Orchestrating Expectations, or Technoromanticism in VR Art

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When I encounter VR in art exhibitions, I always notice some kind of hesitation. Somehow, the situation of zoning out of the shared space via this awkward tool of the head-mounted display (HMD) as a mode of experiencing art doesn't seem very promising. People in- and outside the headset act goofy, rarely seem confident or even cool. This peculiar situation seems to require a genuine neophilia and playfulness, otherwise it's loaded with social unease, shyness or embarrassment.

What is happening inside the headset that cannot share the space with me, my fellow visitors and other artworks? Do I really want to enter and potentially become affected by a space beyond the conventions of physical and institutional norms? And is my commitment big enough to involve myself in an unfamiliar situation and find out? Most of the time, it was. After being overwhelmed, excited, annoyed and disappointed by various VR experiences in contemporary art, this hesitation turned into curiosity: What is it about VR art that causes such ambivalent reactions and apparently makes me care? Of course, there are various topics and artistic styles that configure each single experience, and certainly my own taste and mood play a role in this as well. But in this text, I'm interested in a general component of the aesthetics of VR art that relates to the intensity of its experience and the concurrent exposure of the VR viewer – the exposure to the virtual space as well as to the exhibition space. Departing from the exhibition space, I want to characterize this hybrid constellation of VR art as an orchestration[1] of expectations, which navigates between attachment and detachment to both of these realms.

1 Thanks to Christian Grüny who suggested the term ›orchestration‹ as a fitting English equivalent for the form of ›Inszenierung‹ I'm discussing in this text.

I will focus on two artworks that explicitly deal with this double exposure of the viewer by creating elaborate spatial installations as a stage and as an onboarding for the virtual experience. These installations highlight the peculiar choreography of a VR experience in an exhibition space. Moreover, they communicate bodily involvement into the virtual situation, based on a form of virtual representation of the viewer. They entertain the fantasy of a technologically induced unity between body and virtual space and thus a detachment from the exhibition space. As this mystifies the VR experience and promotes the figure of an awe-driven viewer, indulging in the immersive effects of the technology, I argue, both artworks employ a technoromantic imaginary of VR as an aesthetic tool to orchestrate the expectations as well as the experience itself. While the first example tends to reinforce this imaginary of VR, the second example exposes its underlying premises.

1. Prelude

On first sight, my examples could not be more different to each other: Jordan Wolfson's *Little Room* (2025) consists of a complex technological setup, in which the viewer's body is being scanned and transferred into the virtual space to serve as an avatar. It provides a virtual experience for two people who share the same space within the body of the other. The announcement of the artwork promises a »complex intersection of real, virtual, and imaginary realms.« An artwork that »examines the darker aspects of the human experience while raising profound existential questions about consciousness, identity, and physical and intellectual negation. With *Little Room* the artist pushes the potential of VR to create a unique encounter that goes beyond conventional understandings of the medium.«[2]

Theo Triantafyllidis' *Staphyloculus (or, the paradox of site specificity of virtual realities)* (2017) is a single user experience placed in the fictional narrative of a virus outbreak in the desert. The announcement describes it as a »Virtual Reality experience that attempts to recreate the first known outbreak of Polywobbly Fervenitis […] The artist attempted to setup a complete VR rig under

2 Description of the artwork on the homepage of Fondation Beyeler where the artwork premiered from 01.06.-03.08.2025: Fondation Beyeler (2025): »Jordan Wolfson: *Little Room*«, in: fondationbeyeler.ch. Online: https://www.fondationbeyeler.ch/ausstellungen/vergangene-ausstellungen/jordan-wolfson-little-room (last access: 15.09.2025).

scorching sunlight. […] when the headset was exposed to the desert sun, its display had a chemical reaction that was somehow translated into a digital signal that started a computer virus.«[3] The technology as well as the artist are part of this narrative, which also »goes beyond conventional understandings of the medium« but projects a playful character onto the virtual experience. These descriptions of the artworks not only announce various forms of bodily involvement into the virtual situation but also represent different artistic gestures that already inform the anticipation of two diverse viewing experiences. *Staphyloculus* suggests a narrative-driven, experimental and rather gamified VR situation, of which the artist is part. *Little Room*, however, presents itself as a serious approach to existential questions of virtual embodiment and reinforces its conceptual gravity by highlighting the artist's objective. What both artworks address is the invasiveness of the VR technology, affecting the viewer's body as a means of experiencing the virtual space. In *Little Room*, the technological invasiveness appears in a literal sense through the body scan and the body swap. In *Staphyloculus* the technological invasiveness appears in a figurative sense in form of the virus outbreak infecting the viewer's body through the VR hardware.

