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CULTURAL STRATEGIES & PRODUCTION *NOW*



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GLOSSARY

- 1 *CO-CREATION*
- 2 *COLLECTIVE EUPHORIA*
- 3 *CONTEMPORARY PATRONAGE*
- 4 *DISRUPTIVE DISPLACEMENT*
- 5 *GLITCH CHOREOGRAPHY*
- 6 *GRADIENTS OF IMMERSION*
- 7 *INDUCING WONDER & MAGIC*
- 8 *LONG-TAIL PROVOCATION*
- 9 *NEW SPATIAL TYPOLOGIES*
- 10 *PARAMETERS OF AGENCY*
- 11 *PROGRESSIVE PRIVILEGING*
- 12 *RAISING THE STAKES*
- 13 *RECYCLING THE PSYCHEDELIC*
- 14 *SUBVERSIVE INFILTRATIONS*
- 15 *VIRTUAL BOUNDARIES*

INTRODUCTION

Our immersive cultural experiences have often been framed as part of a recent phenomenon catalyzed by the advent of technology. And yet, the use of space to inspire transcendence is a centuries-old formula.

One need only to time travel to the early sixteenth century at the height of the Renaissance. Patrons and worshippers sought to absolve their sins in the naves of soaring Gothic cathedrals whose flying buttresses reached for the heavens, while the light of God passed through intricately designed stained glass windows that induced biblical wonder. Subsequently satisfied and forgiven, they filled their churches' coffers and thus provided us with the original blueprint for the experience economy.

Five hundred years on, religion and its fraught relationship to nationalism remain more politicized than ever. Cultural spaces have supplanted the church as the "go-to" for enlightenment. Museums in the United States alone generate more than \$13 billion annually, and the global industry for live performance made an impressive \$26 billion in 2016.

Cathedral Church of Saint Peter at Exeter, Devon, England
Courtesy of David Iliff





The Museum of Ice Cream, Miami, Florida
Courtesy of the Museum of Ice Cream

The production of immersive cultural experiences has never been more varied, engendering a dynamic ecosystem where museums and malls, theaters and train stations, cinemas and consoles, and augmented, mixed, and virtual realities are just a few of the physical and digital “contemporary cathedrals” beckoning us to enter.

In economic terms, the desire to experience is outpacing the desire to consume.

75 percent of millennials (this demographic of eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds makes up one third of the US population) value experiences over things. This shift in value has mirrored a set of new players in the last decade who are distributing (market term) and commissioning (art world term) cultural entertainment (mash-up of both). Tech conglomerates (Google, Amazon), media companies (Refinery29, the New York Times Company), heritage brands (Coca-Cola, Levi’s), household brands (Glade of SC Johnson, Unilever), and independent collectives (the Museum of Ice Cream, Meow Wolf) are all producing experiences whose brief is to generate something that is memorable and impactful (generic marketing terms).

This expanding network, obsessed with the immersive experience, is also blooming new creative romances—engineers are partnering with ballerinas, scent designers with playwrights, musicians with architects, magicians with chefs. As boundaries are blurred and even eradicated, we are in an era of endless experimentation that has resulted in a wider spectrum of what constitutes content.

Nomenclature has also altered. We are less often visitors or audiences—terms that allude to a passive relationship to culture—and more likely users, which implies the negotiation of interfaces or an exchange framed by a set of rules, scripts, or prompts.

Critique unfortunately remains in the echo chambers of academia, so what role can universities play in this fast-moving, iterative organism of cultural production? Our Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation (GSAPP) seminar, entitled “Emergent Culture: Production and Strategies,” explored current attitudes toward spatial hybridity and immersion. We traversed the landscape of contemporary culture and were wowed by the choreography of the glitch in the speculative architecture of Liam Young and the internet art of Jodi. We debated the gradients of immersion in the theatrical environments of David Byrne and You Me Bum Bum Train. We tested the notion of subversive infiltration in Miranda July’s Somebody app and political provocateur Amir Baradaran’s AR project *Frenchising the Mona Lisa*. We obsessed over the prescience of the world-building technique used by Alex McDowell in *Minority Report*. And we marveled at the constant flow of brand collaborations by Jeff Koons (Google, Snapchat, Acute Art) that tested virtual boundaries. We reviewed more than a hundred case studies as we searched for strategies that would heighten our experience of immersive culture.

Interactive storytelling is nearing ubiquity, and every aspect of culture is contending with how to integrate it into their practices, their fields, their industries. Be it experiential marketing, experiential retail, experiential theater, experiential art, or a mash-up of all of the above, we cannot settle for the lowest common denominator.

Spectacle for the sake of spectacle, eye candy for the sake of likes, amount to mindlessness. Let’s shift the conversation from “lite” to “enlightment” and embrace the mediated environment that is complex and provocative.

