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Selling Transcendence:
The Rise of Experience and the Big Business of Immersive Art

By

Emeline Callaway

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with the requirements for the
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ABSTRACT

There has been an explosion of immersive art experiences over the past few years. Even as the pandemic has taken a toll on tourism, immersive art ventures and experimental museums have expanded around the world, drawing significant crowds and offering investors an inside into a new, emerging industry. This thesis ties these new experiential businesses to the history of art through an analysis of immersive artistic exploration over time and connects the current forms of investment to the history of immersive art patronage. Exploring the relationship between major economic shifts and the development of the art market, this thesis explains the emergence of the experience economy and its influence on museum programming and artist practices. Finally, a discussion of the current state of the market and the key players that are innovating within the space for immersive art concludes this analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

Many people believe that immersive art is new. As a trend that has taken over media headlines and major immersive exhibitions have toured cities around the world, this newfound experience has rapidly enthralled the public and dominated the Instagram feeds of all generations. This development within the space of creative entertainment and art exhibitions has expanded the reach of traditional mediums within the market and created a new avenue for art viewing, education, and human connection. However, as a new phenomenon that has frequented dinner party conversations and social media tags, the origins of immersive art predate the contemporary market by hundreds of years. This thesis explores the relationship between the current immersive art craze and the trajectory of experiential art following major periods through art history. Through this dialogue, this thesis reveals the financial, aesthetic, and spiritual connections between today's market for immersion and the history of experiential art.

Chapter One will commence this discussion with a brief overview of the development of immersive art through history. Drawing from Oliver Grau's *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, this survey will detail the wall paintings of the Roman Republic, mosaic interiors of the Byzantine period, frescos of the Renaissance, panorama paintings from the eighteenth century all the way through Minimalism, performance art, and the integration of technology with New Media art and digital installations. This chapter provides critical art historical context on which the further discussions of financing and market development will base their analysis.

Chapter Two connects the history of immersive art with the financial structures that have supported the practice overtime. This chapter overviews the patronage systems for experiential art that have allowed the market to flourish at times, while also illustrating some of the

challenges that have surfaced when integrating commission-based installation works into a newly democratized art market.

Chapter Three introduces the Experience Economy through an analysis of Joseph Pine and James Gilmore's Harvard Business Review article *Welcome to the Experience Economy*. This chapter outlines many of the economic shifts that have driven the economy towards an experience-based model. The following two sections of the chapter then describe the ways in which the experience economy has changed the museum industry and altered artist practices. Finally, Chapter Four delineates the current market for immersive art and examines some of the key businesses that have revolutionized the industry, specifically Meow Wolf, Artechouse, The Van Gogh Immersive Experience, and Superblue. Over these four chapters, this thesis will investigate the aesthetic, financial, and spiritual connections deeply rooted in the history of immersive art with the current expanding market, analyzing the growth of such transcendent works over time and providing a glimpse into the viable future for this otherworldly industry.

CHAPTER 1: A Brief Overview of the History of Immersive Art Spaces

Humanity's fascination with illusionist spaces has existed since early history. Frescos, mosaics, and wall paintings are some of the earliest methods of artistic creation that were intended to transform three-dimensional interiors into imaginary spaces. Oliver Grau argues that these truly immersive conceptions constitute 360-degree images, situating the beginning of the historical immersive art timeline at the fresco rooms and mosaics of the Byzantine era rather than the early cave paintings of Cluvet, Altamira, and Lascaux of about 30,000 years.¹ This fixation on the intent of virtual immersion is key in determining the introduction of experiential art within history.

Following this classification, Grau begins his historical analysis with the wall paintings from the late Roman Republic. One of the most impressive surviving examples of frescoes of antiquity is the Great Frieze in the Villa dei Misteri at Pompeii, created ca. 60 B.C. Covering the walls of Room no. 5 in the Villa Intem, this fresco painting demonstrates some of the earliest illusionary elements of a wall painting that extends the surface beyond a plane to create the illusion of a room that is larger in size than in actuality. The painting stretches the walls of five x seven meters each, engulfing the viewer's vision entirely to create the illusion that the viewer exists within the picture (fig. 1).² This method uses illusionary techniques to surround the observer with imagery in a way that confuses the perception of real time and space and aims to establish an alternate reality in which the observer exists. In comparison to contemporary examples, it can be perceived as one of the earliest physical forms of virtual reality in the history of western art.

¹ Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003), 5.

² Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, 25.

These tools of illusionary experience transcended other historical mediums as well, particularly the mosaics of the Byzantine art period. Though differing in theme and subjects, the Roman and Byzantine mosaics functioned similarly by adorning the floors, walls, and ceilings of churches to suggest an ethereal, heavenly atmosphere.³ These mosaic interiors were far less abundant than the churches decorated with fresco and stucco adornment, however they devised the same effect of an illusionary and transformative visual experience for church goers and visitors. Only a small number of these interior mosaic works survive today, however the brilliant mosaic programs of the early churches and baptisteries in Ravenna, Italy in the fifth and sixth centuries provided some of the most transcendent examples of these awe-inspiring interiors. The fifth century Mausoleum of Galla Placidia (fig. 2), the Orthodox and Arian baptisteries in Ravenna, and the seventh century Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (fig. 3) are some of the most prominent surviving examples today that provide a glimpse of the marvelous and ornate environments created by these mosaic decorations.⁴ Mosaic interiors also pushed the boundaries of the illusionary environment further than fresco and stucco by including fragile materials like mother of pearl, gold and silver leaf, and glass of different colors. These celestial ornaments added another dimension of shine and texture to the heavenly illusion these mosaic interiors aimed to evoke. Forms of glass or tesserae were angled to catch and reflect light within the space, adding to the sparkling and ethereal atmosphere. In antiquity, these mosaics mainly adorned the floors of site-specific locations, however the Byzantines advanced the use of

³ Karen C. Britt, "These stones still speak: the progress of research on late Roman and early Byzantine mosaic pavements in the Eastern Mediterranean." *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 5, 1.

⁴ Britt, "These stones still speak", *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 5, 1.

mosaics by placing them on the walls and ceilings to further the immersive experience that the art form provided its viewers.⁵

The historic use of art to create immersive spaces has always been strongly rooted in spirituality. The Catholic Church was one of the greatest patrons and advocates for this type of art; the church commissioned thousands of works over time with the intent to create “telepresence”⁶ - the illusion of being somewhere else - in places of worship through elaborate fresco paintings and architectural design techniques. These illusionistic art pieces aimed to transform the experience of art from a visual interaction with an image to a space where the observer can become part of an immersed experience, and perhaps feel the connection to God and biblical stories through this approach. Many pilgrims claimed to have become “witness” to biblical events and felt as though they were transported to holy sites. These commissioned works were so successful that the church invested in developing perspective in painting practices at the end of the fifteenth century and erected many more image programs around the world during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to push the Christianization of Europe and the South American continent.⁷

The earliest post antiquity example of a room of illusion in Western painting that is tied to the immersive attempts of the Catholic Church is the *Chambre du Cerf*. Dating back to 1343, this fresco is located at the Palais des Papes, “the palace of popes”, in Avignon, France. The private chapels and apartments used by the popes were decorated in frescos, bearing witness to the innovative artistic work of the French and Italian schools of painting in the fourteenth

⁵ *Heaven and Earth: Art of Byzantium from Greek Collections*. Washington, D.C: National Gallery of Art, Exhibition catalog.

⁶ John Patrick Werner, “Immersive Installation Art: Digital technology, its philosophies, and the rise of a new genre in fine art,” Ed.D. diss., (Columbia University, 2007). 32.

⁷ Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, 59.

century.⁸ The artist Matteo Giovanetti created wall paintings in the Saint Martial chapel, the Saint John chapel, and the stag room otherwise known as the *Chambre du Cerf* (fig 4.).⁹ These frescoes stretch across all four walls of each room, with the chapel paintings also extending onto the ceilings to add an architectural element of spatial play within the spiritual space (fig. 5.).¹⁰ Even though the contemporary painting techniques at the time lacked the ability to create such realistic impressions of reality with the absence of perspective in Western painting, Giovanetti's attempts at spatial effects are some of the earliest impressions of panorama paintings and demonstrate the exceptional development and power of the Catholic Church in the beginnings of illusionary art. These advancements continued throughout the following centuries as the church progressed its fascination with immersive spiritual spaces through Baroque Ceiling Panoramas. Italian church works like the nave of Sant'Ignazio in Rome (fig. 6), the Sistine Chapel (fig. 7), and countless others paved the way for the development of large-scale ceiling panoramas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and eventually spread into Germany, Austria, and the rest of Europe.¹¹

Moving forward through history, immersive art saw many advancements with changes in technology and innovation. The ancestor of modern cameras, the camera obscura, was the next major development directly responsible for the growth of panorama techniques and illusionist experiences in the eighteenth century (fig. 8). Oliver Grau describes the impact of scientific developments on immersive art specifically through the example of the camera obscura:

⁸ "Palais Des Papes - Avignon." Priceless Frescoes", Palais des Papes - Avignon. Accessed February 16, 2022. <https://www.palais-des-papes.com/en/content/priceless-frescoes>.

⁹ Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, 33.

¹⁰ Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, 35.

¹¹ Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, 46.

“The camera obscura represented a pioneering achievement in the history of cinematographic modes of perception because it introduced a restructuring of possibilities for visual experience through optical techniques. It is an innovation comparable with the discovery of perspective, and an important precondition for its development was a further stage in the process of individualizing the observer... This isolated situation of the observer in the camera obscura... provides a vantage point onto the world analogous to the eye of God.” (Grau, pg. 54).

These developments in perspective led the way for artists to further realism in immersive artworks. Irish painter Robert Barker perfected the panorama technique of circular painting with perfect perspective in 1787, when he patented his process of “la nature à coup d’oeil”.¹² Barker developed a system of curves on the concave surface of a picture to create the illusion that the observer on the central platform was truly present within the landscape of the work (as seen in fig. 9). This technique was used for illusionistic landscape spaces and was importantly employed by the military to create land surveys and conduct cartography research for strategic planning during military campaigns.¹³ This was yet another example of the fusion of science and fine art to create innovative visual systems that added to immersive art experiences. Eventually, political panoramas applied these visual innovations to create propaganda-based works, like the popular battle panoramas of Germany. These 360-degree battle paintings exhibited the feeling of telepresence to its viewers – the feeling that one is present within a historical event – the same way the Catholic church illustrated biblical stories with ceiling panoramas. The financial incentive for these works significantly pushed the popularity of panoramic images because

¹² John Patrick Werner, “Immersive Installation Art: Digital technology, its philosophies, and the rise of a new genre in fine art,” Ed.D. diss., (Columbia University, 2007). 32.

¹³ Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, 57.

investors started to gain considerable returns from battle panorama paintings abroad. The fact that government funds commissioned many of these battle paintings meant that the purpose of immersive art then became a means to incite patriotism in communities and raise revenue for businessmen and politicians.¹⁴ Examples like Anton von Werner's *The Battle of Sedan* (fig. 10) became a popular occurrence in cultural life and panoramas of battles for public consumption established a strong part of the medium's history.¹⁵

Following the development of perspective and the integration of architecture, science, and art techniques in early history, continuing technological innovation only snowballed to push immersive art through future centuries to make the practice what it is today. One can see the continuation of panorama paintings through traditional art history with works like Monet's *Water Lilies* in Giverny. The technological development of film in the late nineteenth century created more opportunity for digital immersion, paving the way for illusionistic cinema like Walt Disney's experimentation with surround-sound in the 1940s.¹⁶ Art historical movements only continued to push the idea of including the audience as an essential part of an artwork: Marcel Duchamp and the rise of the Dada movement post WWI, the development of early performance art, Fluxus art, the intersection of dance, theater, and fine art revolutionized by the Black Mountain College, Minimalism's fascination with including the audience as a player in an artwork in the 1960s, and countless more. Further technological developments towards the 1990s revolutionized immersive art even further with the creation of the internet, leading to New Media art installations and Net art, which can be considered its own type of online immersive art space.

