationship between curatorial intent, institutional framing, and audience engagement.

1. Framing Immersivity

Our initial curatorial task was to articulate a precise understanding of immersivity. While the concept is predominantly associated with computer-generated virtual reality and other forms of entertainment, its examination within the strictly artistic domain remains limited.⁴ In art studies, immersivity surfaces in discussions of large-scale installations, yet it is treated as a contingent rather than a systematic or defining feature. Our perspective, that consisted of defining through a specific feature (of current concern), allowed us to look at the emergence of the genre across various movements including Spatialism, Kinetic Art, Zero, Arte Povera, etc. We characterized immersion as the experience of being *inside* rather than merely *in front of* a work. Immersion implies crossing a threshold between two worlds or states, a rupture that suggests a state of full engagement, akin to being submerged in water.⁵ This shift relies on a liminal zone marking a transition from the everyday environment of the exhibition space to the world of the artwork. This may be as simple as a curtain that induces darkness, as in Fontana's *Ambiente a luce nera*, or an intermediary corridor, as in Judy Chicago's *Feather Room* or Fabio Mauri's *Luna*.

Defining something is thinking as much about what it excludes as what it includes. Accordingly, we eliminated murals and panoramas, which we considered primarily as painting, as well as architecture, where the act of being within is a given. Projections and light shows were also excluded; during the period we were considering, they predominantly offered frontal, stage-like experiences, reflecting a traditional viewer-object relationship rather than the fully enveloping, 360-degree experience we were investigating. A more ambiguous category consisted of works that we associated with sculpture in the expanded field rather than genuine immersion due to their object-centered nature – for

4 The most important study is Joseph Nechvatal (1999): »Immersive Ideals/Critical Distances. A Study of the Affinity between Artistic Ideologies Based in Virtual Reality and Previous Immersive Idioms«, PhD Thesis, Newport: University of Wales College.

5 For the definitions behind the concept of the exhibition, see Choghakate Kazarian/Camille Lévêque-Claudet (2023): »Immersion. The Origins: 1949–1969«, in: Id. (eds.), *Immersion. The Origins: 1949–1969*, Ex. Cat., Paris: Hazan, pp. 6–9.

example, Otto Piene's kinetic sculpture *Licht-Ballet*. More decisive was the criterion of autonomy. Therefore, installations that served primarily as backdrops for happenings were ruled out, since their experiential impact depended on external events or interventions that constituted the primary content. While immersive installations inherently involve performativity through visitor interaction, we excluded works from our scope if they functioned mainly as containers for specific performances rather than offering freely accessible, undirected immersive experiences for all visitors. In this way, our exclusions clarified the specific conceptual stakes of immersivity as a totalizing, self-contained, and physically enveloping phenomenon.

As with any definition, ours is not unequivocal, and we remain aware of the porous boundaries of these categories. Much of our curatorial discussions centered on whether a given artwork was sufficiently immersive to merit inclusion in the exhibition. To highlight the specificity of immersive art, we adopted a deliberately restrained definition, which nonetheless proved to encompass a rich and varied range of works. While further connections could undoubtedly have been explored, such as between immersive installations and happenings or between immersive art and design, particularly in Italy – a country notably prolific in producing such works – these fell outside the scope of our exhibition, necessarily limited by the gallery space. Even within these boundaries, *Immersion* offered ample variety in experiences and subcategories, revealing the depth and complexity of immersive practice.

It was immediately clear that, despite the substantial exhibition space (two floors totaling approximately 1,200 square meters), we could only present a limited number of works because of their size. Consequently, we chose to restrict our focus to a specific time frame. In contrast to anachronistic exhibitions such as *Immersive Van Gogh*, we decided to concentrate on the period during which such works emerged in this first overview dedicated to immersive art.

The exhibition's chronological framework was determined both by developments within the art world and by broader sociocultural concerns. We focused on the formative, experimental years of immersive art, a period in which the very notion of space – physical, perceptual, and conceptual – was being actively redefined. Within the art context, the timeline extended from Fontana's 1949 *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera* (fig. 2), which we considered the conceptual and chronological starting point of the exhibition, to the 1969 *Spaces* exhibition at MoMA, which marked the genre's formal institutional recognition and its subsequent proliferation. This time in art history coincided with the »Space

Age« (culminating in 1969 with the Apollo 11 mission on the moon), a period that was deeply immersive in scope and aesthetics, as I demonstrated in my essay for the catalogue.⁶ Science, politics, and aesthetics were all preoccupied with space: Cold War politics pursued literal conquest, while artists sought to transcend traditional categories of painting, sculpture, and architecture. By situating immersive art within this dual context, the project underscored its historical specificity and its engagement with the expansive, exploratory ethos of the era.