The expanded field of experiential design has resulted in a kind of schizophrenic hyper-acceleration of cultural content. We (a group of millennial graduate students steered by a Gen-X organizer) set out to compose a short glossary of terms to define the strategies and conditions we found prevalent and intriguing among the noise. No matter the role you play—1.) distributor/producer; 2.) creator/artist; or 3.) user/audience—we hope this guide will prompt dialogue as we continue to expand upon this field with eyes wide open.

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Still from *Minority Report*, directed by Steven Spielberg
Courtesy of the director



CO-CREATION

British choreographer Wayne McGregor partners with the AI tool *Becoming as an "eleventh dancer,"* using it to catalyze new ideas for his new work *Atomos*.
Courtesy of Studio Wayne McGregor

While popular culture remains romantically obsessed with the notion of the struggling, lonely artist, the balance has tipped to favor highly organized studio systems that take their cue from Andy Warhol's *Factory* (1962). This model is best emulated today by Takashi Murakami's *Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd.* (2001)—an enterprise that spans multiple channels, a catalog of art products, and collaborations with luxury and streetwear brands.

Sole authorship is stepping aside for co-creation as creators partner with brands, their audiences, and machines. The how and with whom have become vastly more complex and nuanced.

LARPing (live-action role-playing) has gone from niche hobby to worldwide sensation, wherein, adhering to basic rules, participants in fictional settings create a day in historic battle or a journey to another planet.

The players of life-simulator games like *WolfQuest* or the *Sims* series inhabit the virtual bodies of animals or humans and make incidental to meaningful choices to progress forward.

In interactive experiences that involve technology, machines respond to stimuli from the audience. AI technologies collect and process this data—which includes movement, gestures, sounds, and temperature—and use it to enrich the experience taking place at that moment or as information for future productions.





Kanye West, Saint Pablo Tour, September 2016
Courtesy of Kanye West and @Mikel Galicia

COLLECTIVE *EUPHORIA*¹

The emergence of disco culture in the 1970s brought together young people whose inhibitions were checked at the door. Being in a room, surrounded by music and crowds, was an expression of a life lived intensely and culminated in dancing with oneself and with others.

Communal and energetic, this state of immersion has never been more popular today, as it prevails in well-staged concerts, massive music festivals, and intimate theatrical performances.

A recent study conducted by neuroscientists at the University College London discovered that live theater performance can catalyze synchronized heartbeats among audience members.²

Collective euphoria is not only a shared state of pleasure and of heightened emotions, it can also produce a common physiological response.

1. We borrow the term from Simon Frith. Simon Frith, "The Best Disco Record: Sharon Redd: 'Never Give You Up,'" in *Beautiful Things in Popular Culture*, ed. Alan McKee (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

2. This study was conducted by Dr. Joseph Devlin, Head of Experimental Psychology at University College London, and carried out for Encore Tickets in 2007. Phil Miller, "From the heart: watching live theater unifies audience's heartbeat, research finds," *The Herald*, November 15, 2017.

CONTEMPORARY PATRONAGE

Red Bull Music Academy Los Angeles poster for *The Ecstatic World of Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda*, a concert that took place at Coltrane's Sai Anantam Ashram and featured her devotional music inspired by gospel and Hinduism.
Courtesy of Red Bull Music Academy

Fresco painters were the original beneficiaries of papal patronage. The aristocracies and monarchies of the Renaissance soon followed the church and commissioned composers, playwrights, and portrait artists. The nineteenth- and twentieth-century titans of our industrialized nation built our cultural institutions, and today our twenty-first-century “platform” companies have taken center stage.

These memorable events can range from corporate spectacle by way of introducing a product/service (the BMW Art Car, 1976–present) to altruistic experimentation that may eventually be included in the canon of art history (Bell Labs and E.A.T., “9 Evenings: Theater and Engineering,” 1966). In 1998, the energy drink Red Bull established their now eponymous Music Academy. Their festival lands in a different host city each year, as they support and collaborate with musicians and artists of all stripes. In 2018, for their twentieth anniversary, Red Bull’s well-regarded celebration returns to Berlin, where the Music Academy was born.

Patronage is synonymous with equity-building regardless of the source. Recognize and take advantage of this diversified pool of funding for commissioning culture.



DISRUPTIVE *DISPLACEMENT*

Detail from Hyphen-Labs' *NeuroSpeculative AfroFeminism*, a VR installation
Courtesy of the artists

New technologies that are capable of impersonation or machine-vision decoding have made displacement a powerful tool of actualizing the other and enhancing empathy.