¹⁴ John Patrick Werner, "Immersive Installation Art: Digital technology, its philosophies, and the rise of a new genre in fine art," Ed.D. diss., (Columbia University, 2007). 34.

¹⁵ Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, 65.

¹⁶ Iles, Chrissie, Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz, *Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art 1905-2016*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2017, 53. Exh. cat.

All of these innovations, scientific discoveries, aesthetic and conceptual movements have contributed to and pushed the boundaries for immersive art spaces over the past two thousand years. These historical developments provide an important framework of thinking to keep in mind as we now analyze the impact of the exponential rise of immersion on the business of art.

CHAPTER 2: The Industry Impact of Immersive Art

Now that we have briefly examined the history of immersive art practices, we are able to look at the business of immersive art today in a more accurate and informed manner. The history of this revolutionary and popular practice is critical not only because it informs us of the aesthetic values and ideas that have transcended the medium, but it also clearly demonstrates the very point that this thesis aims to explore: the power of money on immersive art.

Noah Horowitz writes in his book *Art of the Deal: Contemporary Art in the Global Financial Market* about the increasing power of finance on the art world today when he states, “the relationship between art and money, never straightforward historically, has transformed into a new kind of union, at once glamorous, provocative, and banal.”¹⁷ Horowitz discusses the ways in which the art market follows major economic shifts, like the ever-steep growth of excess in the market following the 2000s boom, saturated by beachfront parties in honor of artists, collectors, and institutions and other special VIP events. This is a significant point when it comes to the growth and popularization of immersive art because one of the greatest challenges of these large-scale installation works is the problem of financing. How can these works sell in a commercialized market that is mainly modeled to sell transportable, ‘house-able’ works to individuals and collectors? The reality is that they can’t, really.

In fact, immersive art fits within a business model that functions in a completely alternate way, particularly due to the differences in size, durability, conservation challenges, use of innovative technology, and reliance on the audience to serve as an important part of the work. Even though this business model may seem like a new development in the art market, Chapter

¹⁷ Horowitz, Noah, *Art of the Deal; Contemporary Art in the Global Financial Market*, (Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011), 6.

One of this thesis actually demonstrates how the commission-focused model of immersive art has functioned since the existence of the medium. As the market has shifted due to historical changes, technological developments, and the commercialization and democratization of fine art, this business model has ebbed and flowed in many ways to accommodate societal preferences. This chapter will commence with a discussion of the connection between finance and immersive art, and relate the history of immersion to the business developments we are seeing today. From there, we can better analyze the effect of the experience economy and will identify the key business players in today's market for arts businesses that are changing the state of the industry.

Chapter One established the beginnings of immersive art in the late Roman Republic with the fresco paintings of antiquity. As the popularity of immersive works continued to grow through the Byzantine period up through the Renaissance, it quickly became evident that the power of the Catholic Church was one of the main drivers of the immersive art market. Much of this is due to immersive art's reliance on commissions; as one of the most powerful institutions at the time, the Catholic Church had the budget to serve as one of the greatest art patrons in existence.

The Renaissance period is one of the most important historical time periods where immersive art flourished, with countless church ceiling frescos and 360-degree biblical paintings. Giorgio Vasari's renowned *Lives of the Artists*, published in the fifteenth century, emphasizes the importance of the patronage system in Renaissance Italy as one of the earliest records of "the prices and demands of commissions as well as the intense competition among artists to win favor of the papal courts, nobility, and wealthy merchant class."¹⁸ This period is also, most notably, the

¹⁸ Horowitz, Noah, *Art of the Deal; Contemporary Art in the Global Financial Market*, (Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011), 4.

time when the Catholic Church was at the height of its political power in Europe.¹⁹ The Church focused heavily on leading and influencing the populations of the world by creating immersive art experiences to move viewers through illusionistic spirituality. The campaign that the church institution set out to create “telepresence” in magnificent architectural structures around most of Europe spearheaded the development of immersive art, in addition to perspective painting techniques and optical illusion tools.²⁰ All of this advancement in the arts practice was made possible by the institutional investment of the church and the large budget the church set aside specifically to grow its influence through art. Religious studies professor, Dugan McGinely, adds to this argument, “Commissioning works of art served to bolster [the church’s] influence in the political realm. Religion and state were deeply intertwined at this point in Western history.”²¹

The significance and reliance on institutional investment and a commission-based system for immersive art became more evident as the Catholic Church lost its central place in many Western societies and the development of religious immersive art slowed. As the power of the church fell due to the Protestant Reformation and changing economic and political models, so did its budget to commission such transformative, spatial paintings and architectural sites. The seventeenth century then brought about the origin of public auctions in Holland and Flanders, spreading into England in the latter part of the century. This new development in the business structure of art “helped evolve the market from an older system of courtly patronage to a more modern supply/demand economy in which members of the predominantly elite social classes

¹⁹ Sutton, Benjamin. “What Happened to the Catholic Church’s Art Patronage”, *Artsy*, January 10, 2019. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-happened-catholic-churchs-art-patronage>

²⁰ John Patrick Werner, “Immersive Installation Art: Digital technology, its philosophies, and the rise of a new genre in fine art,” Ed.D. diss., (Columbia University, 2007). 143.

²¹ Sutton, Benjamin. “What Happened to the Catholic Church’s Art Patronage”, *Artsy*, January 10, 2019. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-happened-catholic-churchs-art-patronage>

vied for distinction through their purchases - and through the public display of bidding itself.”²² Thus the democratization and commercialization of fine art began and the market structured itself to accommodate individual buyers, cutting most of immersive art out of the central art industry.

The next wave of development in immersive art occurred in the nineteenth century when a new institutional investor arose with the budget to commission influential works - the western military. The military investment in immersive art functioned similarly to the Catholic Church as the militaries of a few western European countries, most importantly Germany, budgeted capital to invest in immersive art in order to spread their political influence and invest in the development of panorama techniques to perfect perspective painting.²³ These immersive panoramas grew quickly in popularity due to shifting societal sentiments towards the industrial age and the need for transcendence, much like the immersive religious works aimed to imitate spatial spirituality:

“The industrial age had fostered a mentality of rationalism that is said to have become a type of “hyper-reality” - a world of ultimate fakeness where humanity attempts to imitate reality by reproducing it in objects and images as an attempt to improve the reality that is; these imitations don’t merely reproduce reality, but are an attempt to improve on it.”²⁴

Since the commercialization of art had already altered the art market by this time towards a more individualized buying process, the military institution introduced a new revenue-based opportunity for investors to join in the production of immersive art. The funding for illusionistic

²² Horowitz, Noah, *Art of the Deal; Contemporary Art in the Global Financial Market*, (Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011), 4.

²³ John Patrick Werner, “Immersive Installation Art: Digital technology, its philosophies, and the rise of a new genre in fine art,” Ed.D. diss., (Columbia University, 2007). 34.

²⁴ John Patrick Werner, “Immersive Installation Art”, 34.

panoramas by the military then became a financial opportunity for government funds, businessmen, and politicians to earn profits and expand their influence.²⁵ This is one of the first times in history where institutional investment in immersive art was mainly driven by commercial revenue, establishing much of what the contemporary market looks like today with a rise in venture capital investment in immersive art experiences that will be covered in later chapters.

Based on Oliver Grau's historical timeline, the market for artistic immersion continued at a slow pace with minimal developments from European military investment up until the later part of the twentieth century.²⁶ It was not until the 1960s for the birth of Postmodernism to significantly alter the market once again. The movement of Postmodernism was critical in the development of immersive art because it introduced a new way for collectors to purchase experiential works and created an avenue for immersive art to engage with the individualized commercial market.

As an art movement, Postmodernism challenged the process, meaning, and purpose of fine art. It rejected the current ideas and values of creation and embraced many new approaches to artmaking. Postmodern art drew from a new philosophy that advocated for the individual experience, embracing complex layers of meaning and questioning the boundaries of what constitutes art.²⁷ This new method of thinking paved the way for many important art movements to follow that relied on a similar framework heavily invested in audience experience: Fluxus, Minimalism, performance art, body art, and video art. Postmodernism is therefore heavily associated with the dematerialization of the art object beginning in the 1960s. Noah Horowitz

²⁵ Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, 57.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Tate Modern, "Postmodernism." Tate. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/postmodernism>.

explains the significant influence of the postmodern art movement in establishing today's market in *Art of the Deal*: "Dematerialization is a subject of paramount importance to our enquiry because it broadened the economic spectrum of the art marketplace from near exclusive focus on tangible objects to immaterial articles such as content and intellectual property rights."²⁸

From the nineteenth century military panoramas up until the 1960s, the art market focused most of its attention toward privatized business aimed at individual buyers. Auctions, gallery sales, and museum contributions were the main avenues for this democratic buying system and the growth of the commercial economy contributed to the rising success and celebrity of the art market. After Postmodern art established a significant footing in the market, new challenges arose with the logistics of purchasing and collecting Conceptual works. Since the convention of Conceptual art rejected many traditional, tangible forms of art, sales contracts were issued to clarify terms of engagement for any collectors interested in purchasing an experiential work. Seth Sieglaub, the preeminent dealer of the first generation of American conceptual artists, including artists like Carl Andrew, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, and Sol Le Witt, among others, advanced the structure of the market to add value to these experiential practices through the issuance of sales contracts starting in 1964.²⁹ These contracts served a dual function of both legitimizing the artwork and enumerating ownership rights. This revolutionary market tactic was, of course, met with criticism as the Conceptual art movement radically opposed the commercialism of the art market and its institutions. American writer and art critic Lucy Lippard wrote in 1970, "art intended as pure experience doesn't exist until someone experiences it, defying ownership, reproduction, and sameness."³⁰ Yet, no matter

²⁸ Horowitz, Noah, *Art of the Deal; Contemporary Art in the Global Financial Market*, 11.

²⁹ Horowitz, Noah, *Art of the Deal; Contemporary Art in the Global Financial Market*, 94.

³⁰ Benjamin Buchlol, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions", October, no. 55 (Winter 1990): 105-43.

how averse Conceptual artists were to the commercial art market, the invention of sales contracts affirmed their relevance to its institutions and the economic system.³¹

The significance of Conceptualism's effect on the market is evident in the work of Dan Flavin. As a pioneer of Minimalism and best known for his iconic neon-tube structures and light fixture installations (fig. 11), Flavin is a key example of an experiential artist that has enjoyed a successful market due to the use of sales contracts. American conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth explains the buying system for Dan Flavin's work: "when someone 'buys' a Flavin he isn't buying a light show, for if he was he could just go to the hardware store and get the goods for considerably less. He isn't 'buying' anything. He is subsidizing Flavin's activity as an artist."³² Flavin's sales contracts are used mainly to dictate terms of sale and ensure that the "owner" of the work installs the piece, replaces the lightbulbs, and displays the work in the correct way the artist intended. However, the connection between these sales contracts and the old-fashioned, Renaissance commission-based system for immersive art is indisputable. Artist and writer Andrea Fraser has observed this market consistency where Conceptual art has reconstituted collectors as "altruistic patrons, cementing a link between 1960s avant-gardism and art's premarket past."³³ These sales contracts were merely an inventive way for a centuries-old art commission system to modernize and fit into the contemporary, democratic market that exists today.

