



Is Art Immersive?

Refik Anadol
*Machine Hallucinations:
Nature Dreams*
König Galerie, Berlin 2021

Truly, we are in thrall to numbers. \$450 million for a Leonardo that probably was not the work of the master himself—the figure alone exerts a fascinating effect. The promised 40 million visitors for a digital Monet exhibition displaying the famous garden at Giverny, first in Cincinnati and as of January 2024 in Munich, represents another impressive sum. The exhibition's subtitle is "The Immersive Experience." The organization mounting the show calls itself *Exhibition Hub* and promotes the event with a promise of "larger than life projections." The platform acquiring the project in the USA bears the telling name *Fever*. As far back as twenty years ago, in the "Museo Interattivo Leonardo da Vinci" in Florence, Leonardo's drawings of flying machines were enlarged into three-dimensional objects that could be touched and later, starting in 2019, encountered in digital form. The exhibition was initially intended for children and their parents. Not a single original work by Leonardo was on display. Since 2022, elaborate digital shows have been multiplying. "Tutankhamun: His Tomb and His Treasures" started fifteen months ago in Madrid; currently it is on display in Stuttgart. No foreseeable end to this enterprise has been envisaged: as many new cities as possible are invited to apply. The organizer in Stuttgart is already promoting the next project, "Viva Frida Kahlo." Since 2022, "Inside Dali," a project of the *Cross Media Group*, has also been running. Once again, a particularly big name is presented without any original works. ***The Art Newspaper*, the conservative trade journal, is now dedicating a long essay to "Immersive Institutions."** The author is Chris Michaels, former Director of Digital, Communications and Technology at the *National Gallery* in London. Michaels is not only showing the extent to which there has been a widespread increase of exhibitions with overpowering digital displays. He is also concerned with their global distribution. He is interested in contemporary projects currently taking place in Abu Dhabi, Hamburg, Las Vegas, Melbourne, or Shanghai. Here, too, the number of viewers overshadows that of successful museums. Michaels quotes Alexandra Payne, Creative Director of the London company *Outernet*, who praises experiences "that you cannot have at home." Not surprisingly, her motto is "Shaping the Future." *Outernet's* digital displays are effective even in urban spaces, for instance amidst the traffic at *Piccadilly Circus*. When, during the *Frieze 2023* fair, the huge HD screens suddenly displayed not just commercials but artistic programs, interviews, and film excerpts from the avant-garde sector, the art world's luminaries gathered there as well.

If we look back four decades, we find that Jenny Holzer may have paved the way for “Immersive Installations” with her “Truisms” on the advertising facades of New York’s *Times Square*, insofar as these new works are now also being produced by artists. In 2023, David Hockney, who had been drawing wonderful landscapes directly on his *iPad* screen for years, launched the exhibition titled “Bigger & Closer (not smaller & further away)” in the newly founded London *Lightroom*. Immersive art captivates him; he wants to be at the forefront. Holzer’s colleague Barbara Kruger — “I Shop Therefore I am” — recently embraced *TikTok*. The most successful artist in the broad trend of immersive installations since 2021, currently presenting a new work at *Serpentine Galleries*, is Refik Anadol. Whether on a beach in Miami, in the foyer of the New York *Museum of Modern Art*, in Berlin’s *König Galerie*, in Las Vegas, or as a speaker at the *Kunsthaus Zurich*, his room-filling works look like huge snake pits of undulating color. Here we experience the virtual world as the real, quite in line with the original aim of video games. **We are confronted with digitally intensified works that hold the attention captive with constant, unremitting intensity. The display continues for as long as there is electricity to feed it, and as we watch, we find ourselves surrounded by countless other viewers. The solitude of artistic contemplation, as well as the subjective halting of time in front of the work, have vanished.** The idea of the “immersive” pertains to the medium; it is less about the art. Hence almost all these presentations end up in kitsch. They repeat something that already exists and inflate it to the point of tyranny. In the highly committed use of countless reproductions, color filters, formal masks, and the application of artificial intelligence, we are witnessing the emergence of a strong aesthetic seriousness. Its governing mode is high pathos. It is the pathos that sometimes fiercely battles against the suspicion of kitsch. Opera as an immersive art form around the middle of the 19th century; 3-D movies before and after James Cameron’s 2009 epic “Avatar;” overwhelming rock concerts since Pink Floyd; “son et lumières” not only in front of French castles — those were some of the forerunners of these installations. They aspire to a visually dominant mass culture often underscored by loud music which, so far, mostly takes place outside of museums and theaters. “Global scale through global networks,” writes Chris Michaels in a subheading, for *Outerspace* and *Lightroom* in London are not the only such venues. There is *Culturespaces*, a consortium with presentation centers in New York, France, and Korea. *Grande Experiences* is a new Australian venture of this kind. Maximum attraction is the goal, terms like “new frontier” and “immersive revolution” are in circulation. Once you have seen more than ten such presentations, you may find yourself yearning for the couch and a bit of solitude again.

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