Displacement alters the user's perception and can happen through a change of scenario (recontextualization), a shift in identity (assuming others' subjectivities), or an adjustment of the bio-physiological (temperature change).

Usurping mediums such as literature and film (traditional spaces that elicit empathy), VR has led the way, allowing users to embody an immigrant in Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Carne y Arena*, a tree in a Brazilian rainforest in Milica Zec and Winslow Porter's *Tree*, a black woman in Hyphen-Labs' *NeuroSpeculative AfroFeminism*, or a doll in David Byrne's "Being Barbie," an experiment in *Theater of the Mind*.

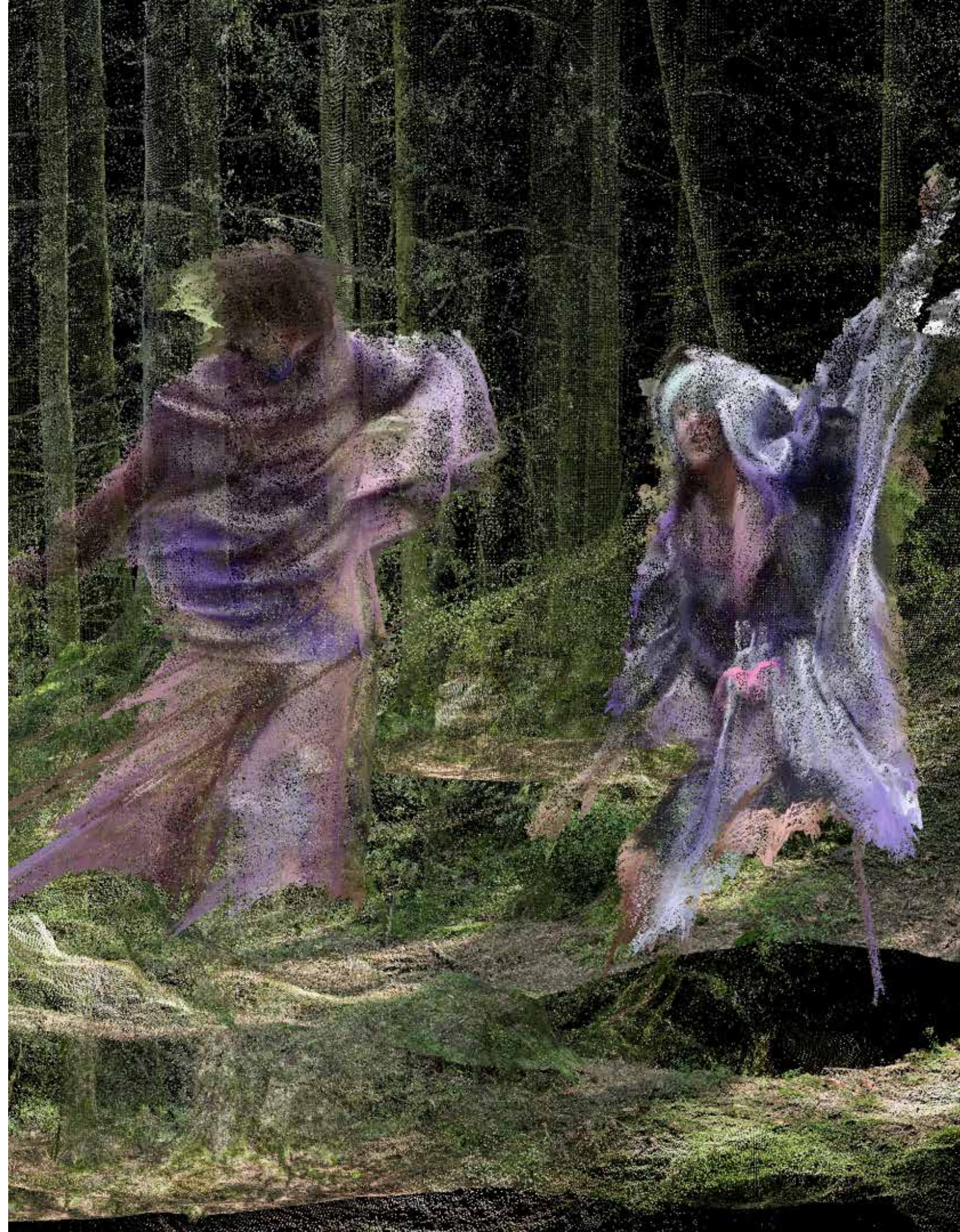
GLITCH CHOREOGRAPHY

Where the City Can't See is a short fiction film, set in the near future, that depicts a Chinese-controlled Detroit and features young factory workers who escape into hidden parts of the city at night. Architect and artist Liam Young shot the entire film using laser-scanning technology.