The final significant market shift that has set the foundation for immersive art's current business structure is the development of an art market that is centered on experience itself. Noah Horowitz argues in his book that the growth of the art economy into an experience-based

³¹ Horowitz, Noah, *Art of the Deal; Contemporary Art in the Global Financial Market*, 97.

³² Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy, part 1", *Studio International*, no. 915 (October 1969): 137.

³³ Horowitz, Noah, *Art of the Deal; Contemporary Art in the Global Financial Market*, 99.

industry with the popularization of art fairs and private museums is of equally paramount importance concerning how art-related experiences have come to constitute increasingly important frameworks for the market at large.³⁴ The last decades of the twentieth century uplifted the scope (and what some may call elitism) of the art market with drastic increases in prices following significant economic growth. The Scull Sale of 1973 marked a major transition for the upward trajectory of the market, drawing the highest values the art world had ever seen for contemporary art at the time.³⁵ The extensive level of prices and competitive bidding publicized the sale and instigated a celebrity-like view of art world events. Following this surge of fame and money, large-scale investments in the infrastructure of the art market grew rapidly (from galleries, museums, fairs, biennials, and ancillary services).³⁶ The flowering of wealth in conjunction with the economic surge of the 1980s and the growth of art collecting also gave rise to the global art museum boom. The 1990s saw a saturation of inaugurations for new institutions, physical expansions of current museums, and the opening of many satellite branches, also known as the “Guggenheim effect.”³⁷ The 1997 launch of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, the same year inauguration of the Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin, and later expansions of the Las Vegas Guggenheim in 2001 and the announcement of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi 2006 all demonstrate this immense institutional growth and investment from traditional institutions. The industry development also moved in lockstep with the flourishing of individual collections, private museums, privately-funded contemporary art exhibition spaces, foundations, and art fairs.³⁸

³⁴ Horowitz, Noah, *Art of the Deal; Contemporary Art in the Global Financial Market*, 121.

³⁵ Sussman, Anna Louie. “How a Single Auction in 1973 Changed the Art Market Forever.” Artsy, April 26, 2017. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-three-ways-single-auction-1973-changed-art-market>.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Horowitz, Noah, *Art of the Deal; Contemporary Art in the Global Financial Market*, 14.

³⁸ Ibid.

Horowitz writes, “[the] social experience, if ever-present within the art market, has come to constitute an increasingly lucrative business commodity.”³⁹ Concurrent with the rise of wealth and growth of institutional investment, it only becomes clearer that the experience of art, whether it be the interaction of bidding, attending art fairs, or walking through a Dan Flavin light installation, is slowly becoming the art world’s commodity itself.

³⁹ Horowitz, Noah, *Art of the Deal; Contemporary Art in the Global Financial Market*, 122.

CHAPTER 3: The Experience Economy and its Influence on Art Practices

PART I: What is the Experience Economy?

Joseph Pine and James Gilmore coined the term “experience economy” in 1998 with a published article in the *Harvard Business Review*. In *Welcome to the Experience Economy*, the two authors argued that experiences have emerged as the fourth distinct economic offering in the commercial market, differentiated from traditional commodities, goods, and services. This economic phenomenon originated around the 1990s at a time when consumers decided that there is a value to experience rather than just owning “things”.⁴⁰ Relying on the undeniable fact that consumers increasingly desire experiences, more industries and businesses have responded by explicitly designing and promoting such events.

The rise of experience-focused businesses is illustrated by the growth of themed chain restaurants such as the Hard Rock Cafe and Planet Hollywood that rose to prominent success during the 1990s. The business model these chains utilize is defined as “eatertainment” – one where rather than selling food as the main commodity, the food is a prop that is incorporated into the larger experience of attending one of these establishments. Other industries have shifted their models to include similar offerings like the toy store FAO Schwartz and Niketown by drawing in customers through fun activities and promotional events, otherwise known as “shoppertainment” or “entertailing”.⁴¹ The branding and marketing strategies of these businesses have thus altered more broadly to focus on immersive promotional experiences. After the dotcom boom and the rise of online marketplaces, many brick-and-mortar stores sought to find new ways to attract

⁴⁰ Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, “Welcome to the Experience Economy”, *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 1998. <https://hbr.org/1998/07/welcome-to-the-experience-economy>.

⁴¹ Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, “Welcome to the Experience Economy”, *Harvard Business Review*.

young people who would otherwise do their shopping online by creating unique and engaging in-person shopping experiences and promotional events. The luxury division of Nissan, Infiniti, for example, trademarked the phrase “Total Ownership Experience” in an attempt to capitalize on the excitement of the buying experience when purchasing, driving, servicing, and owning a new car.⁴² Apple recognized this development before many others, profoundly transforming its physical stores into aspirational, high-design temples for product exploration and customer service. Decades before the rest of the market began to follow, Apple realized that e-commerce doesn’t quite negate the value of stores, but stores can become experiential playgrounds aimed at customer acquisition and long-term retention rather than one-time sales.⁴³

The experience-based model, however, does not only pertain to consumer industries. Companies that promote business-to-business services have taken advantage of new desires for experiences as well by merging the two models in inventive ways. One of the service-based models that Pine and Gilmore reference is Geek Squad, a Minneapolis computer-installation and repair company. Geek Squad employs its “special agents” to dress in a costume of white shirts with thin black ties and pocket protectors, drive old cars, carry badges, and turn the activity of computer repair into a memorable and enjoyable encounter.⁴⁴ Similar service-based industries have since found ways to incorporate a focus on unique experiences while still selling a service as their main economic offering.

Although Pine and Gilmore focus their analysis on the push for businesses to incorporate experiences into their models in the 1990s, the concept of commodifying experiences certainly

⁴² Horowitz, Noah, *Art of the Deal; Contemporary Art in the Global Financial Market*, 124.

⁴³ Tim Schneider, “Why a Brush With COVID Will Strengthen Art’s Experience Economy - and the Old-Fashioned Gallery Business, Too”, *Artnet News Intelligence Report Spring 2021*, March 24, 2021, pg. 30. <https://news.artnet.com/market/introducing-the-spring-2021-artnet-intelligence-report-1954132>

⁴⁴ Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, “Welcome to the Experience Economy”, *Harvard Business Review*.

predated this timeframe. The authors claim that “between 1959 and 1996, employment in experiential industries grew at nearly twice the rate of the service sector as a whole; companies that stage experiences benefited from price increases well in excess of inflation.”⁴⁵ In relation to art, these reflections most importantly developed in conjunction with the onset of Postmodernism and the emphasis on process and experience as the center of value in post-1960s art.⁴⁶ The crossover of Postmodernism's rejection of traditional commercial systems and the increasing emphasis on immersion into entertainment, commercial, and service-based industries became apparent even before the 1960s. One can see this illustrated in the rise of department stores like Harrods and Galeries Lafayette at the dawn of the twentieth century. Though predating Postmodernism, these department stores relied on the similar sentiment of an immersive, engulfing architectural space as an important location for consumers to purchase goods of many different industries.⁴⁷

These examples all demonstrate the ways in which different industries have adapted their models to incorporate experiences over the past few decades, however the experience economy that relates to immersive art businesses today stems from industries that sell experiences themselves as their economic offering. This difference is significant because Nissan’s marketing focused on the enjoyable buying “experience” for the Infiniti uses experience as an inviting tactic, but still sells a commoditized good to its consumer. Experience as an economic offering itself has truly originated at the heart of the entertainment business.⁴⁸ Theaters, cinemas, and amusement parks are examples of long-standing businesses that sell unique, manufactured experiences to their audiences. The most distinguishing factor between the business models of

⁴⁵ Horowitz, Noah, *Art of the Deal; Contemporary Art in the Global Financial Market*, 124.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Horowitz, Noah, *Art of the Deal; Contemporary Art in the Global Financial Market*, 125.

⁴⁸ Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, “Welcome to the Experience Economy”, *Harvard Business Review*.

experience offerings and the models for goods, services, and commodity businesses is that companies selling experiences must charge an admission fee as the exchange for their product to make money. Therefore, for an experience-based company to succeed in the marketplace, they must offer an experience that consumers deem valuable enough to purchase outright.⁴⁹

Disneyland is one of the most important and prominent examples of an experience-focused business that has fueled this industry. Opening in 1955, Walt Disney revolutionized much of this idea of commodified immersion.⁵⁰ As a consumer, you purchase a ticket or season pass as your entry and from there you are able to create your own unique experience with rides, restaurants, theatrics, and other elements of the theme park. This business model also allows for experience companies to capitalize on parking, gift shops, merchandise, and structured ticket models that allow for VIP access or ‘skip the line’ capabilities. This is the business model on which most of today’s immersive art businesses are operating, differing vastly from how all other businesses in the art world have functioned up until the past two decades.

Horowitz adds a compelling point to Pine and Gilmore’s argument when he explains that merely staging experiences as a promotional tactic or as a commodity does not ensure long-term success.⁵¹ He illustrates this idea with the double bankruptcy of Planet Hollywood, closing stores of international branches over the past decade. Horowitz contends, however, that Pine and Gilmore’s strongest claim concerns more than offering consumers prepackaged experiences but, in actuality, is about crafting *individualized* experiences and dynamic services of personal relevance.⁵² We can see this idea successfully established in today’s markets with the development of the subscription economy, where consumers are presented with thousands of

⁴⁹ Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, “Welcome to the Experience Economy”, *Harvard Business Review*.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Horowitz, Noah, *Art of the Deal; Contemporary Art in the Global Financial Market*, 125.

⁵² *Ibid.*

subscription-based services for streaming, razors, gyms, car washes, and food delivery services. The UBS financial services firm predicts that the subscription economy will grow to \$1.5 trillion by 2025, more than double the \$650 billion it was estimated to be worth in 2021.⁵³ The development of a new purchasing process demonstrates Horowitz's argument of consumers' increasing desire for personalized experiences in the market. Thanks to technological advancements, many of these subscription companies use data from their users to tailor their experience on their platform to fit each customer's specific interests. This comes in the form of suggested products, television shows you may like based off of your watch history, advertisements catered to your spending habits, or even a quiz you take when you first sign up to present your preferences to the company. Customers value an individualized experience when shopping for razors, for example, rather than going to a store to purchase a razor in a one-off exchange; and for this, they are willing to join a different business model all together to consistently interact with a company that creates an engaging, individualized experience.

Although immersive art is far different from a subscription-based razor company, all of this goes to show that consumers value individualized experiences more than ever before. It is evident, therefore, that immersive art has exponentially grown over the past two decades because of society's fascination with unique experiences and shift away from a goods and services economy. Pine and Gilmore explain these new preferences and consumer desires in their article:

“Buyers of experiences—we’ll follow the lead of experience-economy pioneer Walt Disney and call them “guests”—value what the company reveals over a duration of time.