Both artworks project extreme scenarios, in which the viewer's body is subjugated to the technology. As such, they address VR as »the most radical form of insertion of a user into a virtual environment.«[4] They figure the virtual experience as a commitment to an exceptional experience, beyond the familiarity of the everyday and the conventions of the exhibition space. This expectation is not only being triggered by the announcement of the artworks but further orchestrated by how the artworks are installed within the exhibition space. The spatial installations serve as a stage as well as an onboarding for the VR experiences. As such, they constitute an inside and an outside audience and explicitly address the hybrid constellation of VR art. In this constellation, *aboutness*[5] and *immediacy*[6] collide. Exposed to the outside audience, the VR experience is subjected to speculation: What kind of experience does the visceral immediacy, the

3 Description of the artwork on Theo Triantafyllidis' homepage: Theo Triantadyllidis (2017): »Staphyloculus«, in: slimetech.org. Online: https://slimetech.org/works/staphyloculus (last access: 15.09.2025).

4 Christiane Paul (2023): Digital Art, London: Thames and Hudson, p. 114.

5 Arthur C. Danto (1981): The transfiguration of the commonplace: a philosophy of art, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

6 Anna Kornbluh (2024): Immediacy. Or, the style of too late capitalism, London: Verso Books.

bodily affection by the technology produce? What is this about and how is it being expressed by the bodily behavior of the VR viewer? Exposed to the virtual situation, the viewer navigates between immediate affection by this new environment and the expectations from outside, searching for a symbolic »crack in the smoothness of the imaginary.«[7] In this hybrid situation, the ›outside‹ experience of the artwork regards a spatial as well as a temporal outside of VR. Before and after the ›inside experience‹, the viewer is part of this outside audience, which is itself co-present during the VR experience. Usually, this exposure to the »shared social norms of the actual space […] remain[s] a constraint upon actions in the virtual space«[8] but in these examples, the particular orchestration of the viewing experience creates a situation for experiment and play.

Both of my examples deal with the egocentric dimension of VR, with what Hito Steyerl calls an »aesthetic of isolation.«[9] She describes the VR experience as a form of »bubble vision« which is subjected to a space designed to be convincing. She observes a paradoxical effect, which is the phenomenon of being at the center of the virtual world but mostly missing the actual body. My examples address this bodily paradox by experimenting with different forms of the viewer's representation within VR. From the outside, they do so by mystifying the embodied VR experience, as they propose a particular devotion to the machine to become bodily represented in VR. They trigger the expectation of a convergence between human body and the technology, which echoes Steyerl's claim: »VR is where the nonexistent bumps into the

7 For an elaborate discussion on the relation between the imaginary of immediacy and the symbolic see: Ibid., p. 62.

8 Eryn Parker/Michael Saker (2020): »Art Museums and the incorporation of virtual reality: Examining the impact of VR on spatial and social norms«, in: The international Journal of Research into New Media Technologies 26/5-6, pp. 1159–1173, here: p. 1168, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856519897251. This form of VR-exposure shows crucial parallels to the outside parameters that prevent affective viewer's commitment in formats like one-on-one performances. See Rachel Gomme (2015): »Not-so-close encounters. Searching for intimacy in one-to-one performance«, in: Participations. Journal for Audience & Reception Studies 12/1 (01.05.2015).

9 Hito Steyerl (2018): »Bubble Vision. Aesthetics of Isolation«, in: Penny Stamps Lecture, Penny W. Stamps School of Art & Design on www.youtube.com (25.01.2018). Online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1Qhy0_PCjs&list=PLIa7Lly2iiBC3G3YCQkFE3-cOYDh5AnA-&index=4 (last access: 15.09.25).

ubiquitous.«[10] Both artworks provoke the »occult pretension […] of VR«[11] and thus nourish its technoromantic imaginary. Technoromanticism describes an effect of individual insecurity in face of an increasingly incomprehensible complexity of technology. It frames how »mediation (whether VR or otherwise) can ›trick‹ consciousness into perceiving one thing or another – manipulating autonomic bodily processes that exceed the capacity for contemplative reflection altogether.«[12] Promoting a retreat into a position of solitude and awe, a technoromantic imaginary of virtual embodiment comes with the expectation of an immersive unity.[13] It results in a sublimation of technology in which the individual surrenders to its fetishization.[14] By diving into my own experience with both of these artworks, I want to examine how the technoromantic fantasy of VR figures within the aesthetic experience. As a tool in orchestrating my expectations from outside and as an effect of exposing these expectations from inside VR.

2. Jordan Wolfson: *Little Room*

The exhibition space of Jordan Wolfson's *Little Room* looked like a tech lab: there were lots of different stations with computers, displays, cameras and HMDs, building a complex network – not necessarily comprehensible for the regular PC user. Each station was run by several people taking care of the technology as well as of the audience. From the perspective of a visitor ready to experience VR, the room was structured by four separate VR stations each with two HMDs hanging from a scaffold at the ceiling. In the middle of the room, there

10 Ibid.

11 Richard Coyne (1999): Technoromanticism. Digital Narrative, Holism, and the Romance of the Real, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, p. 40.

12 Marcus Carter/Ben Egliston (2024): Fantasies of Virtual Reality. Untangling Fiction, Fact, and Threat, Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, p. 55.