Courtesy of the artist

You know a concept is in its ascendancy when a television series bears its name, as in the case of “glitch,” which is also the title of an Australian zombie story about defying mortality (biological glitch). While “glitch art” typically captures visual anomalies and errors, and “glitch” is a genre of electronic music that amplifies the aesthetics of failure, both of these creative processes value the sentiment of the imperfect.

Employing serendipitous omissions, distortions, and redundancies, as well as digital manipulation and misalignment, artists are choreographing the glitch to imbue their work with deeper meaning by exposing both analog and digital faults in our systems.



GRADIENTS OF *IMMERSION*



Hansel & Gretel, an immersive installation exploring public space and surveillance, by Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron, and Ai Weiwei at the Park Avenue Armory, New York City, June 7-August 6, 2017
Courtesy of the artists and © James Ewing

Gradients of immersion have a number of verticals and include physical, social, psychological, and emotional factors.

It's incumbent upon the artist/producer to determine what level of immersion a project should strive for: individual or collective, static or in motion, passive or participatory, or involving one or multiple senses.

Successful immersion is best achieved when the user is a willing participant who is open-minded and embraces risk. The anonymity of the ticket-holder has been supplanted by information drawn from personal data, questionnaires, social media history, and direct contact (physical and/or conversational) with other audience members.

Oftentimes the varied states of immersion are mediated by the use of technology (headsets, AR glasses, masks); physical effects (architecture, stage); or physiological effects (darkness, fog).

INDUCING *WONDER* & MAGIC

The sophisticated fairy tales of *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and *The Wizard of Oz* (1900) remain two primary examples of literary immersion. In each case, a young female protagonist embarks on a journey to discover the fantastic, the nonsensical, and the inexplicable.

As the rage of spectacle-ism wanes, artists are returning to the nineteenth-century tropes of wonder and magic.

Information overload has made us crave experiences that cannot be explained, and there are abundant examples on screen, from Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) and the "magic cave" that is built at the end-of-the-world conclusion to Netflix's supernatural series *Stranger Things* (2016), which takes place in an alternate dimension known as "The Upside Down."

Magicians and illusionists have found fertile ground in theatrical works such as Derek DelGaudio's *In & Of Itself* (2017) and Scott Silven's *At the Illusionist's Table* (2017), the latter which also serves dinner. The immersive installations of Pipilotti Rist and Yayoi Kusama have forever changed museum-goers' responses from the epiphanic moment of "Aha!" to an entranced state of "Wow, wow, wow!"

Installation shot of Yayoi Kusama, *Mirror Room (Pumpkin)*, 1991
Courtesy of the artist and HAM/Kukorelli



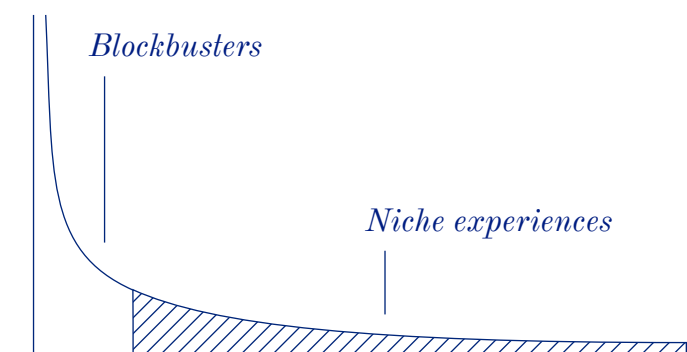


LONG-TAIL *PROVOCATION*

Alison S. M. Kobayashi's *Say Something Bunny*, a one-woman show as experimental immersive theater for twenty-four people, had an original run of two months from June to July 2017. Centered on an audio recording from the '50s, the play extended its run for eight sold-out months and continues through April 2018.

Courtesy of the artist and © Henry Chan

We borrow the term “long tail” from Chris Anderson, who reintroduced the concept in a 2004 *Wired* article. His argument addressed the status quo in which in-vogue products/books that sell well in a short amount of time can ultimately be outpaced by less popular items over an extended period. Plotted on a graph, the vertical axis represents sales and the horizontal axis, popularity. If you replace sales with cultural impact you can use similar logic and apply it to immersive experiences.



Some sensational cultural moments create immediate heat and then fizzle out. Niche experiences that are provocative assessments of our current conditions should not be discounted. They create a larger, diversified pool of engagement and can remain relevant for perhaps months and years.