While prior economic offerings—commodities, goods, and services—are external to the

⁵³ Heather Long and Andrew Van Dam, “Everything’s becoming a subscription, and the pandemic is partly to blame”, *The Washington Post*, June 1, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/06/01/subscription-boom-pandemic/>

buyer, experiences are inherently personal, existing only in the mind of an individual who has been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual, or even spiritual level. Thus, no two people can have the same experience, because each experience derives from the interaction between the staged event (like a theatrical play) and the individual's state of mind."⁵⁴

Immersive art meets this consumer desire perfectly as an art practice that heavily focuses on engaging audiences through an emotional, physical, artistic, and spiritual level. This transcendence and spiritual background have been around since the early beginnings of immersive art. Experiential art only continues to grow now as the economy shifts towards manufacturing unique experiences, forcing traditional institutions to make way for immersive art businesses to create ticketed spaces for complete artistic immersion.

PART II: How Has the Experience Economy Influenced Art Practices?

The power of the experience economy has altered many traditional business practices for all types of industries, and the art market is no exception. Several post-1990s developments have reinforced this link between the experience economy phenomenon and the experiential fascination of the art world. This section will explore the influence of the experience economy on arts institutions and how the desire for individualized experiences has altered artist practices in the past few decades. These shifts specifically pertain to the growth of on-site artistic creation in museums and the exponential rise of immersive artists and artist studios.

⁵⁴ Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, "Welcome to the Experience Economy", *Harvard Business Review*.

THE MUSEUM INDUSTRY

“There is no doubt that we’re in a heightened moment of experience-based programming, in the landscape of museums and beyond,” claims Diane Jean-Mary, an associate director of strategy and innovation at marketing firm LaPlaca Cohen. “The experience economy is certainly part of the zeitgeist, perhaps because of the rise of the digitization of every aspect of our lives, and people are hungry for in-person, physical connection with each other and our shared world.”⁵⁵ As Jean-Mary contends, the museum industry has seen significant changes as many institutions are reacting to the push for immersive experiences. The coronavirus pandemic was a pertinent contributor to this development as well, leaving populations hungry for in-person experiences and spaces to interact with others after a few months to over a year of isolation. Museums have struggled to keep their visitor numbers consistent with previous decades because of generational shifts in interests and the pandemic’s effect of closing in-person activities for months on end. Following the many businesses and industries that have embraced immersive experiences as a promotional aid, museums around the world have adopted similar methods to increase visitor numbers by creating new branches, commissioning immersive works, and increasing their efforts of on-site artistic production.⁵⁶ This institutional evolution is evident also through the saturation of new museums geared towards immersive experiences and corporate exhibition partnerships beginning from the 1990s continuing through today.

To observe the trend of arts institutions progressively pitching themselves as sites of artistic production, Paris’ Palais de Tokyo must be considered as an example of such

⁵⁵ Naomi Rea, “As Museums Fall in Love With ‘Experiences,’ Their Core Missions Face Redefinition”, *Artnet News*, March 14, 2019. https://news.artnet.com/art-world/experience-economy-museums-1486807?fbclid=IwAR2ih_WOLKP2ycmlaqqau2JiNbNVzFLLx-w_Eg7RZERH8npZqzVfPsgTkxg

⁵⁶ Horowitz, Noah, *Art of the Deal; Contemporary Art in the Global Financial Market*, 128.

developments. As a contemporary arts institution in Paris, France, Palais de Tokyo describes itself as the largest center for contemporary artistic creation in all of Europe with a one-of-a-kind exhibition space and an inviting, radical, cutting-edge program. The institution dedicates its space to emerging and established artists from France and around the world. The programming efforts of Palais de Tokyo center around “thematic and monographic exhibitions, large-scale interventions, and carte blanche invitations to artists who take over the entirety of the space. Each season is accompanied by completely new transformations within the Palais, as artists welcome visitors into the heart of their practice, renewing their relationship to art.”⁵⁷

As an arts institution, this new model demonstrates revolutionary ways for exhibition spaces to advertise themselves as locations for artistic production, drawing from the celebrity of immersive art experiences. Horowitz explains this phenomenon as a crucial distinction, where “versus a museum’s traditional function to amass and display works from its collection, this trend thrives on the constant commissioning of new work and the internalizing of this process into how audiences experience their time in galleries.”⁵⁸ In Palais de Tokyo’s example, between 2001 and 2005 the co-directors advanced their model to establish their institution as a “site of contemporary creation” by adjusting the hours of operation from noon until midnight, dismissing the traditional “white cube” form of display and instead decorating its interior with exposed industrial walls and concrete floors, and integrating a large theater in the center of the main exhibition space - also reinforcing the idea of experiential play.⁵⁹ Yet, Palais de Tokyo only stands as a singular example; the industry has seen a substantial wave of immersive-focused museums and arts institutions that operate under a similar model as a site of artistic creation.

⁵⁷ “Who We Are”, Palais de Tokyo, accessed March 30, 2022. <https://palaisdetokyo.com/en/who-we-are/>

⁵⁸ Horowitz, Noah, *Art of the Deal; Contemporary Art in the Global Financial Market*, 128.

⁵⁹ Horowitz, Noah, *Art of the Deal; Contemporary Art in the Global Financial Market*, 128.

Other European non-collecting institutions debuted around the same time as Palais de Tokyo, specifically the Kunstverein Munich under the curatorship of Maria Lind between 2001 and 2004 and BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, UK established as an “art factory” in 2002.⁶⁰ This development has continued rather consistently through the past two decades into today’s industry, as well. Take for example Qatar’s National Museum, which opened to the public in March of 2019 as a “new immersive museum experience” described to contain 1.5 kilometers of experiences, and Atelier des Lumières, debuting just a year prior in 2018, offering multi-sensory experiences and digital projections of artworks in Paris, France.⁶¹

Again, this idea of experiential engagement is not entirely new to the museum industry. As we’ve seen previously, Conceptual artists of the 1960s exhibited installation works in large-scale museums and arts institutions as their art practices began to take hold of the art world. One of the most famous exhibitions that pioneered this exhibition model was *Live in Your Head - When Attitudes Become Form* in March 1969. Opened to the public at the Kunsthalle in Bern, Switzerland, the show featured 69 artists from America and Western Europe and was perceived in the public eye as a rather controversial international survey of Post-minimalism and Arte Povera.⁶² However, most innovative of the show was the relationship between the curator, the artists, and the exhibition itself; the participating artists began making their works on site, taking over the institution of the Kunsthalle and utilizing the space as their own art studios. It took weeks for many of the artworks on display to fully take form before the exhibition opening. Encompassing a wide range of art forms like Conceptual art, Land art, Process art, and Arte

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Naomi Rea, “As Museums Fall in Love With ‘Experiences,’ Their Core Missions Face Redefinition”, *Artnet News*, March 14, 2019.

⁶² Shira Wolfe, “The Shows That Made Contemporary Art History: Live in Your Head. When Attitudes Become Form,” *Artland Magazine*, accessed April 5, 2022. <https://magazine.artland.com/shows-that-made-contemporary-art-history-live-in-your-head-when-attitudes-become-form/>

Povera, the “Attitudes” in the exhibition title itself referred to the process-related nature of the collected works.⁶³ Though met with staunch criticism from some of the conservative Swiss public, this show was acutely influential in establishing an innovative model of on-site artistic creation in a museum setting, paving the way for the institutional growth of this exhibition practice. The show also chartered a new system of corporate funding for exhibitions of a similar model, with significant financial backing from the corporations Philip Morris and Ruder & Finn.⁶⁴ This corporate funding model is evident in today’s market with many different corporate sponsors for immersive experiences and experiential museum exhibitions.

It is ironically not the savvy marketers and advertisers that invented the immersive aesthetic experience, but the artists of the 60s onwards. On top of that, the demand for these sorts of immersive efforts have existed in the museum institution well before today’s experience craze. Another important example that pioneered the rise of experiential art in traditional arts institutions is Olafur Eliasson’s *The Weather Project* in 2003. For this project, Eliasson transformed the Tate Modern’s turbine hall into a multi-sensory spectacle of a simulated sunrise, filling the spacious interior with a hazy, orange glow using artificial light, mist, and mirrored ceilings (fig. 12). Eliasson created an immersive, artificial environment utilizing smoke and mirrors, built from mirror foils, two hundred mono-frequency lamps and haze machines.⁶⁵ The centerpiece of the work, the sun, was made of a translucent half-circle suspended in front of the main-facing wall in the Turbine Hall. The mirror-covered ceiling that reflected the ground and

⁶³ *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*, Directed by Harald Szeemann, Bern: Kunsathalle, 1969. Exh. cat.

⁶⁴ Shira Wolfe, “The Shows That Made Contemporary Art History: Live in Your Head. When Attitudes Become Form,” *Artland Magazine*, accessed April 5, 2022.

⁶⁵ Agnes Berez, *100 Years, 100 Artworks: A History of Modern and Contemporary Art*, Munich; New York: Prestel Verlag (6), 2019, 178.

the spectators in the space reflected the half sun to create the effect of a full circle and gleamed with yellow mono-frequency lights.⁶⁶

As an artist, Eliasson is renowned for his large-scale, multimedia installations and participatory projects. *The Weather Project* stands out as one of Eliasson's most influential works, drawing two million visitors during its four-month long exhibition at the Tate. The work quickly became a site of pilgrimage and, most significantly, the most popular exhibition in the Tate's history.⁶⁷ Though Eliasson's art practice aims mainly to explore relationships between nature, art, and technology through his work, *The Weather Project* marks a major turning point in the development of immersive art as an audience-driver. Since the Danish-Icelandic artist was able to attract an incredible number of visitors and become the most popular exhibition in the history of the museum, many museums and other institutions have taken note of this phenomenon and commissioned immersive works or large-scale lobby pieces to draw the same type of attention with the hopes of increasing viewership and ticket sales. Eliasson has since returned to the Tate Modern for a hotly anticipated exhibition running from 2019 to 2020 titled "In Real Life", where the artist created a survey of "captivating immersive installations"⁶⁸, utilizing a tunnel of blinding fog and an interactive reflective rainbow (fig. 13).

⁶⁶ Agnes Berez, *100 Years, 100 Artworks: A History of Modern and Contemporary Art*. 178

⁶⁷ Agnes Berez, *100 Years, 100 Artworks: A History of Modern and Contemporary Art*. 178

⁶⁸ Naomi Rea, "As Museums Fall in Love With 'Experiences,' Their Core Missions Face Redefinition", *Artnet News*, March 14, 2019.

ARTIST PRACTICES

The Weather Project is not only imperative in demonstrating the experience economy's effect on museum programming, but Olafur Eliasson's sharp rise in popularity over the past two decades also exemplifies the growth of experiential artists within the market and the trend of artists working as collectives. For Eliasson, *The Weather Project* served as a major turning point in the artist's career, launching him into a hot market for his experiential works and setting him up to soon become a celebrity-like figure and cultural phenomenon. After rising to a sort of artworld stardom, Eliasson has worked on many commission-based projects to transform some of the world's most popular museums and tourist attractions. In 2016 the artist was invited to create an exhibition at the Palace of Versailles, along with other celebrity-like artists that create large site-specific works including Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami. For this exhibition, Eliasson presented a technologically-built natural phenomenon, an artificial waterfall placed in the grand canal of the Versailles gardens (fig. 14).⁶⁹ Eliasson had previously created artificial waterfalls in New York City, commissioned by the Public Art Fund, eight years prior that received successful praise and recognition. As a creator that works across many disciplines that focus on installation art, nature, technology, and design, Eliasson is perceived as an inventor, an architect, a designer, an artist and many more titles as his popularity soars to new heights because of the ways in which he transforms spaces into otherworldly, moving, extravagant experiences.