13 Ibid., pp. 19–20.

14 Kat Kitay proposes the concept of technoromanticism to grasp a trend of contemporary art after »post-internet«. In relation to Richard Coynes literary analysis, she observes an increasing »aesthetic flirtation with the materiality of technology« which, on the one hand asks existential questions about the relation between human and machine and at the same time risks to »blur[…] the lines between critique and commodity fetishization.« Kat Kitay (2024): »What's after Post-Internet Art?«, in: spikeartmagazine.com (28.02.2024). Online: https://spikeartmagazine.com/articles/essay-whats-after-post-internet-art (last access: 15.09.25).

was a station where multiple cameras (96) were mounted on a dome-like scaffold. They were directed towards the middle to capture a person's body from all around (fig.1).

fig. 1: Jordan Wolfson: Little Room, installation view: Fondation Beyeler, Riehen, 01.06.-03.08.2025

Upon entering the exhibition space, the audience's attention was directed to this station. Guided by a retractable queuing system, we would be kept away from the HMD-settings and stand in line watching other people's bodies getting captured and waiting to go through this procedure ourselves. Someone from the staff asked me if I had a partner with whom I'd do the experience together. As I came without company, they wanted to match me with someone. After waiting a while, I did so myself, as the person seemed too busy handling other stuff like informing impatient visitors that the whole procedure would take up to one hour or preparing the next couple for the body scan.

Randomly, I matched with a Mexican gallerist who was there for Art Basel and who never experienced VR before. Knowing that we would swap each other's bodies in VR, I attempted to establish some familiarity between us. For me, this was an interesting match, as we had quite contrary positions in

terms of experiences and expectations towards the artwork. Their motivation to experience the artwork was driven by curiosity to finally experience VR and by the mystery surrounding this artwork. For them, the mystery was created by the speculative formulation within the announcement of the artwork as well as by friends who had recommended the artwork without revealing much about their experience. Well aware of Wolfson's fascination with *body horror*,[15] I shared some conceptual considerations I had on a previous experience with a VR artwork of his. While this was intended to unravel some of its mystery by exposing my expectations towards some kind of disturbing, yet conceptually approachable experience, I realized that my speculation just added another level of mystification to the artwork.

We had to interrupt our small talk to prepare for the body capture. Like in a security check of an airport, we had to leave our personal belongings with the staff outside the scanner. I also had to tie back my hair and tuck in my skirt to create clear body contours. One after another, we stepped into the dome. A person who was running the technology asked us to position ourselves in a relaxed A-pose and stand still until the flash of the cameras signaled that our image would be taken. After leaving our names with this person, we were guided by another helper to a table with two chairs. On a separate sheet we had to fill in the color of our eyes, which then was taken to two people, sitting behind big monitors connected to gaming computer. The monitors were turned away from us and the people behind them were facing the whole scenery in the middle of the space – that's where the magic happens, I thought. Here the photogrammetry software would reassemble our bodies, fragmented into 96 images, to become our digital avatars.[16]

Sitting at the table, we were now positioned close to one of the HMD-settings. We observed two other people being guided into the headsets and through a seemingly complicated calibration process conducted by yet another person. This person was running in between the HMD-people and the computer station, checking the functionality of the interface, becoming increasingly exasperated by the visitors who apparently had a hard time following their orders to bodily calibrate the headsets. For my partner and me,

15 See for example: Grant Bollmer/Katherine Guinness (2020): »Empathy and Nausea: Virtual Reality and Jordan Wolfson's Real Violence«, in: Journal of Visual Culture 19/1, pp. 28–46, https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412920906261.

16 Since light-based scanners have difficulties scanning reflecting surfaces, our eyes would be added to the avatars afterwards.

this whole situation became increasingly absurd. The technical effort that was being performed around us kicked us out of an initially flowy small talk. Waiting another twenty minutes in our seats, I tried to pick up the talk again by mentioning this gigantic setup. Intimidated by its apparent complexity, we focused on the performance of the viewers who finally immersed in a virtual experience in front of us. They were goofing around with their bodies, looking at each other from various perspectives and sometimes touching each other – shaking hands or hugging. Other couples behaved differently, only looking at each other or performing careful movements with their bodies. My partner admitted that they were not sure whether they even wanted the experience anymore. They exposed their insecurity about the whole situation. The longer we waited, the closer we got to the virtual experience, initial genuine curiosity turned into uncomfortable indisposition. How did we have to behave within the virtual? How close would we get? And how would it feel inhabiting the other's body? I was also uncomfortable with this projection but unlike my partner, really looking forward to it – given this hypercomplex technical and personal orchestration of the experience, I expected a lot. At least something that would be an answer to this spectacle.