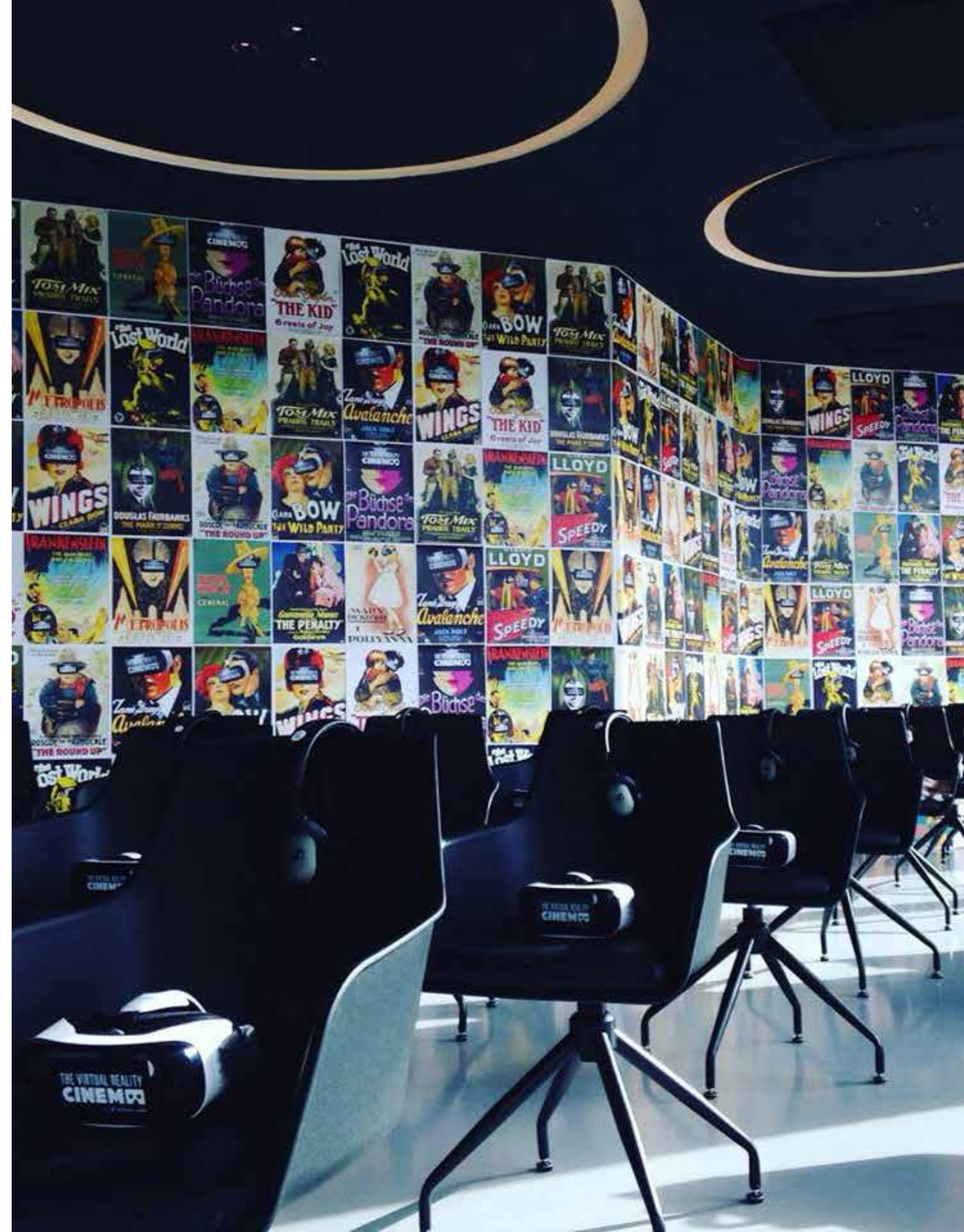
NEW SPATIAL TYPOLOGIES

A permanent VR cinema in Amsterdam
Courtesy of The VR Cinema

As we contend with immersive experiences and virtual boundaries, we are also puzzling over the design conundrum of new spatial typologies.

Traditional concert halls and theaters are being retrofitted to blur the delineation of stage and seating, and to facilitate a heightened participatory experience, while the rollout of fifty new Hologram USA Theaters featuring *Billie Holiday Alive* is underway.

The process of defining the interstitial physical spaces for VR experiences has lagged behind the growing popularity of and demand for this medium. More effort and expertise are required to design communal and exhibition spaces for VR-viewing that match the sophistication of the technology.



PARAMETERS *OF AGENCY*

As the traditional power balance of artist (dominant) to audience (submissive) has begun to equalize, it's more vital than ever to confront and leverage the bounded agency each group wields in an immersive experience.