The 2016 Versailles Exhibition points to an important shift in artists' practices that has grown tremendously following the rise of immersive art: artist studios and collectives. When

⁶⁹ Dea Cvetković, "Olafur Eliasson: 7 Mesmerizing Contemporary Installations", *The Collector*, December 17, 2020. <https://www.thecollector.com/olafur-eliasson-contemporary-artist/>

most people think of artists, they perceive an individual creator who solely transforms their artwork within the confines of their home or private studio. For many artists and most of the history of art, this is true, especially in the beginning stages of a traditional artist's career. However, the past few decades have exposed an upsurge of artists employing assistants and apprentices within a larger studio to create their work, or have joined forces with other creators to produce art within a collective. Eliasson is a fantastic example of the gravity of this movement, with a studio in Berlin consisting of 96 employees of craftsmen, specialized technicians, architects, archivists, art historians, web and graphic designers, film-makers, cooks, and administrators.⁷⁰ As an artist who creates such grand works reliant on engineered design and technology, it is essential for his studio to employ assistants, engineers, and technicians who can help with the logistical work that would be nearly impossible to do on one's own. This studio structure stems from the Renaissance period, where artists worked as apprentices to assist in their artistic training and gain access to important patrons, like in the studios of Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Sandro Botticelli.⁷¹ This revival of structure also ties back to the commission-based system of many Renaissance immersive works, once again demonstrating the influence of immersion on art history and in this case, art practices and studio formation.

For contemporary art, the studio shift can be seen first with Andy Warhol's innovative model that combined artistic production with the Henry Ford mechanization process in his studio known as the Factory. Much of Warhol's studio invention was due to his repetitive artistic process and his use of technology and machinery for his silk screen prints. Donald Judd also engaged with this factory-like production model for the fabrication of his minimal, industrial-

⁷⁰ "About Studio Olafur Eliasson", OlafurEliasson.net, accessed April 18, 2022. <https://olafureliasson.net/studio>

⁷¹ Mark Cartwright, "Life in a Renaissance Artist's Workshop", *World History Encyclopedia*, September 24, 2020. <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1611/life-in-a-renaissance-artists-workshop/>

inspired sculptures.⁷² But the creation of a full-blown factory model for contemporary artist's studios has only proliferated as site-specific works and immersive art have grown in popularity with the rise of artists like Jeff Koons, Olafur Eliasson, and Takashi Murakami, all of which were included in Versailles' 2016 Contemporary Exhibition. These artists have excessively grown in recognition to be considered similar to celebrity status around the world, much of which could be argued is due to the largescale, site-specific, commissioned work they create that access all types of audiences and captivate the media. Though Koons and Murakami do not focus their entire artistic practice towards immersion like Eliasson, the stardom of these artists still indicates the influence of the rise of commissioned-based, immersive art on the artistic process and growing trends in the formation of artist studios.

This specific phenomenon refers to these creators as “superartists”, that run factories and oversee teams of assistants in order to create such expensive and tremendous works that transform entire environments intended for mass consumption.⁷³ Jeff Koons, for example, operates his studio with hundreds of assistants that specialize in painting, casting, finishing, computer graphics and more. Writer Ian Wallace even compared Koons' New York studio to an Apple plant, pushing the integration of factory-type artistic production.⁷⁴ Takashi Murakami, sometimes referred to as the Warhol of Japan, also runs an art factory in Tokyo with 60 employees.⁷⁵ The development of a societal interest in artistic experience and immersive works has laid the foundation for these studios to grow in popularity, as the “superartists” receiving

⁷² Ian Wallace, “The Evolution of the Artist's Studio, From Renaissance Bottega to Assembly Line”, *ArtSpace*, June 11, 2014. https://www.artspace.com/magazine/art_101/art_market/the-evolution-of-the-artists-studio-52374

⁷³ Ben Davis, “The Rise of the Superartists”, *Artnet Magazine*, accessed April 18, 2022. <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/reviews/davis/davis7-16-08.asp>

⁷⁴ Ian Wallace, “The Evolution of the Artist's Studio, From Renaissance Bottega to Assembly Line”, *ArtSpace*.

⁷⁵ Arthur Lubow, “The Murakami Method”, *The New York Times*, April 3, 2005. <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/03/magazine/the-murakami-method.html>

commissions to create site-specific works for institutions to attract more visitors has created the need for larger studio operations to keep up with this interest. These artists have developed in lockstep with the experience economy, joining forces with the marketing trends of experience-based programming and corporate artistic commissions as well. Olafur Eliasson, Takashi Murakami, and Jeff Koons have all three collaborated with Louis Vuitton, for example. Murakami famously integrated his color palette and icon system into the brand's designer bags starting in 2002, in addition to erecting functional boutiques of the designer in the middle of his museum retrospective. Eliasson propelled his immersive-focused art practice in collaboration with the brand as well as he was called to create holiday display installations in all 350 global Louis Vuitton locations in 2006.⁷⁶

It is obvious that the ascending popularity of immersive art has charged the development of artist studios to become even bigger, grander production operations in order to create the transcendent works for which these artists are known. The magnitude of the art form itself and its prominence within the news, social media, and commercial marketing efforts has also helped many of these artists to reach stardom as “superartists” become a new form of celebrity. But the threshold of success for immersive artists does not only reach the operative studios of Eliasson, Murakami, and Koons. Other individual artists have also risen to great success thanks to the influence of the experience economy and the popularization of immersive art practices, the two artists most important to this conversation being Doug Wheeler and Yayoi Kusama.

Doug Wheeler and Yayoi Kusama are both artists that have seen a significant surge in recognition over the past few years that can be largely attributed to the connection between their artistic practice and the demand for experiential art. Both artists began their practice around the

⁷⁶ Ben Davis, “The Rise of the Superartists”, *Artnet Magazine*, accessed April 18, 2022.

early 1960s, but failed to achieve the industry acknowledgement or market status they aimed for at the time. For Doug Wheeler, the artist's comeback mainly started just ten years ago after his "return from obscurity in 2012"⁷⁷. Wheeler began his artistic career in the late 1960s in Venice, California, where he began creating ethereal, experiential works that made him one of the founders of the Light and Space movement. The artists of the movement, most famously James Turrell, Mary Corse, and Robert Irwin, were loosely invested in similar ideas to the Minimalism movement in the sixties and investigated unknown aspects of physical space and human perception of light. Wheeler fashioned boundaryless atmospheric fields as some of his first experiential works, where viewers could enter into an immersive space infused with light and color. Though he found some early success, his career was mainly punctuated by refusals from major institutions and exhibitors.⁷⁸ The artist himself refused a few major museum exhibitions because of his doubts that his works would be presented in the way they intended. Many of the challenges of representation for Wheeler came from the difficulties of installing the works he created, which made him a bit of an enigma in the following decades. Jeffrey Weiss, senior curator at the Guggenheim Museum, said that "he was always an artist that commanded a lot of respect in the art world, but his work can be very hard to find and see."⁷⁹

Over the four decades following of his career, Wheeler never had a full-time American gallery represent him, aside from a brief, unsuccessful experience with a Los Angeles dealer Doug Christmas. Wheeler was mainly supported in his early years by the well-known minimalist art collector Giuseppe Panza. The most powerful dealer in the country, Leo Castelli, had courted Wheeler, however the artist turned down the opportunity to work with him because he felt that

⁷⁷ Andy Battaglia, "Creating a Desert Essence With Light and Space", *The Wall Street Journal*, January 21, 2016. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/creating-a-desert-essence-with-light-and-space-1453424260>

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Castelli wanted to push him to create older versions of his work in which he was no longer interested.⁸⁰ Wheeler's work had been exhibited mainly in the West Coast and parts of Europe due to Giuseppe Panza's investment, however sightings of the artist's work on the East Coast were slim for many decades, partly because of gallery representation and the complexity of his installation requirements. In the mid-1970s, Wheeler became so frustrated with the artworld and his struggle for success that he took up screenwriting to support himself. It wasn't until 2012, nearly forty years later, that the artist ignited his comeback with his first solo New York exhibition at David Zwirner gallery in Chelsea, titled *SA MI 75 DZ NY 12* (fig. 15), at the age of 72.⁸¹ David Zwirner claimed this exhibition to be the "most expensive single installation ever mounted by the gallery"⁸², demonstrating the early struggles of immersive art's success due to costly technological needs and the lack of infrastructure within the art market to support similar types of exhibits. Since then, the artist has grown in recognition thanks to David Zwirner's re-introduction of Wheeler into the artworld and the influence of the experience economy on artistic preferences and trends. Doug Wheeler has since held four solo exhibitions at David Zwirner gallery in New York, the most recent in 2020 at the age of 80. His work is held in prominent museum collections worldwide, including the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the MOCA in Los Angeles, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York to name a few.⁸³ His success serves as a true testament to the influence of the experience economy on the art market and how the development of experience-focused infrastructure within the artworld has

⁸⁰ Randy Kennedy, "Into the Heart of Lightness", *The New York Times*, January 15, 2012.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/15/arts/design/doug-wheeler-builds-infinity-environment-at-david-zwirner.html>

⁸¹ Randy Kennedy, "Into the Heart of Lightness", *The New York Times*, January 15, 2012.

⁸² Randy Kennedy, "Into the Heart of Lightness", *The New York Times*, January 15, 2012.

⁸³ "Doug Wheeler: Biography", David Zwirner, accessed April 18, 2022.

<https://www.davidzwirner.com/artists/doug-wheeler/biography>

allowed for immersive artists to gain traction in spite of the challenges of expensive installation requirements.

Yayoi Kusama, the current highest-selling living female artist and one of the most famous immersive creators, also experienced decades of refusal and neglect from the high-stakes artworld. She was born in Matsumoto, Japan in 1929 and began her artistic career in her native country, but always had her sights set on leaving Japan to pursue her career elsewhere. She presented her first solo show in Japan in 1952 and quickly moved to the U.S. in 1957, eventually situating herself in New York.⁸⁴ However, she struggled to gain recognition and break into the competitive art market in the city. During her fifteen-year stay in New York, she worked on some of her major series of “Infinity Net” paintings, “Accumulation” objects of stuffed phallus-shaped soft sculptures, performance pieces, and polka-dot paintings. She went door to door to galleries and frame shops trying to sell her first watercolors she brought from Japan. Although she made strong connections with New York’s hottest artists in the 60s, like dear friend Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, and Claes Oldenburg, she struggled to gain gallery recognition and found it especially difficult to compete in the white, male-dominated art market. During this decade, the most influential dealer, Leo Castelli, dealt mainly with American, white, male artists and drove them to great success, however left Kusama, amongst other female, non-white artists behind in their triumph over the market.⁸⁵ Art historian Midori Yamamura argues this to have contributed to the delayed broader reception and uneven critical attention afforded to her work in her rigorously researched book, *Yayoi Kusama: Inventing the Singular*.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ “Yayoi Kusama: Biography”, David Zwirner, accessed April 19, 2022.

<https://www.davidzwirner.com/artists/yayoi-kusama/biography>

⁸⁵ Greg Allen, “The Kusama Industrial Complex: How Yayoi Kusama Came to Captivate the World, Feuling Museums and the Market”, *Artnews*, July 21, 2020. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/yayoi-kusama-museum-favorite-art-market-rise-1202694918/>

⁸⁶ Midori Yamamura, *Yayoi Kusama: Inventing the Singular*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, August 2015).