We entered the VR by standing next to each other, each of us equipped with a headset. To calibrate, I was told to take my hands in front of my face, stretch one arm away from me, the other one close to my headset, facing the palm. Slowly walking a few steps forward, a few steps backward, I was continuously switching this position with my arms back and forth. After this was done, I put on a pair of headphones and waited for my partner to be ready. The appearance of a white, empty space with a few grid-like lines signaled the start of the virtual experience. We immediately faced each other. Instead of my partner, I saw a three-dimensional image of myself in front of me. It looked like an empty shell, like a puppet.[17] One of my arms had a strange distortion. Also, there were some glitches at the intersection of different materials, such as the skin and the cloth of my t-shirt or at my hairline. Even though the retrospectively added brown eyes were staring at me, without a blink, I found this puppet of myself quite cute. I had an amused look on my face, which made me think

17 For an extensive discussion of the relation between human and avatars see for example the contribution by Federica Cavaletti/Pietro Conte/Andrea Pinotti to this volume. See also Dieter Mersch et al. (eds.) (2023): Actor & Avatar. A Scientific and Artistic Catalog, Bielefeld: transcript.

back to the situation in which this image was taken. Also, the very visible technical errors were charming, as they highlighted the technical artificiality of this bodily object. But my partner had a different impression of themselves. They didn't want to look at me/themselves, expressing that they didn't know that they were so ugly. Bewildered by this reaction of my partner, I tried to convince them that it was the digital capture making us look like this: »It's their errors, not ours. Look, our mouths do not move, even though we are talking to each other.« But this did not work: »I'm so old and look at my posture!« I looked down at my actual body and observed the virtual representation of my partner. Their visual appearance was the same as mine, only as them. I looked at my/their hand and turned it around. Moving this body felt like a typical avatar representation in VR. The movements of the body parts that were not tracked – which included everything else than the hands and the head – were stiffly and schematically simulated. After a few moments, a mirror flew into the virtual space. We positioned each other in front of it and looked at our virtual bodies. Now I could guess why my partner was disturbed by their representation: their facial impression was rather shocked, which indeed looked a bit scary with the staring eyes. I took the mirror as a chance to project my own liveness into the avatar. I/they waved into the mirror, using my avatar as a tool to signal my sympathy but I wasn't sure about delivering this message. Neither could I attune to my avatar as a body, nor could we establish any relation to each other with or beyond these empty shells.[18] The mirror disappeared and suddenly we heard the voice of the artist through the headphones. The mouth of my partner/my mouth opened abruptly: »I am your father.« A different voice: »I'm your mother.« Him again: »God molested you.« The other one: »I'm God.« … »God murdered me.« … Statements like these were exchanged back and forth. I was assuming that my partner experienced the same as I did, seeing the mouth of my avatar opening and closing mechanically, simultaneously to the audio overlay. The last sentence was »Look at your hands.« Doing so, the virtual space vanished around us. We took off the hardware and looked at each other. My first thought was: »Seriously?« – which I probably also expressed on my face. Curious about the impressions of my partner, I asked them if we should take a minute and talk about it. »No, this was strange,« was the answer, and they left immediately.

18 For the concept of attunement between body and avatar see the contribution by Ksenia Fedorova/Jose Hopkins B. to this volume.

After spending more than an hour in the exhibition space and only about twelve minutes within the VR, I couldn't leave directly. I sat down on a chair to digest – not an existential disturbance but a profound irritation about the unimpressiveness of my VR experience. Apparently, the voice-over was supposed to add psychotic heaviness to the exerted body swap. But in all its artificial constructedness, it appeared to me as a lesson on what I was supposed to feel – intruded and possessed by the other. I was annoyed by this godlike performance of the artist, of which the voice-over was only the peak. The whole orchestration of the situation – the commitment of the visitors to wait extremely long to mess with their bodily integrity, the endeavor of 20 people in service of the technology and of the anxious, impatient, disturbed or also just disappointed audience – all of this seemed quite off.

But what was my partner disturbed and I disappointed of? Apparently, the whole situation has caused strong and ambivalent reactions that I think are revealing of the technoromantic myth that sustains this artwork. At the center of this seems to be the strange form of embodiment and the phenomenon of becoming affected by it. It's not about an affection towards the body you are inhabiting but towards the representation of your own body that appears in front of you. In various articles, this affection by the own bodily representation has been described as form of »cold mutual possession«, figuring as a »mutation of the body and a profound loss of agency«, a »dissociation of our own bodies in the most visceral way.«[19] While my partners' immediate reaction might fit to these descriptions, I could not establish any kind of visceral relation to my bodily representation. I was indeed disappointed that I did not experience any of the expected intensity and weirdness of embodiment. Instead, I felt affected by its technical curiosity. It was this »irritating hybrid of human and machine, of flesh and cyberspace«[20] that represented my image-body as a puppet and prevented any physical form of possession or dissociated embodiment. Rather than detaching me from the technological infrastructure, the simple arrangement of our clumsy bodies in this white, gridded space reminded me of the

19 Kate Brown (2025): »Jordan Wolfson's New Virtual Reality Is Peak Body Horror«, in: artnet.com. (24.06.2025). Online: https://news.artnet.com/art-world/jordan-wolfson-little-room-2659690 (last access: 15.09.2025).