Although the immersive quality of artworks is not unique to the period under study, it is precisely during this moment that immersive installations emerged as an independent genre, although without being named as such. Terminology varied across linguistic spheres during that period: Latin languages favored »ambiente« (following Fontana's 1949 precedent), while Anglophones preferred »environment«, often associated with Allan Kaprow. This convergence was made explicit at *documenta 4* (1968), which devoted a section to different kinds of installations – including immersive ones – under the rubric »Ambiente – Environment.«⁷ There is, of course, a prehistory of the field: immersive experiences can be traced back to Renaissance trompe-l'œil grottoes, as discussed by Camille Lévêque-Claudet in the exhibition catalogue, or to cave paintings, as analyzed by Joseph Nechvatal in his PhD thesis on virtual reality and immersivity within art.⁸ However, we excluded these earlier experiments (as they were part of larger projects), as well as other apparent precedents such as Marcel Duchamp's installation with strings for *First Papers of Surrealism* in 1942, for it functioned as exhibition design intended to contain or frame other artworks rather than exist as an autonomous work. We also excluded Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* (1923-1937), a work that occupies a liminal space between sculpture and architecture. In contrast, fully immersive and autonomous works emerged during the period 1949-1969, arising within the cultural context of the »Space Age« and the neo-avant-garde. These works are marked by a conscious departure from traditional artistic categories

6 Choghakate Kazarian (2023): »Totalizing Experiences: Immersive Artworks between 1949 and 1969«, in: *Ibid.*, pp. 34–49.

7 For the main concepts used to define such works, see C. Kazarian/C. Lévêque-Claudet (eds.): *Immersion*.

8 Camille Lévêque-Claudet (2023): »Theaters of Immersion: Immersive Art Exhibitions between 1949 and 1969«, in: *Ibid.*, pp. 14–33; cf. J. Nechvatal: *Immersive Ideals/Critical Distances*.

and a commitment to pluridisciplinary experimentation and participatory practices.

Considering our historical ambition, we deliberately chose to focus on examples within our chronological framework that materialized rather than on those that remained mere projects.⁹ Although unrealized projects were fully situated within the immersive paradigm of the period, including them would have expanded the scope of the study to a scale that was unmanageable within the physical constraints of an exhibition. Moreover, attempting to actualize such projects would have raised significant issues regarding historical accuracy and risked introducing anachronisms.

2. Variety of Immersive Experiences

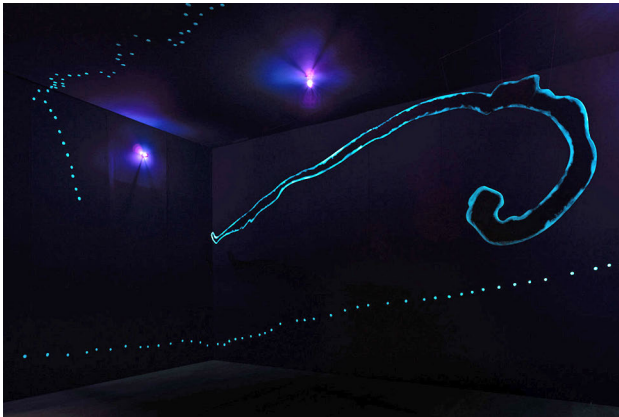


fig. 2: Lucio Fontana: *Ambiente spaziale*, 1967, installation view: *Immersion. The Origins: 1949–1969*, Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne, 4.11.2023–3.3.2024

9 One exception was James Turrell's 1969 *Raemar Pink White*. We discovered a bit late that the project was materialized after 1969, hence its exclusion from the catalogue even though it was presented in the exhibition.

Rather than selecting artworks as mere illustrations of a curatorial argument, we adopted a panoramic approach, showing a representative sampling (a process inherent to any exhibition) of the diverse expressions of the immersive genre within the defined chronological framework. Our selection encompassed works offering a broad spectrum of aesthetics and materials, each proposing a distinct mode of experience.