Kusama began her investigation into creating immersive environments during her time in New York, while still fighting to gain recognition. She exhibited her first-ever mirrored Infinity Room, her series of work which is most well-known today, titled *Phalli's Field* in 1966 at the Richard Castellane Gallery (fig 16.). This piece is considered to be one of the first mirror rooms in contemporary art history, yet only garnered mention in *Arts Magazine* and *ARTnews* folded into the standard roundup reviews of current exhibitions. Meanwhile, Yamamura notes that artist Lucas Samaras exhibited a rather comparable mirror room six months later at Pace Gallery, which resulted in a six-page interview in *Artforum* and a seven-page special feature in *ARTnews*.⁸⁷ Kusama struggled with deteriorating mental health issues and multiple suicide attempts, much of which she channeled into her work through artistic therapy and interests many of her fans today because of her incredible story, however returned to Japan after struggling for success in New York in 1973. She moved into a psychiatric hospital in 1977, where she currently lives and found an art therapy program that has provided her the supportive environment to rebuild her artistic practice.⁸⁸

Though Kusama's decades of neglect within the market were fueled partially by gender misrepresentation and mental illness challenges, she was able to rise to tremendous success later on through the popularization of her Infinity Rooms and the influence of the experience economy. It is undeniable that in the past twenty years Kusama has risen to unparalleled heights in terms of fame and recognition because of social media and the saturation of selfies taken in her Infinity Rooms and posted on Instagram. Greg Allen wrote in his article in *ARTnews* that Kusama's immersive environments were some of the first art spectacles that were actually

⁸⁷ Gloria Sutton, review of *Yayoi Kusama: Inventing the Singular*, by Miduri Yamamura, *Women's Art Journal*, 2018, Vol. 39 Issue 1, pg. 44.

⁸⁸ Greg Allen, "The Kusama Industrial Complex: How Yayoi Kusama Came to Captivate the World, Fueling Museums and the Market", *ARTnews*, July 21, 2020.

intended to, and could be, shared via social media.⁸⁹ The experience economy and the rising need for audiences to immerse themselves in fabricated, transcendent environments has truly fueled the market for Kusama to become one of the most famous female artists in the world. Since 2011, Kusama's museum shows have dominated the globe, with five major exhibitions touring thirty-four cities. In 2014, the Kusama retrospective "Infinite Obsession" in Central and South America drew the highest museum exhibition attendance rate globally with more than two million visitors. From 2017 to 2019, the immersive exhibition, "Yayoi Kusama: Infinity Mirrors", toured six North American institutions and drew more than 800,000 visitors. It is clear that the trend of experiential art and Kusama's Instagrammable success have mutually aided museum's programs as well. Greg Allen wrote, "Kusama delivers everything a 21st-century museum could ask for - art, experience crowds, social media likes, and money - in one sleek mirrored box."⁹⁰

When Kusama exhibited her first "Infinity Mirror Room" in 1965, Castellane priced the work at \$5,000 (\$2,500 for museums). No takers. Over the last eight years, Infinity Mirror Rooms have become "surefire crowd-pleasers whose costs are easily justified by their popularity."⁹¹ At least eleven international institutions have acquired Infinity Rooms since 2011, including the Tate, the Rubell Museum, and the Hirshhorn, and each work currently raises around \$1.2–\$2 million on the primary market, nearly double on the secondary market.⁹² As the top-selling living female artist on the market today, Kusama's prices, fame, and imminent success are only predicted to amplify as the experience economy continues to grow.

⁸⁹ Greg Allen, "The Kusama Industrial Complex: How Yayoi Kusama Came to Captivate the World, Fueling Museums and the Market", *ARTnews*, July 21, 2020.

⁹⁰ Greg Allen, "The Kusama Industrial Complex".

⁹¹ Greg Allen, "The Kusama Industrial Complex".

⁹² Greg Allen, "The Kusama Industrial Complex".

CHAPTER 4: What Does the Current Market Look Like Today?

Immersive art has made a significant impact on the art market and its institutions over the past sixty years, as we have seen. However, aside from altering museum programming and bringing many art collectives and immersive artists to stardom, the experience art economy has made its own impact on the business world by igniting an alternate industry. This chapter will discuss the current market for immersive art businesses, introducing the key commercial ventures that are pioneering the industry and finding inventive ways to commodify the experience of immersive art.

As discussed in the previous chapters, it is clear from the history of experiential art that immersive experiences have always relied on commissions or institutional and corporate investments because of the medium's magnitude, size, technology, and various other reasons. This mode of financing operated somewhat within the art market during the Renaissance period thanks to the Catholic Church's investment in art and followed later with Western military investment and government funds. However, since the early twentieth century the art market has grown significantly within the confines of expanding capitalistic and commercial economies, and due to increased democratization and the decline of religious and military involvement in society, immersive art has moved away from the traditional art market and established its own industry in which it operates. The *2020 Immersive Entertainment Industry Annual Report* written by longtime immersive creators Ricky Brigante and Sarah A.S. Elger, claims that immersive art businesses operate instead within the ever-growing entertainment industry. These enterprises all utilize similar business models that offer admission tickets and merchandise for commodified experiences that aim to educate, entertain, or provide artful context to the world around us. "This

industry includes themed entertainment, haunted attractions, virtual reality, augmented reality, mixed reality, transmedia, escape rooms, immersive theatre, alternate reality games, live-action role playing, themed bars and restaurants, experiential marketing activations, and experiential museums.”⁹³

The annual report analyzes this industry’s activity over the year of 2019 and praises its success during that time period. The authors claim that 2019 was the year where the experience economy truly took hold, further supporting Pine and Gilmore’s Harvard Business review article from 1998.⁹⁴ After a tremendously successful, growth-oriented year in 2019, the Immersive Entertainment industry was valued at \$61.8 billion. The leader of this industry has always been theme parks and haunted attractions, which are businesses that have been established for many decades and have solidified their business models to drive successful results. In 2019, major themed attractions reached a major turning point having exceeded a collective half billion visits for the first time in history - roughly 7% of the world’s population.⁹⁵ Yet, even though the strong growth of themed attractions demonstrates the significant expansion and prosperity of the immersive entertainment industry, the report emphasizes the most powerful innovations of immersive art experiences that have really broken ground with new business models and attracted new markets throughout the world. “Growth is occurring in all of these segments as experiences become more creative, more elaborate, and receive more funding.”⁹⁶

⁹³ Ricky Brigante and Sarah A.S. Elger, ed. Noah Nelson, *NEW ADVENTURES: The Strength of Immersive Entertainment, 2020 Immersive Entertainment Industry Annual Report*, HERE Institute, Los Angeles, CA. June 9, 2020, pg. 57. <https://everythingimmersive.com/storage/website-files/documents/2020%20Immersive%20Entertainment%20Industry%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

⁹⁴ Ricky Brigante and Sarah A.S. Elger, ed. Noah Nelson, *NEW ADVENTURES*, pg. 10.

⁹⁵ Ricky Brigante and Sarah A.S. Elger, ed. Noah Nelson, *NEW ADVENTURES*, pg. 10.

⁹⁶ Ricky Brigante and Sarah A.S. Elger, ed. Noah Nelson, *NEW ADVENTURES*, pg. 6.

The annual report discusses the industry lifecycle of newcomers and strong performers in the market. Brigante and Elger claim that the majority of the Immersive Entertainment Industry is largely in the introductory phase of figuring out products, innovating, and rightfully failing along the way to identify their true potential. At least 775 new immersive projects were created in 2019, establishing serious growth and expanding the sector ever more than before. Theme parks, haunted attractions, and escape rooms have been testing and tweaking practices for many years. This is the field where Walt Disney built his empire, revolutionizing entertainment through the development of the true original immersive experience. But theme parks, haunted attractions, and escape rooms have already experienced tremendous growth since Disney's opening in 1955. For this reason, the annual report claims these businesses are on their way to maturity in the industry lifecycle. All other parts of the Immersive Entertainment Industry are in the introductory growth stages, and this is where the true innovation and growth is coming from. Brigante and Elger conclude that we are on the verge of another entertainment revolution where the next generation of innovators are pushing boundaries and engaging audiences with spectacles unlike anything we have seen before.⁹⁷

Minus theme parks, the size of the industry is valued at \$9.7 billion. This side of the industry that is truly innovating and revolutionizing the practice is embracing creativity and bringing art to the masses. At the forefront of these new businesses are immersive theater experiences and immersive art. The report focuses on Meow Wolf, the Museum of Ice Cream, Color Factory, and other immersive 'museum-type' experiences that are producing exploratory permanent installations and leading the way for the new experience economy with massive dollar signs. These businesses have found new ways to monetize art and shared experiences on a mass

⁹⁷ Ricky Brigante and Sarah A.S. Elger, ed. Noah Nelson, *NEW ADVENTURES*, pg. 8.

scale, attracting more than \$200 million in private and venture capital investments in 2019.⁹⁸ The art collective teamLab also amplifies this exponential growth of artistic immersive businesses with their immersive museum in Tokyo, teamLab Borderless. The group describes teamLab Borderless as “a group of artworks that form one borderless world. Artworks move out of rooms, communicate with other works, influence, and sometimes intermingle with each other with no boundaries.”⁹⁹ The museum is marketed as a place for viewers to “wander, explore with intention, discover, and create a new world with others”¹⁰⁰ (fig. 13). Rising to imminent success, the team announced in 2019 that they received more visitors than the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam the same year, becoming the world’s most visited single-artist museum. TeamLab Borderless drew 2.3 million visitors in its first year of operation in addition to 1.2 million visitors to the collective’s temporary light experience.¹⁰¹ The collective has also launched a Borderless digital art museum in Shanghai, with a title sponsor of Epson printers.¹⁰²

What is paramount about this development within the Immersive Entertainment Industry is the way new businesses are merging art and commodified experiences to engage the masses with artistic creation in a new way. The annual report praises these new advancements because of the ways in which the categories of art and entertainment are rapidly blurring together.

“Much of what was formerly considered mass entertainment is now thought of by many as art. And even the most wild art is now finding forms to be entertaining for the masses.

Through emerging business models, artists are discovering new opportunities to leave the

⁹⁸ Ricky Brigante and Sarah A.S. Elger, ed. Noah Nelson, *NEW ADVENTURES*, pg. 11.

⁹⁹ “Wander, explore, discover in one borderless world”, teamLab Borderless, accessed April 14, 2022. <https://borderless.teamlab.art/>

¹⁰⁰ “Wander, explore, discover in one borderless world”, teamLab Borderless, accessed April 14, 2022. <https://borderless.teamlab.art/>

¹⁰¹ Ricky Brigante and Sarah A.S. Elger, ed. Noah Nelson, *NEW ADVENTURES*, pg. 11.

¹⁰² teamLab Borderless Shanghai Official Site, accessed April 14, 2022. <https://borderless.teamlab.art/shanghai/>

‘starving artist’ cliché behind in favor of one that encourages them to actually be able to make a living off their art and not feel like a sellout.”¹⁰³

This evolution is not only creating new business ventures for investors and corporations, but is also benefitting artists by changing the ways in which their work can reach others. A survey was conducted amongst the 2019 immersive creators, where 43% of respondents claimed to consider creative or artist achievement to be their primary success metric, followed by social impact as the second most important, then financial gain and customer satisfaction as the two last components. With viewers describing their experiences in immersive art spaces as “transformative”, “mind blown”, “meaningful”, and “I’ve never seen anything like this”¹⁰⁴ from conducted surveys, it is evident that immersive art as an art practice can truly move people in a fresh, all-encompassing manner that artists are beginning to see in a new light. This is not new, however, as the church demonstrated hundreds of years ago with an investment in immersive art to push religious connections through artistic transcendence. Marc Glimcher, CEO of Pace Gallery, ironically makes this connection as well. “People are hungry for transcendence...churches are emptying and these artists are trying to fill that gap.”¹⁰⁵ It is no surprise then that artists are turning to immersive experience as a new way to reach audiences on a “deeper level and achieve social impact.”¹⁰⁶

One of the main challenges the industry still faces is the need for the establishment of clear paths of funding. Relative to the Immersive Entertainment Industry, the main players of theme parks, haunted attractions, and escape rooms have grown out of large corporations or

¹⁰³ Ricky Brigante and Sarah A.S. Elger, ed. Noah Nelson, *NEW ADVENTURES*, pg. 11.