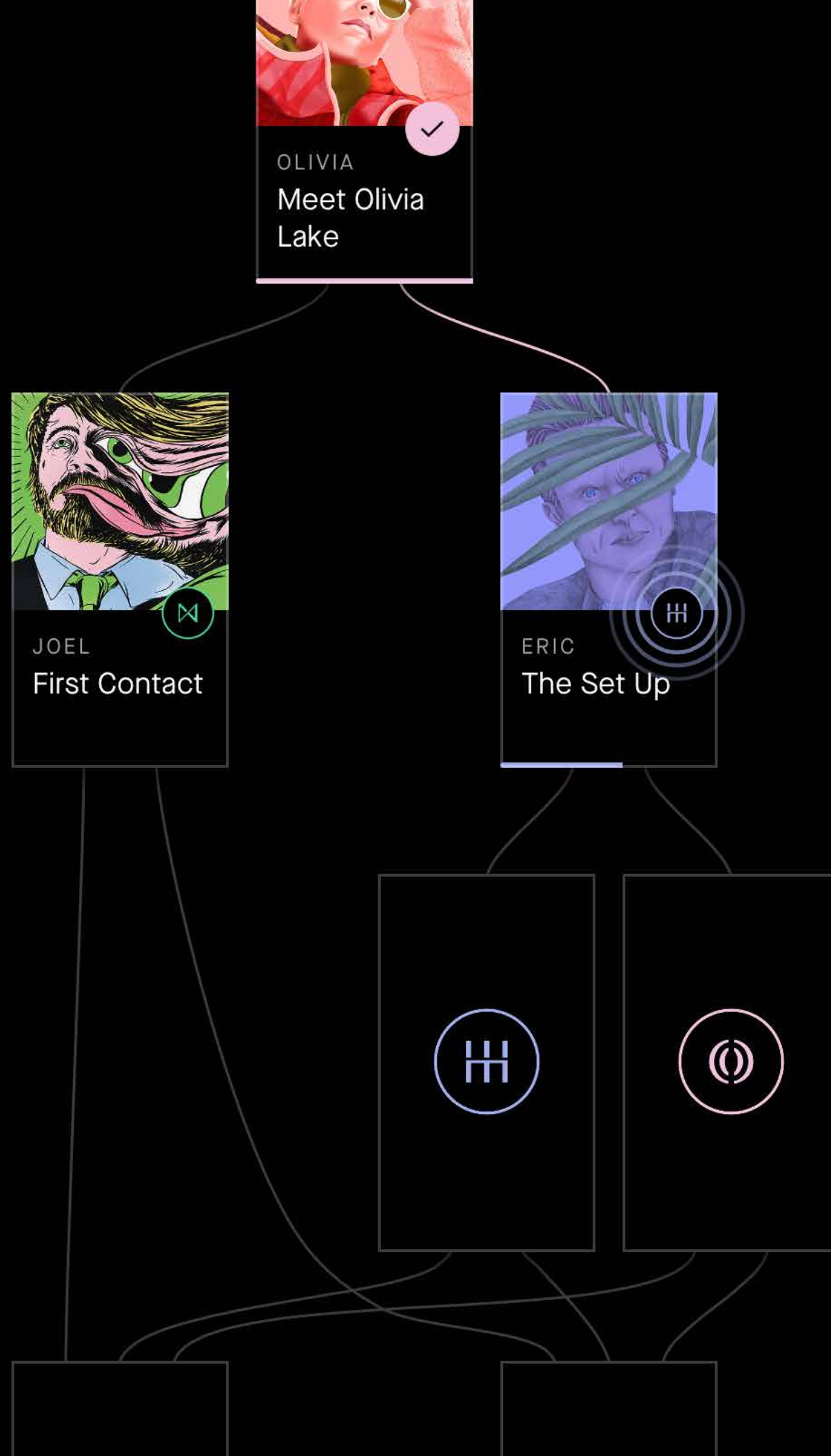
Distribution Control: The distributor mediates the equation of agency between the artist and the user via legal frameworks, technology, and delivery systems.

Creative Control: The producer/artist determines the level of agency that the user should experience within the work. The creator can engineer degrees of expressive latitude so that a user is free to construct and reconstruct their own worlds, their own meanings, their own conclusions.

Personal Control: A user maintains a sense of agency and the ability to make individual choices when the outcome or result of an experience feels neither predetermined nor predestined.

Steven Soderbergh's interactive murder-mystery app, *Mosaic*, allows viewers to choose the story's outcome.
Courtesy of Mosaic

The juggernaut of interactive entertainment (the video game industry) has more than doubled in the last decade from \$45 billion to \$109 billion by privileging the agency of the user. Traditional spaces such as the theater (Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*) and television (Steven Soderbergh's *Mosaic*) have taken note and are inventing new hybrids of cultural entertainment that create more choices for the user.



PROGRESSIVE PRIVILEGING

Founded in 2000 by Joe Hall in the Bronx, Ghetto Film School is now headquartered in Los Angeles where it creates opportunities in the film industry for inner-city youth.