While firmly anchored in physical media, many of these installations pursue a sense of immateriality. For instance, Lucio Fontana's spatialist work was conceived as drawing in space (fig. 2), while Christian Megert's 1968 *Environment* creates the illusion of infinity through facing mirrors (fig. 3). Whereas most works play with the expansion of space, the exhibition also included an example of claustrophobic immersion in Robert Morris's *Passageway*, a narrowing curved corridor. Some works are overtly spectacular, while others appear deceptively austere and barely perceptible, privileging subtle sensory shifts, such as Laura Grisi's *Vento di s. e. velocità 40 nodi* (a sensation of strong wind created by hidden fans). The unsettling atmosphere of Bruce Nauman's *Sound Breaking Wall*, in which hidden speakers whisper hardly audible sounds of breathing and laughter through the walls, sharply contrasted with the exuberant energy of USCO's *Fanflashitic*, combining strobe lights, balloons, and festive music. To present a broad spectrum of experiences, we limited the selection to one work per artist and avoided including similar pieces. For example, although several artists engaged with the reflexive properties of mirrors, we chose to feature only the Megert work (fig. 3).

We also sought, insofar as possible, to ensure diversity in terms of geographic origin and gender. In constructing a panorama of experimental practices in immersivity, we gave particular attention to foregrounding the contributions of women artists, whose work has often been marginalized or omitted from historical narratives. This objective was supported by the substantial body of scholarship produced in recent decades on women's artistic practices, including important research on figures such as Marinella Pirelli and Laura Grisi. Nonetheless, the number of women represented in the exhibition fell short of our initial intentions. The chronological parameters of the exhibition, situated prior to the emergence of the feminist movements of the 1970s, coincided with a period in which women were afforded fewer opportunities to exhibit, particularly in media demanding substantial spatial and material resources. Immersive installations, by virtue of their scale, were generally conceived for public contexts, a condition that disproportionately favored male artists who benefited from greater opportunities. Furthermore, the process of securing loans

for works by women artists proved especially challenging, as such works are currently in high demand. These circumstances contributed to the regrettable absence of pieces by figures such as Yayoi Kusama and Lygia Clark.¹⁰ The catalogue allowed us to include these contributions by women artists to the history of early immersive art.



fig. 3: Christian Megert: *Environment*, 1968, installation view with visitors: *Immersion. The Origins: 1949–1969*, Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne, 4.11.2023–3.3.2024

10 While developing the exhibition, we learned that the Haus der Kunst in Munich was preparing a similar project focused on women artists, curated by Andrea Lissoni and Marina Pugliese. Their exhibition spans a much broader period, benefiting notably from the increased presence of women artists in the 1970s. See Andrea Lissoni/Marina Pugliese (eds.) (2024): *Inside Other Spaces. Environments by Women Artists: 1956–1976, Ex. Cat.*, Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag.

Another decisive factor in our selection was the requirement that each work be experienced in the manner originally intended. In some cases, the lending institutions we approached wanted to impose conditions that would have altered the fundamental nature of the piece, such as requiring that visitors observe the work from a distance without touching or entering it, as occurred with Marta Minujín's 1963 *Chambre d'amour* and Haus-Rucker-Co's 1968 *Environment Transformer/Fliegenkopf*. We had to abandon borrowing these works, as such restrictions would have transformed the immersive pieces into static sculptures, undermining their purpose.

Finally, practical limitations also shaped the selection. Because they demand substantial space, we were not able to consider Niki de Saint Phalle's *Hon*, Lea Lublin's *Fluvio Subtunal*, or Martina Minujín and Rubén Santantonín's *La Menesunda*. Moreover, the financial costs associated with transporting existing elements, constructing new ones, and (as we later discovered) maintaining the artworks throughout the run of the exhibition were considerable, as the inherently participatory nature of these works and the high attendance exposed them to wear and frequent damage. For these reasons, the inclusion of technology-dependent works was necessarily limited (they were generally in the minority, and VR computer technology was still in its experimental stages). Such pieces impose distinct burdens: specialized (often obsolete) hardware, dedicated technical staff, and contingency stocks of parts whose procurement timelines can exceed the exhibition run. From a stewardship perspective, frequent failures risk compromising the artist's intent, while interim substitutions introduce unacceptable departures from the original concept. Coupled with higher operating costs and an elevated risk of downtime in a high-traffic setting, these constraints led us to privilege installations whose immersive effects could be delivered reliably and sustained by the museum's existing technical capacity.