20 Jolinde Hüchtker (2025): »Komm, wir tauschen unsere Körper. Eine Installation des Künstlers Jordan Wolfson macht's möglich«, in: zeit.de (13.07.2025). Online: https://www.zeit.de/2025/29/jordan-wolfson-koerper-tauschen-little-room/seite-2 (last access: 15.09.2025).

interface of a game-engine. Instead of nourishing a sense of psychotic dissociation, this »clinical coldness«[21] of the virtual space placed me into some kind of experimental stage of VR, maybe in a context of play-testing the avatars. While this could have provided access to a more experiential reading of the artwork's technological conditions, the voice-over constituted the actual source of disappointment. It presented me some kind of reading of the artwork, which I couldn't relate to myself – the disturbing dimensions of missing attunement between physical body, body image and a sense of the self. Within the framework of play-testing, the voice-over appears as yet another layer of the experiment, exposing the immediate bodily affectedness as devotion to the illusional character of the technology.

Apparently, there are very different readings of this artwork which relate to the experiences and imaginary capacity of each viewer. However, I argue that the celebration of body horror in this artwork relates to a particular detachment from the exhibition space. It requires ignoring the technical and social efforts around the VR experience and presupposes the belief in its power to produce an immersive effect of unity between body and machine in order to be effectively disturbed. The egocentrism of immersive experience is being reproduced and backed up by the psychoanalytical framework of an »oedipal drama triangle between father, mother, and child, with alternating victim and perpetrator roles«[22] is being introduced by the voice-over of the artist. This reading features the mystification of the technology, as it confirms VR's immediacy trick as a mode for rehearsing the psychotic dissonance of individual's self-perception. Linking this experience back to the concept of technoromanticism, the exposure of the technological infrastructure and the laborious procedure of bodily involvement in VR could have led to disenchanting the technology.[23] Yet, the actual procession of the images, the work of the software, stays hidden inside the networked hardware, awaiting the viewer inside the headset for subjugation. The way the audience is directed towards the VR spectacle not only fetishizes the technology but also inflates the expectations towards the

21 Sebastian Frenzel (2025): »VR-Installation von Jordan Wolfson: Ist man Gott begegnet, ein wenig gestorben und wieder geboren?«, in: monopol-magazin.de (29.06.2025). Online: https://www.monopol-magazin.de/jordan-wolfson-vr-installation-little-room-fondation-beyeler (last access: 15.09.2025).

22 Ibid.

23 For a discussion of the semiotics of enchantment of VR technology see Stefan Rieger (2024): Imagination und Immersion. Topologien des Virtuellen, Bielefeld: transcript, esp. pp. 323–324 and p. 402.

virtual experience, which tends to figure as a self-fulfilling prophecy.[24] Aiming at a detachment from technological infrastructure in favor of its effectiveness, I argue that the virtual situation promotes an awe-driven viewer, enforcing the technoromantic myth rather than disclosing it. Rehearsing and exposing the individual's helplessness in face of the technology's effectiveness, the artwork tends to »entertain[…] gloom-and-doom pastiche without saying anything at all.«[25]

What this »aesthetic flirtation with the materiality of technology«[26] does show is the enormous infrastructural effort to produce and provide a more or less convincing virtual viewing experience. It also exposes a crucial phenomenon of the hybrid constellation of VR art, namely the social awkwardness in face of the anticipated bodily affection by the virtual situation, arising from the orchestration of expectations within the exhibition space. The explicit exposure of the technology, the aesthetic flirtation with its materiality, causes and at the same time highlights the fundamentally unsettling effect of VR art and the genuine insecurity in how to properly approach the artwork. This unsettling effect of the technology is backed up by the narrative of the artwork. Spreading within and beyond the walls of the exhibition space, even into the virtual space of the headset, this narrative demonstrates the power of »rumor as a participatory force«[27] as a crucial element in the artistic orchestration of expectations.

3. Theo Triantafyllidis: *Staphyloculus (or, the paradox of site specificity of virtual realities)*

While also staging the awkwardness between inside and outside audiences, my second example turns the effects of a technoromantic imaginary around. It hides the technological complexity of virtual embodiment behind the expectation of a playful, even random experience. In *Little Room*, playfulness was the

24 See Richard Jenkins (2000): »Disenchantment, Enchantment and Re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium«, in: Max Weber Studies 1/1, pp. 11–32, esp. p. 13.

25 K. Kitay: What's after post-internet Art?

26 Ibid.

27 Karin Bruns (2006): »›Do it wherever you want it but do it!‹ Das Gerücht als produktive Partizipationskraft der ›Neuen Medien‹«, in: Britta Neitzel/Rolf F. Nohr (eds.), Das Spiel mit dem Medium. Partizipation, Immersion, Interaktion, Marburg: Schüren Verlag, pp. 332–347.

least expected mode of aesthetic experience, in *Staphyloculus* it is the most expected one, which turns out to be just right for exploring the profoundness of the artwork.