Courtesy of Ghetto Film School

“The future is already here—it’s just not very evenly distributed.”¹

Emerging technologies seek, receive, and impart information and ideas via thousands of channels and platforms. To participate in this seemingly limitless sandbox, you need capital and human resources.

We encourage producers to open source inventions and be cognizant that creators and users of immersive technologies do not represent the diversity of our communities.

Questions of access, digital literacy, and representation can and should be addressed with progressive privileging so that we can develop additional pathways of inclusiveness.

1. William Gibson, “Broadband Blues,” *The Economist*, June 21, 2001.



ACROSS THE LINE

ACCESSING ABORTION IN AMERICA
A VIRTUAL REALITY EXPERIENCE



RAISING THE STAKES

Executive produced by Planned Parenthood, *Across the Line* is a 2017 immersive VR experience about accessing abortion in the United States.

Courtesy of *Across the Line*

As we are bombarded with content through the media we read, the social media we post, the cultural experiences we attend, and the entertainment we watch, we should ask of our stories, “Are the stakes high enough?”

Manufacturing a sense of urgency by presenting something that is at risk of being lost or gained is vital to making your audience care.

The outcome of the character’s or user’s choices, be it positive or negative, should create a position of fulfillment—in knowledge, in emotional pleasure, or in revelation.

EMBLEMATIC GROUP & 371 PRODUCTIONS PRESENTS KRISTINA NAILEN RAEGAN McDONALD-MOSLEY SAMANTHA COLLIER
CHARLES GILBERT LEE SHERMAN JOE SPENCE ACROSS THE LINE A FILM BY NONNY DE LA PENNA BRAD LICHTENSTEIN & JEFF
FITZSIMMONS EXECUTIVE PRODUCER PLANNED PARENTHOOD DAWN LAGUENS MOLLY EAGAN CAREN SPRUCH PRODUCED BY JULIE YOUNG & MORGAN
JOHNSON ASSOCIATE PRODUCER EREN AKSU & KRISTEN TILLEY IN ASSOCIATION WITH CUSTOM REALITY SERVICES 3D VISUAL
EFFECTS BY MICHAEL LICHT HUMAN-ENGINE
HOUSE OF SOUND JOHN ROBERTS SOUND EFFECTS SUPERVISOR SOURCE SOUND SEISMIC ISLAND LABS ANDREA WIJAYA & PAISLEY SMITH

RECYCLING THE *PSYCHEDELIC*

A by-product of the prominence of “collective euphoria” is the return of the psychedelic. The vestiges of the psychedelic can be traced back to the 1958 World’s Fair in Brussels when Philips Electronics Company commissioned Le Corbusier to design a space to showcase their latest innovations. Le Corbusier responded, “I will not make a pavilion for you but an Electronic Poem and a vessel of light, color image, rhythm and sound joined together in an organic synthesis.”¹

A decade later at the Fillmore East, New Yorkers were introduced to the first of many Joshua Light Shows, which featured liquid light projections and psychedelic art as backdrops to live band showcases.