The final selection for the exhibition comprised fourteen works by artists representing different generations, geographic regions, and artistic orientations: Judy Chicago, Gianni Colombo, Lucio Fontana, Laura Grisi, Fabio Mauri, Christian Megert, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio, Marinella Pirelli, Jesús Rafael Soto, Ferdinand Spindel, USCO, and James Turrell. The accompanying catalogue encompassed a broader range of artists and works.

3. (Re)making of

Beyond these conceptual and curatorial considerations, a number of technical factors had to be addressed, foremost among them the feasibility of reconstructing the works. While some of the issues I have outlined are familiar within curatorial practice, the exhibition posed an entirely novel challenge from a technical perspective, as it involved the re-creation of works. As most of the pieces were originally created for specific exhibitions, their existence was inherently ephemeral, although some were subsequently recreated either by the artist or posthumously, with the authorization of the artist's estate.

It is precisely the idea of creating an effect, with limited concerns with originality, materials, or »the artist's hand,« that enables their re-creation. In several instances, however, reconstruction proved impossible, either because the artist had conceived the work as strictly site-specific, precluding future iterations (as in the case of Michael Asher's installations), or because recreating without the artist would fundamentally compromise the work's integrity. This latter concern applied to Yves Klein's *La Spécialisation de la sensibilité à l'état matière première en sensibilité picturale stabilisée* (also known as *Le Vide*), for which the artist spent days painting the interior of the Iris Clert Gallery entirely white, imbuing the space, in his words, with his own artistic sensibility.¹¹ While the work has been re-created in recent years (with the authorization of the artist's estate), we felt that without Klein's direct involvement, the result would be, quite literally, void. Accordingly, it was represented in the catalogue but excluded from the exhibition. A further limitation arose in cases where insufficient documentation prevented faithful reconstruction; for example, despite extensive research on a work by Jacqueline Nova and Julia Acuña titled *Luz-Sonido-Movimiento*, presented at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, we reached a dead end.

When working with artists' estates or museums, we had to follow strict guidelines to reproduce the work as originally presented. We could occasionally incorporate elements of the original installation (as with Pinot-Gallizio's work) or components from previous reconstructions (as with Fontana's piece). In contrast, when working with living artists such as Chicago, the experience

11 Yves Klein, account of the opening of the exhibition »Époque pneumatique, la sensibilité picturale immatérielle à l'état matière première« at the Galerie Iris Clert, typescript with handwritten annotations, Paris, the Yves Klein Archives.

was different, as she had a flexible approach to her work. While we were reluctant to add further elements due to the historical focus of the exhibition, we accepted certain technical modifications that remained conceptually faithful to the original 1966 work such as the use of more seamless wall screens and feathers that were cruelty-free (fig. 4). Ironically, our re-creations required greater financial and technical resources than the original iterations, which were often surprisingly artisanal and low-tech.

This flexibility with materials was characteristic of all reconstructions carried out by the artists themselves, as our research revealed. Some works, such as those by Mauri and Fontana, were re-created by the artists after their initial presentations. Notably, each subsequent iteration differed substantially from the first. These variations either involved small technical refinements to the original realization or through more substantial changes. For example, Fontana's *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera* (1949) was re-created by the artist in 1967. The later version expanded the room's dimensions and replaced the floating papier-mâché shapes with an organic form cut from cardboard, while the walls were covered by lines of phosphorescent painted dots. Although the artist regarded this re-creation as ideal, it diverged materially from the original, illustrating that, for such works, formal and technical specifics are secondary to achieving a particular effect – in this case, the materialization of a drawing in space. Consequently, we presented the 1967 reconstruction in the exhibition, as the 1949 version was unavailable for loan (fig. 2).

Although we did not anticipate the exhibition's extraordinary success (ultimately attracting a historical attendance of 125,000 visitors in a city with a population of about 139,000), we considered in our selection process the capacity of each installation to accommodate multiple viewers simultaneously, limiting works intended for only one or two participants at a time. The exhibition design allowed sufficient intermediary space between works, enabling visitors to circulate, remove shoes, or queue without obstructing other installations. This arrangement also minimized the potential for »noisy« works to interfere with one another. Nevertheless, some level of cross-contamination was inevitable. Visitors exiting Chicago's *Feather Room* (fig. 4) inadvertently spread feathers throughout the exhibition space (and beyond), while polystyrene beads from Mauri's *Luna* (fig. 1) sometimes found their way into Spindel's *Hole in a Home's* foamy pink folds or up to Lausanne's train station! As far as we observed, visitors appeared unconcerned by these effects; rather, they displayed their feather-covered clothing as tangible traces of their

passage, signifying both an initiation and evidence of having engaged with the work, which they further documented through self-photography.