The exhibition setup consists of a simple arrangement of VR-hardware, a banner, and a second screen. The VR viewer, equipped with the bulky headset of the HTC-Vive and its two controllers, is standing in front of a horizontal banner, which is suspended from the ceiling (fig. 2). It shows a panorama view of a desert. Various images are collaged onto this backdrop, creating a peculiar scene: There is a VR-setup in the middle of the desert, surrounded by a few big rocks. The headset and the controllers are floating in between two room-scale sensors. A red location pin is set in the distance. Around this setting, some coral-like creatures lurk in the vegetation. There is a big drawing on the right side of the banner that looks like a depiction of the biological life cycle of these creatures. It connects the following pictograms with each other: a few differently shaped creatures – human eyes looking in different directions – one human eye labeled with scientific terms – two hands holding a gamepad – a schematically depicted figure in T-pose – and something that looks like a skin infection. One of these coral-like creatures appears as a physical model, being presented by a human hand from behind of a rock on the left side of the banner. In front of this rock, a monitor and a keyboard are placed on the desert ground. Close to this setting, a strange, small sphere is hovering above the ground. It shows a person with an HMD on their head, standing in the same desert location as that of the panorama. The person is directed towards the rock – the one in the sphere as well as the one in the panorama. Following the perspective of the person to very left edge of the banner, Caspar David Friedrich's wanderer appears on a rock at the horizon, gazing into the supposed vastness of the desert beyond our point of view. Our point of view on this setting and on the VR viewer in front of the banner is also being emphasized by a shadow of a figure cast onto another rock.

fig. 2: Theo Triantafyllidis: Staphyloculus, 2017, installation view: Plural Landscapes, group show at Keiv, Athens, 01.-17.04.2022

But what are we seeing from this point of view? How do the different images of the desert, the creatures and the technology relate to each other and to the virtual experience? The collage-like arrangement on the banner resembles some kind of storyboard for the VR experience, but without a comprehensible narrative. As a backdrop for VR experience, it rather seems like a mood board, visually placing the viewer in a unique atmosphere. This setting explicitly exposes the behavior of the VR viewer to the exhibition space which turns into a performance ready to be interpreted by an outside audience. But this performance is similarly incomprehensible. The VR viewer gestures with the controllers and maneuvers their body in peculiar ways. Sometimes, it looks like they are eagerly interacting with something stubborn in digital space. Sometimes they just seem to observe their surroundings. Competition or contemplation? Intuitive play or choreographed movement? The screen, which is mounted onto the wall next to the VR-setting, could provide information about the actual experience. But instead of translating the situation from the point of view of the immersant, as the second screen in a VR setup usually does, it depicts yet another perspective onto the scenery that must be captured from inside the virtual scenario. Here, we can see the VR hardware

moving in the desert according to the viewer's position. In this sense, the viewer's bodily movements become integrated into the desert scene, but what the actual experience consists of stays mysterious. The wall label next to the screen is giving a hint:

> »A Virtual Reality experience that attempts to recreate the first known outbreak of Polywobbly Fervenitis. According to live footage found on the site in Joshua Tree, California, the depicted artist attempted to setup a complete VR rig under scorching sunlight. As suggested by the investigation, when the headset was exposed to the desert sun, its display had a chemical reaction that was somehow translated into a digital signal that started a computer virus. The computer virus that had some kind of primal Artificial Intelligence, managed to mutate itself into a strain of bacteria, now known as Staphyloculus, that spreads through the use of Virtual Reality headsets. In this first incident, the artist was infected by the microorganism and, after hosting it for a while, brought it back to Los Angeles and started the spread of Polywobbly Fervenitis. The ability of this sentient microorganism to freely transform from computer virus to real world bacteria has astounded the scientific community that is anxiously looking for a cure.«[28]

This is providing information about the images on the banner: the location must be in the national park, the VR setup refers to the technical experiment, the image of the sphere probably documents the artists conducting it and the coral-creatures are likely to be the virus whose outbreak is depicted in the life cycle. Yet, the situation of the viewer stays blurry: Is this a recreation of the outbreak in which we're going to be infected? Or are we part of the scientific community that is looking for a cure? This description of the artwork creates a backstory to the virtual experience and situates the viewer within a science-fiction story. Instead of giving reasonable background information on the artwork, it figures as a lore, known from computer games, which creates a narrative to prepare the user for its role within the virtual environment. As such, the VR experience is being detached from the conventions of the exhibition space and suggests a playful mode of experiment and play.

Knowing that my actual experience would not be translated onto the screen, which prevented the outside audience from being able to judge my behavior, I felt encouraged to go for this playful attachment to the virtual space. Inside the VR, I landed in the desert. The vastness of the desert appeared like

28 Website Theo Triantafyllidis.

a scene from an open world game, ready to be explored.[29] Intuitively, I tried to use the controllers to teleport myself through the space. As this did not work, I was restricted to explore my immediate surroundings. The carefully designed visual and acoustic details – the warm light of the sunset, the shadows of the vegetation, and the close humming of an insect – addressed a sense of tactility. My body itself was missing, it was only represented by the headset and the controllers, which cast a shadow on the desert ground. I could also observe this body representation within a monitor, which was placed in between the bushes and served as some kind of mirror. This monitor was part of a complete VR rig that was surrounding me in virtual space, similar to the technical setup in the exhibition space as well as in the artist's experiment.