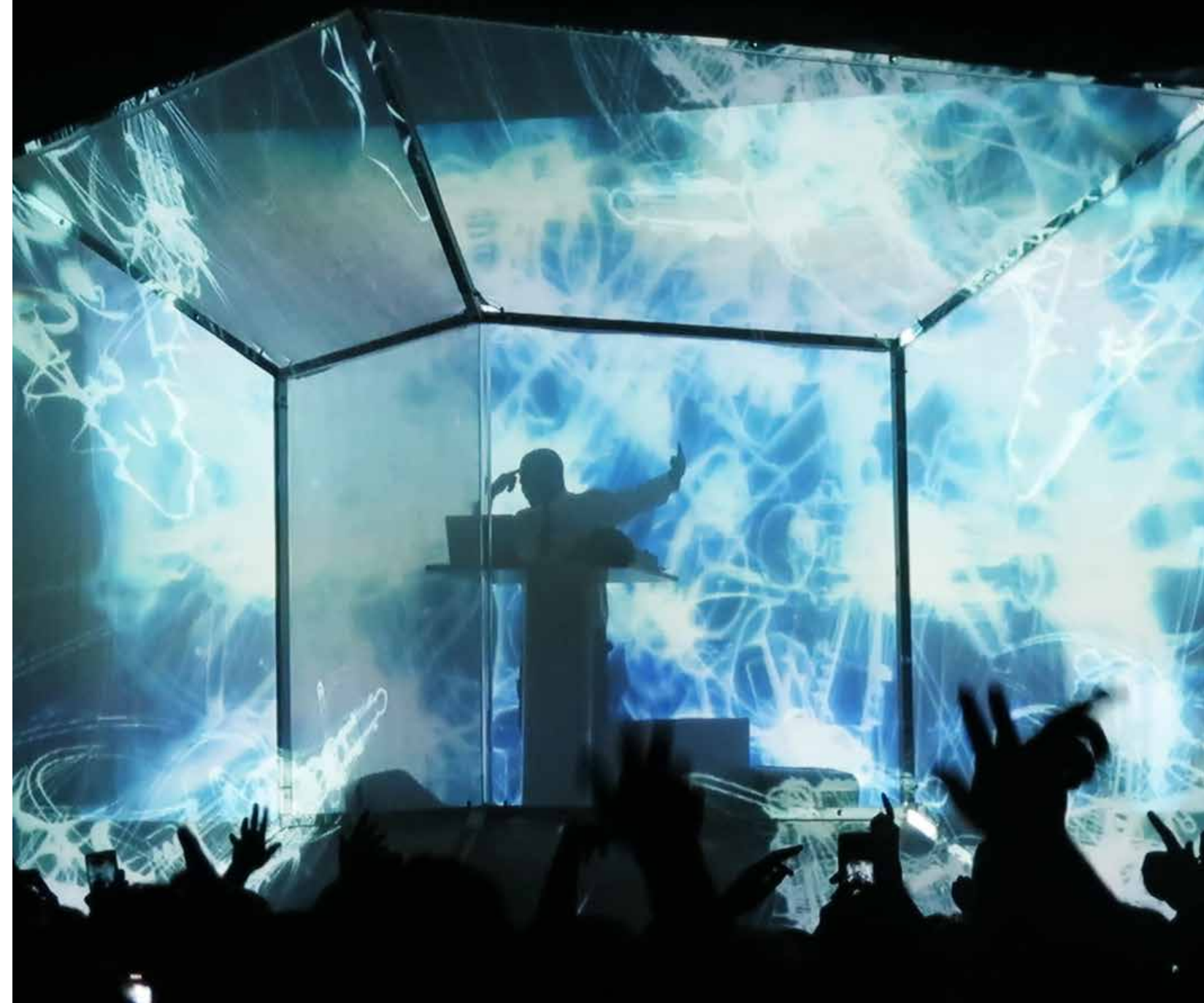
Today, with an abundant array of technology tools, we have new combinations of drugs (MDMA), music (Flying Lotus in 3-D), and visuals (the VR Dome at Coachella and the dozens of installations at Burning Man) seeking the elusive mystical state of otherworldliness in both singular and community settings.

1. Le Corbusier, quoted in Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011), 379.

2. Chris Ip, “Flying Lotus in 3D’ is a jam session between music and holograms,” Engadget, November 25, 2017.

Flying Lotus in 3-D, concert tour, 2017
Courtesy of the artist and © Rick “Platano in Gotham” James

“I just love any kind of possibility of being there, together,” [Steven] Ellison (Flying Lotus) said. ‘Dude, if you pay money to come see me, just let’s just turn that shit off for like a little bit. Let’s just zone out together for like an hour. How crazy is that? One hour without touching your utility belt, Batman. Let’s just fucking watch a show together and trip out, have some fun and then you can tweet about it all night.’”²





SUBVERSIVE INFILTRATIONS

Snapchat employed AR technology to enable users to superimpose Jeff Koons's *Balloon Dog* on New York City's Central Park. Protesting the brand's encroachment on digital public space, artist Sebastian Errazuriz created an overlay of graffiti and "vandalized" the sculpture.

Courtesy of the artist

With new technologies we can add new layers of information, allowing some items to be revealed and others obscured. This temporary and virtual occupation is a reconfiguration of our physical reality, and it's an opportunity to evolve new benefits and responses to our world. These subversive infiltrations are invisible to the naked eye and display alternative realities.

Subversive infiltrations can reflect upon the ownership of the virtual environment (Jeff Koons's AR *Balloon Dog*, which was vandalized by Sebastian Errazuriz) or make use of virtual gaps to expose the politics of national identity (*Frenchising the Mona Lisa* by artist/technologist Amir Baradaran).

VIRTUAL *BOUNDARIES*

Tomás Saraceno's *Cloud Cities* is a long-term research project to develop a modular and transnational city in the clouds.
Courtesy of the artist

Our ability to discern between public and private physical space is often a straightforward equation based on ownership. However, the overlap of physical and digital spaces is creating new dilemmas of governance.

Cultural assets may occupy more than one spatial jurisdiction, making it harder to regulate through traditional legal structures. These new virtual boundaries push us to redefine or create new rules for how we control data harvesting, safeguard information disclosures, and account for interventions that simultaneously inhabit public, private, digital, and virtual spaces.