¹⁰⁴ Ricky Brigante and Sarah A.S. Elger, ed. Noah Nelson, *NEW ADVENTURES*, pg. 39.

¹⁰⁵ Anna Wiener, “The Rise of ‘Immersive’ Art”, *The New Yorker*, February 10, 2022.
<https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-silicon-valley/the-rise-and-rise-of-immersive-art>

¹⁰⁶ Ricky Brigante and Sarah A.S. Elger, ed. Noah Nelson, *NEW ADVENTURES*, pg. 11.

sometimes small, individually-owned, single location companies. The rest of the industry, including the new immersive art ventures, consists of a mix of companies, organizations, corporate partnerships, or venture capital investments, many of whom have identified that the cost of installing new immersive works from scratch is among the most daunting challenges of all. The cost to introduce elaborate works like immersive installations are extremely expensive and traditional grants or donations that have been used previously to fund theater productions are most of the time not sufficient, nor are admissions models for productions where audiences are on the smaller side. Other industries have organized prizes, grants, sponsorships, and other clear fundraising paths to allow for smaller creators to apply for the funding needed to become established. This has not yet found clear footing in the Immersive Entertainment industry, however is not a far reach for potential.¹⁰⁷ As these experiences grow in size and wider audiences become more familiar with their models, the problems of scaling and sustainability become even more apparent. The annual report claims that outside of many immersive technology companies, “only a very small number of immersive entertainment companies have found their way into receiving the funding they need to catapult them to success. But investors are starting to take note that there is something particularly magical happening in the space.”¹⁰⁸

Funding paths for these early-stage creative immersive companies are what next needs to be established to fuel the growth of similar artistic endeavors. With such a high percentage of individual creators and startups in the space, the report notes that the majority of new ventures have started in the past six years, and this growth has moved at an exponential, upward pace during that time. 63% of respondents to the creator survey claim to have bootstrapped their efforts, relying on founders and past revenue to continue to produce work. 27% of respondents

¹⁰⁷ Ricky Brigante and Sarah A.S. Elger, ed. Noah Nelson, *NEW ADVENTURES*, pg. 100.

¹⁰⁸ Ricky Brigante and Sarah A.S. Elger, ed. Noah Nelson, *NEW ADVENTURES*, pg. 8.

have brought in additional capital from outside sources including grants, crowdfunding, sponsorship, donations, and private investments.¹⁰⁹ But achieving these investments may prove difficult while still in such an early stage of the industry lifecycle. Brigante and Elger note in their report that “when it comes to funding - an inevitable stage of growth that this industry is just starting to find its way into - it’s a given that many investors simply do not care about the artistry of an immersive experience. It is the financials that will convince them whether to invest or not.”¹¹⁰ As these art experiences continue to exponentially grow in 2022 and forward, the success of these ventures is sure to grab more investors as the industry progresses into new heights.

One of the newest developments in corporate funding for some immersive art businesses is the idea of “the art stack”. Anna Weiner describes this phenomenon in her article *The Rise of ‘Immersive’ Art* in the *New Yorker* as the trend of tech companies acting as art patrons in a “vertically integrated, artist-led system of production that operates at unprecedented scale, bypassing the art establishment through centralization.”¹¹¹ Piggy-backing off of the “tech stack”, which usually refers to a system’s foundational software components, or a “full-stack” engineer who is fluent in both front-end and back-end development, the “art stack” consists of an art studio that owns the process from beginning to end. The full-stack art studio employs artistic and technological teams to create artwork, controlling its own revenue streams and gallery spaces. This type of business model exists within the entertainment world already with movie studios, record labels, fashion houses, video-game companies...etc. Weiner suggests that the art stack could become the new mode of business for hybrid immersive art/entertainment companies. She

¹⁰⁹ Ricky Brigante and Sarah A.S. Elger, ed. Noah Nelson, *NEW ADVENTURES*, pg. 24.

¹¹⁰ Ricky Brigante and Sarah A.S. Elger, ed. Noah Nelson, *NEW ADVENTURES*, pg. 70.

¹¹¹ Anna Wiener, “The Rise of ‘Immersive’ Art”, *The New Yorker*, February 10, 2022.

explains how studios who have mastered the art stack could someday adopt an industrialized model, where they can monetize their offerings in different ways like brokering corporate sponsorships, partnering with real-estate developers, or offering nonartistic technical services. She even states that there could be art-stack I.P.O.s. These collectives exist already with examples like teamLab, Random International, whose 2012 “Rain Room” became a global sensation (fig. 18), and Drift, which recently held an immersive exhibition of kinetic sculptures at the Shed in New York City.¹¹² However, with such vast potential for the immersive art economy to expand into, this model is expected to grow as well, merging artistry and technology into the space of immersive business.

This section will now identify four key businesses pioneering the industry sector of immersive art in the market today. These businesses include Meow Wolf, Artechhouse, the Van Gogh Immersive Experience, and Superblue. This order follows the chronology of these business launches and will introduce the history, business model, and ideation behind each venture.

MEOW WOLF

“Big Fun Art” is what art critic Ben Davis used to describe the movement started by Meow Wolf. As one of the first art collectives focused on immersive experiences, Meow Wolf has pioneered the industry by serving as one of the premier innovators within the experiential art market operating with a completely new business model. The collective started in 2008 as a group of DIY artists who came together to “make art, throw parties, and have music shows in a

¹¹² Anna Wiener, “The Rise of ‘Immersive’ Art”, *The New Yorker*, February 10, 2022.

warehouse in Santa Fe.”¹¹³ George R.R. Martin, an author and Santa Fe local, helped the group create their otherworldly vision, investing \$3.5 million to help them build their flagship location, “House of Eternal Return”, in 2016.

Meow Wolf proved to be an immediate sensation. The company demonstrated its profitable investment potential after its first year of opening, bringing in \$17 million in investment in 2018 and over \$158 million the following year. In 2019, “House of Eternal Return” welcomed half a million visitors and, in the same year, broke ground on a \$60 million flagship location in Denver with more art-exhibition space than the Guggenheim. Since then, Meow Wolf has filed as a B Corporation, a for-profit business legally required to meet standards for social and environmental performance.¹¹⁴ The venture has also utilized its investment capital to expand its footprint with new locations in Phoenix, Washington D.C., Denver, and Las Vegas. Boasting a staff of around 900 employees, the company only continues to grow and conjure new ideas for expansion.

The most optimistic enthusiasts of the company claim that it is poised to become the Disney of the twenty-first century. This pipe dream already seems to be taking place as the collective has installed the first artist-driven ride at the Denver amusement park Elitch Gardens. *Kaleidoscope*, the collective calls it, is described not as a rollercoaster but a “thrill ride for the mind” on an interactive, artist-driven voyage.¹¹⁵ As the collective continues to innovate and blur the lines between entertainment and art, they are expected to follow a similar business plan to Disney by creating a 400-room Meow Wolf hotel in Phoenix. The company additionally

¹¹³ Sarah Cascone, “‘The Whole Thing is an Art Project’: Meow Wolf Cofounders explain the Grand Plan Behind Their Wildly Popular Immersive Art Universe”, *Artnet News*, October 20, 2021. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/meow-wolf-interview-2011837>

¹¹⁴ Sarah Cascone, “‘The Whole Thing is an Art Project’”.

¹¹⁵ “Kaleidoscope”, Meow Wolf, accessed April 26, 2022. <https://meowwolf.com/ride>

produces music videos, runs an annual festival, and has opened a production studio that will produce television shows and podcasts.¹¹⁶

As a group that started as a loose collection of punk artists, Meow Wolf's company story and investment trajectory robustly outlines the future potential for immersive art-entertainment ventures within the growing experience economy. The developer of AREA15, Winston Fisher, claims that the artist group did not come together to become a corporation, but as genuine artists who created a magical world that thrives in the new economy in which we are living. "It's people like that who are the next titans."¹¹⁷ Meow Wolf's 37-year-old CEO, Vince Kadlubek, embodies this belief as a man who asked his high school teachers if he could work on independent projects instead of coming to class. As a young, creative-minded person, he felt excluded from the conversation, but against all odds utilized his passion to ignite an empire geared towards creative, artistic expression and immersive exploration.

Through this innovation, the company has created an avenue to attract new audiences to the art world who would have previously been excluded from it. Meow Wolf strayed from the traditional gallery and nonprofit model, adhering to the admission-based business models of entertainment companies in order to be fairly compensated for their creative work. As a corporation that has grown into a nine-figure valuation, Meow Wolf demonstrates the true power of artist collectives that are growing in numbers as the experience economy pushes for largescale immersive entertainment and has ignited an industry that gives artists the opportunity to join the entrepreneurial side of the market.

¹¹⁶ Rachel Monroe, "Can an Art Collective Become the Disney of the Experience Economy?", *The New York Times Magazine*, May 1, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/05/01/magazine/meow-wolf-art-experience-economy.html>

¹¹⁷ Rachel Monroe, "Can an Art Collective Become the Disney of the Experience Economy?".

ARTECHOUSE

Artehouse followed the craze evoked by Meow Wolf's success with its first opening in Washington D.C. in 2017. Co-founded by husband-and-wife Sandro Kereselidze and Tatiana Pastukhova, the company aims to inspire a new generation of genre-pushing artists, educate the public about new artistic mediums, and empower artists with tools and platforms to amplify their work.¹¹⁸ Artehouse focuses on the integration of art, science, and technology, dedicating their space to new-media artists and digital creators that construct immersive environments utilizing the latest scientific and technological innovations.

Like Meow Wolf, Artehouse has established a for-profit model that satisfies a certain niche within the art market that ordinary white-cute galleries and museums have failed to support. Kereselidze explains this focus for the company: "Digital artists are struggling to find exhibition spaces...Without specific technology, they're left with limited means of engaging the public, which seems to be increasingly interested in this type of artwork."¹¹⁹ To ensure that Artehouse can consistently keep up with burgeoning technological developments compared to other arts institutions, the exhibition spaces will be with first art space to integrate L-ISA Immersive Hyperreal Sound technology with thirty-two separate channels for an entirely multidimensional audio experience and will feature the world's largest seamless megapixel count with Barco-powered technology to bring floor-to-ceiling digital environments to life with the widest possible color spectrum.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ "Mission", Artehouse.com, accessed April 26, 2022. <https://www.artehouse.com/mission/>

¹¹⁹ Ryan Waddoups, "Enter Manhattan's Sprawling New Digital Art Mecca", *Surface Magazine*, September 3, 2019. <https://www.surfacemag.com/articles/artehouse-nyc-opening/>

¹²⁰ Ryan Waddoups, "Enter Manhattan's Sprawling New Digital Art Mecca", *Surface Magazine*.

