Seeing with the Body at a Virtual-Reality Art Show
by Lenore Metrick-Chen on May 11, 2016

Artists are generally the first to explore the unique potential of new technology. For most of the modern era, theorists prioritized word over image, creating a world that is dominated by either/or constructions. But virtual reality art galvanizes what we already suspected: that we are indeed embodied in a different world in which our words have lagged behind images. Through virtual reality, images exhibit a state of affairs that previously would have been possible only as paradoxes. Virtual reality art brings us into dialogue with the global changes in our way of understanding the world. Curator and artist Christopher Manzione’s exhibition Space Between the Skies, at New York’s Apexart, includes three virtual reality installations that radically shift both the viewing experience and commonly held assumptions based on tradition binary patterns of thought.

Immediately upon entering the gallery, visitors experience the first of many alterations in their assumptions. The works on view invert the axiomatic gallery practice of presenting objects (whether material or filmic) for collective viewing. Of the five pieces included in the exhibit, only Nicholas O’Brien’s “Cross Timbers” (2016), a projected video game situated at the back of the gallery, permits a group visual experience. And although the visual component (a 35mm photographic transparency) in Seth Chuetts ”Breaking Economies” (2016) is too tiny for group viewing, its sound does permeate the entire gallery. But for the virtual reality pieces, at any given time only a single appropriately equipped viewer can see or hear the art; nothing of the colorful imagery viewable via the headset confronts the rest of the gallery audience. Viewing the work occurs only individually and consecutively, not simultaneously. Only the external housings are directly visible: three black headsets and three pairs of black headphones dangling limply from the ceiling by heavy black wires. To be frank, aesthetically, it is not a seductive picture.

Then why compose virtual reality art? There is no doubt that the technologies of the late 20th and early 21st centuries — the internet, smartphones, Twitter, Snapchat, and on and on — are creating new relationships, not just in communication but in our definition of self, our access to the world, and our apprehension of it. But sensation is prior to cognition. Changes in technology often result from the desire for increased efficiency in systems that are already in place. But as we have known at least since Marshall McLuhan’s The Medium is the Message, technology has its own voice, causing unpredictable consequences in social systems. Often these consequences are difficult to detect, since they are not jarring in appearance or in their immediate consequences. The changes occur not as radical alterations to objects but instead as shifts in the relationships between things and in the framing of categories, reorienting dynamics between people, objects, and, for lack of a better term, the phantasmagoria of space and time.

In the largely uncharted technology of virtual reality, artists must invent the medium as they engage with it. Each virtual reality artwork places us inside looking out, contrary to the normal position where the audience is outside the art looking in. Experiences of both time and space are dissociated from their naturalized relationships, hence they function dialectically. Attributes that were previously considered contradictory and opposite instead now inscribe and reconfigure one another: collapsing configuration of the distance between here and there, merging presence with absence and abstraction with object, and complicating categories of dimensionality. Opposite possibilities are present simultaneously. Merleau-Ponty anticipated this as early as 1964 when he wrote, in his essay “Eye and the Mind”:
I see things, each one in its place, precisely because they eclipse one another, and that they are rivals before my sight precisely because each one is in its own place—in their exteriority, known through their envelopment, and their mutual dependence in their autonomy. Once depth is understood in this way, we can no longer call it a third dimension ... Depth thus understood is, rather, the experience of the reversibility of dimensions, of a global “locality” in which everything is in the same place at the same time, a locality from which height, width, and depth are abstracted, a voluminosity we express in a word when we say that a thing is there.

Each of the three virtual reality works in this show presents a world that reconfigures our expectations by placing us within relationships that are unexpected because we only recently emerging from a reality based on dualisms.

John Craig Freeman's "Portal to an Alternative Reality VR: Minsheng Courtyard" (2016) functions as a gateway between the viewer's world and a fragment of China the viewer can traverse with a joystick. This "China" is at once realistic and a construction, a present experience of the no-longer-present. In visiting Freeman's artwork, the viewer finds herself occupying two spaces at the same time: a place that seems to be a physical reconciliation of oppositions, defying the homogenization of individual consciousness.