4. IRL Versus VR: Immersivity in the Age of Social Media

Unfortunately, no sustained studies on visitors to the exhibition were conducted; consequently, the following reflections are grounded in observation. *Immersion* attracted an unprecedented number of teenagers, families, and first-time museumgoers, representing a significant expansion of the institution's audience base. This outcome can be attributed to the exhibition's multisensory appeal – particularly resonant in the aftermath of isolation due to covid – along with the innate human desire for tactile experiences. The longing for collective and interactive encounters and the amplifying effect of social media, where visitor-generated images circulated widely, also played a significant part.

Interaction with the works was largely unregulated, with only minimal guidelines in place for certain installations (e.g., the removal of shoes). While visitor engagement often took a playful form (mostly through self-fashioning), these interactions cannot be equated with gaming, as they lacked formalized rules or a fixed *modus operandi*. The works also lacked any teleological aim: there were no goals to accomplish, scores to accumulate, or levels to progress through. Instead, the works solicited open-ended exploration and sensorial experience, privileging contingency and self-directed movement over task-oriented achievement – with the partial exception of Morris's *Passageway*: the tilted corridor channels visitors toward a dead end, prescribing a specific itinerary and culminating in a physical – and psychological – terminus. Nevertheless, implicit boundaries emerged, such as the permissibility of touching certain elements (e.g., the feathers in Chicago's *Feather Room*) while refraining from others (e.g., the wires in Colombo's *Spazio elastico*) where contact could result in damage, a risk that did, in fact, materialize. The tactile emphasis of the exhibition also had spillover effects. Guards reported that some visitors – many of whom were experiencing a museum for the first time – attempted to touch artworks in the permanent collection after visiting the exhibition, influenced by the immersive, tactile engagement they had just encountered. This prompted the museum to install signage at the collection entrance reminding visitors not to touch the works.

Interactivity implies a reciprocal exchange, with the potential to alter the work itself. However, none of the artworks in the exhibition extended interactivity to the level of full reciprocal engagement (as in gaming). In other words, they remained fundamentally unaltered by the presence or actions of the audience. Visitors, while able to touch, photograph, or otherwise physically engage with the installations, were not positioned as co-authors of the artworks. Their actions did not meaningfully modify the works' overall compositions. While visitors' actions, such as moving polystyrene pebbles, feathers, colored balloons, or metallic sticks, did affect the spatial arrangement of certain installations, these changes did not fundamentally transform them. When alteration did occur, it was typically unintentional and detrimental, resulting from wear and tear due to the high volume of visitors. Examples include broken screens in Pirelli's *Filmambiente*, damaged wires in Colombo's *Spazio elastico*, feather loss in Chicago's *Feather Room* (fig. 4), and makeup stains on Nauman's *Sound Breaking Wall* left by visitors who pressed their faces against it to hear the subtle sounds it emitted.

Although issues related to high attendance had been anticipated, we had not foreseen the degree of physical wear. This was largely due to the fact that most works were originally conceived for limited audiences and short exhibition durations, ranging from a single night to a few weeks, rather than the sustained four-month run of this exhibition. Consequently, the installations required frequent maintenance to preserve their intended form, and those attending later in the day often encountered works already visibly worn from earlier interactions, underscoring the temporal contingency of the exhibition experience. You cannot step in the same river twice.

While the haptic experience was undoubtedly instrumental to the exhibition's success, particularly in making it accessible to children, the principal factor accounting for its popularity and the diversification of its audience, especially among younger demographics, lay in the reflexive nature of the experience. Although only Megert's mirror installation was reflexive in a literal sense (fig. 3), other works similarly encouraged such engagement through their photographic potential; they served as ideal backdrops for selfies and were subsequently disseminated on social media. Hence, interest accrued for Chicago's *Feather Room* and Mauri's *Luna*, the most popular works on social media.