fig. 3: Theo Triantafyllidis: Staphyloculus, 2017, ingame screenshot from the VR-experience

Suddenly, some of the small creatures appeared in the vegetation, shyly hiding from my gaze behind the bushes and rocks. They drew my attention away from the technical setup and one after another jumped towards me with a cute, squeaking sound. When I tried to grab them, they attached themselves

29 Marc Bonner (2018): »Die gekerbte Wildnis – Inszenierungen vermeintlich unberührter Umwelt in digitalen Spielwelten«, in: Paidia. Zeitschrift für Computerspielforschung (28.02.2018), pp. 1–24.

onto my hardware. Like a skeleton, they bridged the gap between headset and controllers. On one hand, I did see the urge of preventing this bodily invasion by trying to get rid of these stubborn creatures, on the other hand, this arbitrary visual representation of my body added a feeling of pleasure to my embodiment. I played around with this body and observed myself in the shadow and in the monitor (fig. 3). I used the technology to observe my whole virtual body– how it would bend down to the screen and move back again. Apparently, this technical mirror supported my sense of attunement to the virtual body, which I playfully explored.

After a few minutes, the wobbly creatures burst with a plop and my bodily representation disappeared. Instead, a video sphere appeared in front of my face, mirroring the whole scene in which I was standing (fig. 4). The artist appeared close to the surface, pulling his headset over his eyes. As he started to explore his surroundings with the controllers, his voice appeared from off screen: »Ok, this is a camera… 360 camera right here… The rock, is here… aaah, this is a real rock! What is this? Where are we?… Ok, I can walk around. I can feel the wind on my face. I can feel the wind on my fucking face!« He was commenting on his experience like in a let's play video. This situation was yet another mirror of my previous experience, but not in a sense of supporting virtual embodiment but of exposing my virus-body as a fictional illusion of what I was actually doing: gesturing in space with the technology. While the virus was my tool of embodiment, the artist's tool is the technology on which he commented further. To observe whether our current situations would also relate to each other, I tried to touch the same rock as he did, but in my surroundings. Instead of feeling anything, a coral-colored guardian appeared in front of my face, marking the technical boundary of my freedom of movement as well as of the lacking materiality of my virtual surrounding. I turned towards the rock in the video, which inflated as soon as I touched it with my controller. An animated sound corresponded to this inflation and also the voice-over reacted to it: »aaah, its growing, its growing… So, this is a skybox? Or is it a video?« The video sphere inflated until it encapsuled me (like a skybox). Suddenly, a wireframe stretched over the whole scenery, covering the surface of the desert with a coral-colored polygon grid. The artist next to me tripped over a cable: »What am I supposed to get out of this? Come on – virtual reality? You call this virtual reality? What the fuck is this?« The virtual surrounding burst into multiple particles and ended in a coral-colored void.

fig. 4: Theo Triantafyllidis: Staphyloculus, 2017, ingame screenshot from the VR-experience

Indeed, what was this? How do both parts of this artwork, the peculiar embodiment through the technology as well as the virus and the eversion of the virtual space, relate to each other? The appearance of the video sphere served as some kind of reality check. Seeing the artist handling the technology and hearing his comments, I realized that I had not thought about how my situation was constructed. Instead, I fully immersed myself into the playful affection by the virus. Like the virus, the representation of the technology functioned as a tool for further bodily involvement. Reconstructing the virtual scenario as a bubble and revealing my genuine bodily involvement as a convincing effect of its egocentric and affective tools,[30] the video sphere destabilized this experience of unity between my body and the technology. It exposed the fragility of immersion into a virtual situation and unraveled all kinds of layers of its constructedness. By addressing the technological components constituting the visual space, such as the 360° camera, a wireframe, the video and a skybox, the experienced stability of the environment becomes questionable: The wireframe exposes the desert environment as a scan. The correlation between 360° video and a skybox links back to the infrastructure of a game-engine where all kinds of visual material – be it the scan or the video – may serve as a resource for spatial simulation and, in case of the skybox, for the illusion of

30 H. Steyerl: Bubble Vision.

infinity.[31] The video sphere links the question of space to that of body and proposes an understanding of one's own embodiment as part of the artists experiment. From this perspective, the virus body emerging in between the VR-hardware can be addressed as an exploration of the VRIK model (fig. 2). This is a »full body solver« that tracks the position of controller and headset to simulate the whole body with the means of an inverse kinetics algorithm.[32] The experience of affective attachment, the effect of bodily attunement with the skeleton of this body model highlights the paradoxical effect of »double bind patterning,« which furnishes the inanimate digital object with a »quality of liveness through movement.«[33]

This conceptual link between both parts of the artwork is supported by the narrative of the virus outbreak. At first, it's attached to the viewer's body, then it's attached to the environment figuring as a mutation in form of the coral-colored wireframe and the guardian. Just like the virus constituted the skeleton of my virtual body, the wireframe constitutes the skeleton of the virtual environment, revealing the perceptual illusion of materiality and liveness as an experienced relation between skeleton and skin. The exploration of the artist and his let's-play like commentary provide access to these technical layers of observing the phenomenon of embodiment within the virtual space. At first, I felt exposed by the disclosure of my lived illusion. But against this background, the playful affection by the virus outbreak seems to be an important detour to this observation: to know what you're observing you need to experience yourself.