"Portal" images a portion of a courtyard in the Minsheng district of Wuhan: exterior walls, walkways, and even a person standing in the space. When Freeman first visited this area, the courtyard was still intact, so his virtual reality bridged only a geographical distance. But in the short span between his filming and now, "Portal" has come to bridge an even wider temporal gap: in the last year, the crumbling walls have been destroyed to make room for newer structures, so now the old district exists only in the VR world. And while the virtual reality images conjure up the ancient Chinese walls, nothing we see conforms to our expectations of three-dimensionality. In the piece, a wall or object that seems fully three-dimensional when viewed from one side simply disappears when visited from another. Consequently, although the VR images define a space that is inhabitable, paradoxically the space is also fugitive, flattening out and disappearing. "Portal" emphasizes that neither the buildings we inhabit nor the space they contain are solid and enduring; instead both object and space are mutable, always in the process of becoming. This simultaneity of presence and absence of the surrounding buildings and their spatiality has an equally destabilizing effect on the viewer's sense of permanence.

Rachel Rossin's "Lossy" (2016) gives no motor control to the viewer, immediately immersing him in a world of fragments, as if some entity has shattered and its remains have become independent of one another, approaching and receding at varying speeds.

Some of the shards make themselves available for slow inspection, others hurtle straight at the viewer, and at times large elements are completely engulfing. They swirl around, encircling the viewer, but remain only briefly; surprisingly, their departure induces a pang of emotion, a feeling of being deserted. As they move into what seems in virtual reality to be the distance, they become more a screen than an object. While the pieces continue to exhibit object-like characteristics in proximity to the viewer, they are equally planar—not an object as much as a sheet or curtain, a creation of other dimensions, close at hand yet never tangible. They elicit awareness of a new sense, perhaps best described as seeing with the body. It's not touch, because nothing was tactile, yet still it involves the body. The closest approximation to this pioneering virtual reality experience might be that effected by centuries-old Chinese landscape paintings: an experience in which the eyes lead the viewer on a journey that involves imagining entering the landscape with the entire body. By speeding up the process of appearance and departure, events previously experienced as separate and static could instead be experienced as interlocking and fluid. This new experience brought with it a compound emotion, interlocking contentment and regret.

Seth Cluett, Ricky Graham, and Christopher Manzione collaborated on "To Notice and Remember" (2016), which places the viewer in a forest where trees seem comprised of points of light. Glimpsed with peripheral vision, the curtain of glimmering trees appears bright, but it fades away on direct gaze. Via a joystick, viewers can attempt to pursue the light, using a movement reminiscent of gliding, floating over large dark pools of deep black that seem to reflect a smattering of the lights from the trees above.
Virtual reality art plays with fixed notions, disentangling elements of space and time that were previously bound so tightly together they seemed to be inseparable. All three artworks on view in this show had a quality akin to viewing a city from the height of an airplane window. Distance unified the fragments into a single visual field; proximity revealed its actual lack of fixity and the temporality of its cohesion. Yet distance and proximity are themselves in need of revision: the entire space exists only in the narrow span between the lens of the glass and the lens of our eye. And traditional notions of time were no less precarious. Flipping the nature of time in childhood fairytales, where years go by in the magic world inhabited by the protagonists while no time passes in their home world, instead, in the virtual reality world, no time seems to pass at all. When I emerged, I was quite surprised to discover how long I had been engaged with the art. Instead of time passing, space seemed to be flowing, or maybe time was experienced spatially, while meanwhile I stood still.

If art is accurately described as a genus of objects from which utility has been subtracted, then at this moment, virtual reality art is art's epitome. At this phase in its development, neither its practical utility nor its political function have been definitively determined.

New technologies appeal to artists who want to explore. Herbert Brün, a pioneer who used a computer in music composition early in the 1950s, wrote in the essay “Music and Information and Communication and Chaos and...”: “Nothing is sooner lost than new ways and new languages, and the privilege to walk the new path and to utter the new tongue is given to us but for a moment. In no time the gift of a present turns into the possession of a property.” Inevitably, art helps create the social conditions that advance technology, moving toward the brink of virtual reality’s commercial applicability. The technology and the visions played with by artists are eagerly awaited by commodifiers ready to pounce.

Space Between the Skies has given us the privilege of experiencing the condition of the new, of savoring the creative dislocation produced by the unfamiliar medium before it becomes defined and packaged for us.
Installation view, ‘Space Between the Skies’ at Apexart