As noted earlier, the curatorial intention was to reaffirm the importance of physical, multisensory engagement in the wake of the sensory deprivation experienced during covid and to reassert the value of in-person (»in real life,« as they say online) encounters over disembodied, predominantly visual interac-

tions of online experience. The willingness of visitors to queue for up to three hours, despite the extensive availability of images online, suggests that this aim was, in one sense, fulfilled. Yet, this return to the here-and-now was paradoxically underpinned by the logic of social media: the IRL experience functioned simultaneously as an end in itself and as a means of generating content in the virtual world of social media, in which lived experience is instrumentalized for representation. The necessity to be »here« was sustained by a »some-where else« in the projected world of social media.



fig. 4: Judy Chicago: *Feather Room*, 1966, installation view with Choghakate Kazarian and Camille Lévêque-Claudet: *Immersion. The Origins: 1949–1969*, Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne, 4.11.202–3.3.2024

In translating the embodied, IRL encounter to platforms such as Instagram, the immersive experience of the works was frequently reduced to static images (or short videos). This transformation altered and at times inverted the perception of the works. For example, the numerous Instagram posts of visitors in Chicago's *Feather Room* convey a mood of dreamlike ethereal lightness and immateriality. But IRL, the physical experience was considerably less smooth, as Lévêque-Claudet and I experienced ourselves (fig. 4). Upon entering, we were confronted with the blinding glare of light emitted through translucent walls, intensified by the room's overall stark whiteness; the oppres-

sive heat and pungent odor of feathers quickly followed. Full immersion in the feathers, accompanied by the struggle to avoid suffocation, typically led to our exit. Outside the installation, feathers clung stubbornly to hair and clothing, extending the sensory discomfort well beyond the confines of the room. Such experience is anything but the frictionless »clean room« promised by VR. The exhibition existed in a doubled form: as a site of immediate, embodied encounter and as a visual construct in the economy of digital images, two orders of experience whose affective registers could be diametrically opposed, yet which mutually sustained each other in the cultural logic of mediated, networked spectatorship.

5. Immersivity and Critical Distance

The exhibition was a significant success not only in terms of attendance but also for the intensity of public engagement it generated around a historical display of experimental works by artists, some of whom are unfamiliar even to specialists. Crucial to this success was the exhibition's interactivity. Touch established an immediate phenomenological bond between viewer and artwork, yet the most salient mode of interaction unfolded through self-representation mediated by photography and its dissemination via social media. In this respect, the exhibition reactivated the traditional touristic function of photography (the indexical marker of presence, the declaration »I was there«) while accelerating its circulation and feedback through digital platforms. In this process, aesthetic engagement was displaced into digital self-display.

While this heightened engagement can be interpreted as a democratizing gesture, repositioning the visitor at the center of the aesthetic encounter, it also displaced the works themselves, reducing them at times to backdrops for self-fashioning. While interactivity is celebrated as inclusive and emancipatory, it often risks subordinating the work's historical and aesthetic complexity to the spectacle of the visitor's experience – particularly when calibrated for social media, a platform that circulates a narrow range of codified experiences and, owing to its age-skewed participation, eclipses other forms of engagement that remain undocumented and thus invisible. The exhibition's entertaining value, contingent on the dynamics of audience presence and density, further reinforced this ambivalence. The phenomenological experience of the works shifted markedly depending on whether they were encountered in solitude or within a collective setting. In the absence of other visitors (as I had

the privilege to experience), the installations foregrounded an affective register of apeirophobia (anxiety associated with spatial vastness). However, when mediated by the presence of crowds – teenagers documenting the experience through photography, or families with children traversing the spaces in convivial excitement – the same installations were transformed into festive arenas of collective energy inherent to shared experience. In no way I am implying here the superiority of the feeling of solitary anxiety over collective joy (something even more valuable in our post-covid times). Rather, I wish to emphasize that the exhibition's meaning was not fixed within the works themselves but co-constructed through the social dynamics of their reception.

As an experience premised on co-presence rather than headset isolation, the exhibition explicitly opposed the solitary, device-mediated model of virtual reality. Meaning accrued in the shared air of the galleries through the frictions of queuing, the choreography of bodies negotiating thresholds, and the incidental acoustics produced by crowds. Several works even exceeded the museum's bounds by leaving tangible residues on visitors' clothing and skin: feathers from Chicago's *Feather Room* and polystyrene pebbles from Mauri's *Luna* migrated into other rooms and out into the city, functioning as indexical tokens of contact. These traces carried home underscored a material surplus particular to IRL immersion, quite unlike the sealed, »clean-room« virtuality of headset-based VR.