Coming back to the expectations orchestrated by the exhibition set-up, I understand the inflated narrative of the science-fiction scenario as a tool to detach the VR experience from the exhibition space. Directed to an outside

31 Marc Bonner (2021): »The World-Shaped Hall. On the Architectonics of the Open World Skybox and the Ideological Implications of the Open World Chronotope«, in: Id. (ed.), Game, World, Architectonics. Transdisciplinary Approaches on Structures and Mechanics, Levels and Spaces, Aesthetics and Perception, Heidelberg: University Publishing, pp. 65–98.

32 Big thanks to Theo for taking the time for a studio visit and walking me through the technical layers of the artwork. Technical introduction of VRIK on the oculus developers page: https://developers.meta.com/horizon/blog/developer-perspectives-character-animation-in-dead-and-buried/ (last access: 15.09.2025).

33 Sina Seifee (2022): »Rigging Deamons«, in: Blanca Pujalset et al. (eds.), DATA browser 08 Volumetric Regimes. Material cultures of quantified presence, Open Humanities Press, pp. 32–56, here: p. 39.

audience, it delivers a gamey backstory as a framework for interpreting the viewer's performance in relation to the collage-like banner and the perspective of the second screen. The fact that this setup doesn't expose the viewer's actual experience supports a detachment from the exhibition space and an adaption of a curious and playful mode within the virtual space. The role of the viewer as someone becoming infected and looking for a cure translates into an affective as well as reflective negotiation of the technological and imaginary effects of inhabiting virtual space with a virtual body. In the virtual experience of the artwork, the initial game world situation is irritated by a form of 360° documentary of this situation, which is infected by the narrative itself. It is not a question of a distinct or even transcendent outside perspective on the VR experience but the interrelation between different modes of reception, which addresses the »paradox of site specificity of VR« as the central element of its aesthetic experience. Initially, the virus narrative tends to cover the complex interplay between body, space and technology. In a very explicit sense, this work description employs rumor as a participatory force to involve the viewer into some kind of fantasy. Taken as a gamey backstory, this science-fiction scenario risks to »diminish tangible concerns with equipment and embodiment.«[34] Integrated into the actual experience of the artwork, this narrative is all about these tangible concerns with equipment and embodiment. While projecting the fantasy of a virtual space, in which the »boundaries of human and machine will vanish,«[35] it introduces the role of imagination into the production of an elusive unity of virtual embodiment and thus complicates its material parameters of body and technology. As such, I read the artwork as a humorous commentary on the technoromantic fantasy, as a revelation of the infrastructural conditions of VR's immediacy effect and as a motivation to use of our affective fascination as the basis for active engagement with its material reality.

Conclusion

Coming back to my question from the beginning: What is it about the hybrid constellation of VR art that causes strong and ambivalent reactions? Feeling excited, annoyed, overwhelmed and disappointed – all of this was part of my

34 R. Coyne: Technoromantism, ix.

35 Ibid. p. 19.

experiences of the artworks. Apparently, they are indicators for strong affection by the artworks, which is the result of a fundamental commitment to their propositions. In the discussion of these examples, I was interested in how both artworks deal with the hybrid situation of the viewer – what is being experienced of the artwork from outside, how does this affect the experience of the inside and how do both spheres interrelate in terms of aesthetic experience? Expectations about the relation between body and technology, about its lived intensity versus its (in)comprehensible complexity are what migrates between outside and inside experience. They become visible by being disappointed. Instead of leading to a dead end, this provides further access to the artistic gesture in playing with this relation and its imaginary.

I was excited by the anticipation of *Little Room* prompted by the lure of body horror inside as well as by the technical show-off outside. Yet, both of these dimensions of the artwork were disappointing given its clichéd sensationalism. The virtual space of *Little Room* traps the individual inside its own insecurity about virtual embodiment and features a position of helplessness towards overwhelming effects of the technology.

I was not necessarily excited by the anticipation of *Staphyloculus* prompted by the imagination of becoming infected as well as of playing a game in the exhibition space. Yet, the disappointment of these expectations nourished a sense of excitement in face of partaking in the disclosure of its sensationalism. The virtual space of *Staphyloculus* plays with different modes of virtual embodiment and features the individual's insecurity as a means of dealing with the overwhelming effects of the technology.

Both of these artworks address virtual embodiment as a question of imaginary and tactile attunement to a virtual image body. They stress the fragility of this phenomenon by questioning the materiality of virtual representation. Yet, they draw crucially divergent figures of the viewer – one whose affection further promotes this fragility, and one whose affection is part of the questioning. When I put both artworks in Hito Steyerl's crystal bubble and look at the figure of the viewer from outside – in both of them, the viewer's body is still missing. It's lost in the isolation of *Little Room* and encouraged to deal with this lostness by *Staphyloculus*.

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