At the same time, the exhibition shared with VR a commitment to world-building: each installation constructed a bounded environment within (and partially against) the museum's default spatial logic. Visitors crossed thresholds, underwent sensory re-calibration, and occupied scenarios that bracketed everyday reference – effects analogous to virtual environments, but achieved with low-tech, predigital means (lights, fans, mirrors, sounds, etc.). The crucial distinction lay in contingency and material resistance: haptic contact, heat, odor, friction, and wear were not bugs to be eliminated but constitutive elements of the experience.

A point of misunderstanding concerned the historicity of the works. Many visitors seemed to apprehend them less as archival reactivations than as opportunities for immediate immersive experience. Several factors contributed to this perception. First, the reconstructed installations, lacking the patina of historical objects, appeared new (and, crucially, were *new*). The invitation to touch, still largely taboo within the museum context, further reinforced that sense. We likewise chose to emphasize immersion as a contemporary experiential mode, thereby permitting the works to communicate

– through affect and perception – the visual culture and broader socio-cultural paradigm inscribed in them. The only contextual element was the wall text for each work that briefly informed readers about the author, title, materials, original setting, and context.¹² The deliberate exclusion of archival ephemera (photographs, catalogues, invitations) in favor of reenactment privileged the affective immediacy of the original experience over its documentation. The original was less resurrected than re-authored under present-day experiential regimes. In a way, this misperception may indicate the effectiveness of reactivating these historical works, even though their original context has inevitably shifted, thereby transforming their meaning.

Another unexpected observation was the absence of vandalism in Morris's *Passageway*, a long, dead-end corridor. The unnerving austerity of this work provoked such frustration when it was first created in 1961 that the walls were defaced with graffiti and other insults, including one by the dancer Yvonne Rainer, who wrote, »FUCK YOU BOB MORRIS.« This incident was referenced in the wall text accompanying the work, a potentially risky curatorial choice that might have encouraged similar acts of transgression. Only a single visitor, however, replicated Rainer's action and words, and in very small writing. It was most likely a playful gesture by an art historian or curator who had read the wall text carefully and enacted a controlled form of engagement, signaling knowledge of the historical context rather than literal defiance.

The exhibition also raised questions about the nature of active versus passive spectatorship. Interactivity is often valorized as active engagement, in contrast to the supposed passivity of visual contemplation. Yet visitor behavior suggested a more complex picture. Despite the infinite photographic possibilities offered by the installations, many participants repeated preexisting images encountered on Instagram, reenacting promotional material such as the photograph of a face emerging from the white pebbles of Mauri's *Luna* that was used for the exhibition poster (fig. 1). The »active« participant is thus enmeshed in circuits of repetition, imitation, and reproduction, complicating the valorization of interactivity as emancipatory. In sum, the exhibition revealed the productive contradictions of immersive museological practice – between historical reenactment and contemporary spectacle, between af-

12 Proportionally, an unusually small number of visitors purchased the exhibition catalogue, which further suggests that the show was primarily perceived as an immediate, experiential event rather than as an educational or historically oriented engagement.

fective immediacy and historical distance, between presence as embodied experience and presence as circulated image.

Bibliography

Kazarian, Choghakate/Camille Lévêque-Claudet (eds.) (2023): *Immersion. The Origins: 1949–1969*, Ex. Cat., Paris: Hazan.

Kazarian, Choghakate/Camille Lévêque-Claudet (2023): »Immersion. The Origins: 1949–1969«, in: Id., *Immersion*, pp. 6–9.

Kazarian, Choghakate (2023): »Totalizing Experiences: Immersive Artworks between 1949 and 1969«, in: Id./Lévêque-Claudet, *Immersion*, pp. 34–49.

Lévêque-Claudet, Camille (2023): »Theaters of Immersion: Immersive Art Exhibitions between 1949 and 1969«, in: Kazarian/Id., *Immersion*, pp. 14–33.

Lissoni, Andrea/Marina Pugliese (eds.) (2024): *Inside Other Spaces. Environments by Women Artists: 1956–1976*, Ex. Cat., Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag.

Nechvatal, Joseph (1999): *Immersive Ideals/Critical Distances. A Study of the Affinity between Artistic Ideologies Based in Virtual Reality and Previous Immersive Idioms*, PhD Thesis, Newport: University of Wales College.

Image Credits

fig. 1: © Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne

fig. 2: © Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Milano, by Siae 2025 © Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne/Étienne Malapert

fig. 3: photo: Haïkouhie Kazarian

fig. 4: © Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne/Étienne Malapert