Since the gallery was first launched in D.C. in 2017, Artechouse attracted nearly 500,000 visitors that year with immersive exhibitions by artists Nonotak, Julius Horsthuis, and Marpi.¹²¹ A Miami location opened the following year in 2018, followed by another permanent location in New York's Chelsea market in 2019. The co-founders have declined to detail how much the company has invested into its immersive spaces, however Kereselidze and Pastukhova have stated they invested \$4.5 million up through 2018 to expand its various locations. With ticket prices between \$15-\$25, the company operates on the same entertainment-based business model to gain revenue and will continue to invest in the artistic practices of new-media and tech-based installation artists.

THE VAN GOGH IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE

The Van Gogh Immersive Experience will only briefly be considered for this thesis, however it is imperative to discuss because of the almost instantaneous rise in popularity the ventures brought to the immersive entertainment industry. The Van Gogh Immersive Experience is not one travelling show, but in fact a collection of nearly 40 different Van Gogh immersive experiences that have each been created and financed by around five separate entertainment companies.¹²² These companies have all capitalized on the intellectual property rights of Van Gogh's work, as legally artworks fall under the public domain seventy years after the artist's death.¹²³ Therefore, the costs of production are comparatively favorable as the producers only

¹²¹ Ryan Waddoups, "Enter Manhattan's Sprawling New Digital Art Mecca", *Surface Magazine*.

¹²² Kriston Capps, "What's Behind the Wave of Immersive Van Gogh Exhibits", *Bloomberg*, September 14, 2021. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-09-14/the-explosion-of-digital-vincent-van-gogh-exhibits>

¹²³ Judith B. Prowda, *Visual Arts and the Law: A Handbook for Professionals*, Farnham, UK: Lund Humphries, 2013.

have to pay licensing fees to museums or photographers for the use of high-resolution images of Van Gogh's work.

These productions, however, do not quite fall within the realm of immersive art developments of which this thesis is concerned because The Van Gogh Immersive Experience and other similar events function solely as entertainment sites rather than for-profit businesses aimed to commission, exhibit, and support immersive artists and experiential work. The Van Gogh Experiences are rather entertainment pieces that are created based *off* of an artist's work, aimed to entertain and educate the masses, but do not create these immersive experiences as artworks themselves. They can be considered more as shows, rather, that utilize creative animation and projection techniques to engage audiences in thirty-to-sixty-minute floor-to-ceiling films that run repeatedly for timed ticketed admissions.

These productions are an important contributor to the market, however, because they have instigated an extensive interest in immersive art experiences alike. The president of Toronto-based Lighthouse immersive, one of the producers behind "Immersive Van Gogh", stated that their production surpassed 3.2 million tickets sold, making it the most successful attraction in the world on Ticketmaster.¹²⁴ The growing attraction and expanding market will only continue to draw new audiences towards other immersive art supporters like Superblue, Meow Wolf, Artechouse, and others that are entering the market. Other entertainment companies have noticed the profitability of this sector of immersive entertainment and have lined up other artist-based productions to debut this year, "Monet by the Water", "Immersive Picasso", "Immersive Frida", and "Gustav Klimt: The Immersive Experience" to name a few.

¹²⁴ Kriston Capps, "What's Behind the Wave of Immersive Van Gogh Exhibits", *Bloomberg*, September 14, 2021. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-09-14/the-explosion-of-digital-vincent-van-gogh-exhibits>

SUPERBLUE

Superblue is the last, and one of the most interesting, businesses that has revolutionized this burgeoning space within the art market. As a venture started by Pace Gallery, the company reforms and instigates a unique overlap between gallery business models and for-profit entertainment spaces. The idea first started in 2015, when the blue-chip New York Gallery planned to open a new space in Silicon Valley with a show by teamLab. The new venture, titled “Pace Art + Technology”, aimed to bring art to the tech crowd through teamLab’s wildly kinetic, colorful, electronic environments in an immersive celebration of art, science, technology, and nature. But the CEO of Pace Gallery, Marc Glimcher, was taken aback when teamLab asked the gallery to sell tickets to the exhibition. Glimcher recalled his response, “I said, you can’t sell tickets, [because] art galleries sell art, not tickets.”¹²⁵ The interesting dichotomy between the models of immersive exhibition spaces and art galleries noted by Glimcher ended up instigating the idea for Superblue, Pace Gallery’s series of experiential art centers that do not sell artworks, like its brick-and-mortar gallery counterparts, but sell immersive experiences.

Superblue initially launched in December 2020, but due to the pandemic debuted its premier location in Miami in April of 2021. A few months following, Superblue’s London location opened in October of 2021. The company’s experimental model has supported many famous art collectives that have vastly grown in size to operate as full-fledged companies in response to increased demand for experiential art - teamLab and Random International as two examples. Each artist or art group receives an upfront payment from Superblue as a commission to create an immersive work, as well as a royalty from gross ticket sales throughout its exhibition

¹²⁵ Frank Rose, “Will Superblue Be the ‘Infinity Room’ Writ Large?”, *The New York Times*, August 4, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/04/arts/superblue-immersive-art-pace-jobs.html>

run. Like the entertainment business of Hollywood, music, book publishing and others, the relationship becomes more lucrative the more popular the installation.¹²⁶ The commissions offer direct financial support to Superblue's artists in order to get them started or, in other cases, help them land commissions for public artworks from cities, festivals, and similar events.

The business model of Superblue follows what Glimcher described as “beg, borrow, and steal [to fundraise the budget] and then try to sell enough souvenirs to get out of the red.”¹²⁷ The souvenirs he refers to aren't coffee mugs or t-shirts, but the unique, limited-edition artworks of the represented artists that are more domestically-friendly in size and scale. James Turrell, Random International, and Mary Corse, for example, are all artists represented by Pace Gallery that have created immersive exhibitions for Superblue, whose sales from the gallery may help account for some of the fundraising needs for the immersive venture. However, the equation has since changed after Superblue introduced a ticketing model with admission of about \$30.

Even though the gallery and Superblue claim to operate as two completely independent businesses, despite their crossover in executive ranks and artist lists, the combination of business models has the potential to bring about new collectors and establish a fresh audience within the market. Superblue's immersive installations tend to attract younger audiences or viewers who have not normally expressed interest in traditional museums and galleries - that is part of its appeal. However, since the company works with many artists represented by Pace, Superblue has the potential to hook non-collectors in an alternate setting and then send them out to become

¹²⁶ Tim Schneider, “Why a Brush With COVID Will Strengthen Art's Experience Economy - and the Old-Fashioned Gallery Business, Too”, *Artnet News Intelligence Report Spring 2021*, March 24, 2021, pg. 30. <https://news.artnet.com/market/introducing-the-spring-2021-artnet-intelligence-report-1954132>

¹²⁷ Tim Schneider, “Why a Brush With COVID Will Strengthen Art's Experience Economy - and the Old-Fashioned Gallery Business, Too”.

clients elsewhere within the art-market ecosystem.¹²⁸ In this way, Superblue demonstrates a highly disruptive, yet innovative model that could change the art market altogether as galleries and museums think of new ways to engage with immersive art experiences that have the potential to raise immense profits and attract new audiences.

¹²⁸ Tim Schneider, “Why a Brush With COVID Will Strengthen Art’s Experience Economy - and the Old-Fashioned Gallery Business, Too”.

CONCLUSION

Immersive art has been used for centuries as a means to move, inspire, and ultimately transcend viewers into alternate realities. As a medium that breaks away from the traditional boundaries of fine art, innovation and development have been deeply rooted in its history. The story of artistic immersion stretches over major art historical time periods, connecting the Roman wall paintings, Byzantine mosaic interiors, Renaissance frescos, panorama battle paintings, Postmodern installations and many other famous art historical eras to the contemporary immersive ‘art-ertainment’ market reliant on digital projections and creative, otherworldly environments. This historical connection reveals innumerable consistencies in meaning, influence, aesthetics, financing, and structure that the industry continues to exhibit today.

Although present in art history since some of the earliest forms of artistic exploration, immersive art has always pushed the boundaries of art and the market in which it operates. It’s magnificence and monumental quality renders it an ambitious and rather burdensome investment, yet a magical and fascinating mode of art that can move audiences in ways no other art form could. This is perhaps one of the reasons that the medium continues to thrive and find ways to fit into emerging economies and markets over time.

This thesis demonstrates the ways in which experiential art challenges the relationship of art, artist, and patron. The trend of tech companies investing in ‘art stacks’ in the contemporary market is not extraneous from the previous patrons that established the practice, like the church and western militaries. We have seen how the experience economy has strengthened the influence of immersive art, evolving the medium, its involvement with museums and traditional institutions, and the success of superartists. After observing the market and analyzing the few

businesses that are pioneering the new wave of immersive art, it is evident that the industry is only a seed that has been watered, but still has the infinite potential to grow into a market-changing sector that may alter the relationship between artists, viewers, arts institutions, and the entertainment industry for good.

With the advent of NFTs, the creation of the Metaverse, VR, AR, and many other emerging technologies that are taking the art world by storm, it is only expected that immersive art will further contribute to these shifts that will bring art into a more digital, interconnected market. We are living in a time of an entertainment revolution. Only further innovation, artistic exploration, and creativity are expected to bring our most wild fantasies to life, as a clear desire for alternate realities has emerged. Entertainment and art offer the chance for audiences to feel free, built on the ideas of the most creative and daring, and innovated into industries that can create new meanings. The seed of contemporary immersive art is preparing to bloom, and The Big Business of Immersive Art has only just begun.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1. "The Great Frieze", Villa dei Misteri, 60-50 BCE, Pompeii, Italy. Photo. Source: Pompeiisites.org. <http://pompeiisites.org/en/pompeii-map/analysis/roman-housing/>



Fig. 2. The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, AD 392 – 450, Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy. Photo. Source: Italy Magazine.
<https://www.italymagazine.com/featured-story/mosaic-wonder-mausoleum-galla-placidia-ravenna>



Fig. 3. Interior view of the Dome of the Rock (Qubbat al-Sakhra), Umayyad, stone masonry, wooden roof, decorated with glazed ceramic tile, mosaics, and gilt aluminum and bronze dome, 691-92, with multiple renovations, patron the Caliph Abd al-Malik, Jerusalem Photo. Source: SmartHistory.org. <https://smarthistory.org/the-dome-of-the-rock-qubbat-al-sakhra/>



Fig. 4. Giovanetti, Matteo, *Chambre du Cerf*, Papal palace at Avignon, view of the north wall. Fresco, 1343, photo. Wikimedia.org.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Avignon_-_palais_des_papes_-_chambre_du_cerf_2.jpg



Fig. 5. Giovanetti, Matteo, *Saint Martial Chapel*, Papal palace at Avignon, France, fresco, 1344, photo. Source: Palais des Papes.
<https://www.palais-des-papes.com/en/content/priceless-frescoes>



Fig. 6. Pozzo, Andrea, *The Glory of St Ignatius*, the nave of Sant' Ignazio di Loyola, Rome, Italy, fresco, 1685-1694, photo. Source: Walks in Rome. <https://www.walksinrome.com/blog/stunning-frescoes-by-andrea-pozzo-church-of-sant-ignazio-rome>



Fig. 7. Michelangelo, *The Sistine Chapel*, Rome, Italy, fresco, 1508-1512, photo.
Source: ItalianRenaissance.org.
<http://www.italianrenaissance.org/a-closer-look-michelangelos-painting-of-the-sistine-chapel-ceiling/>

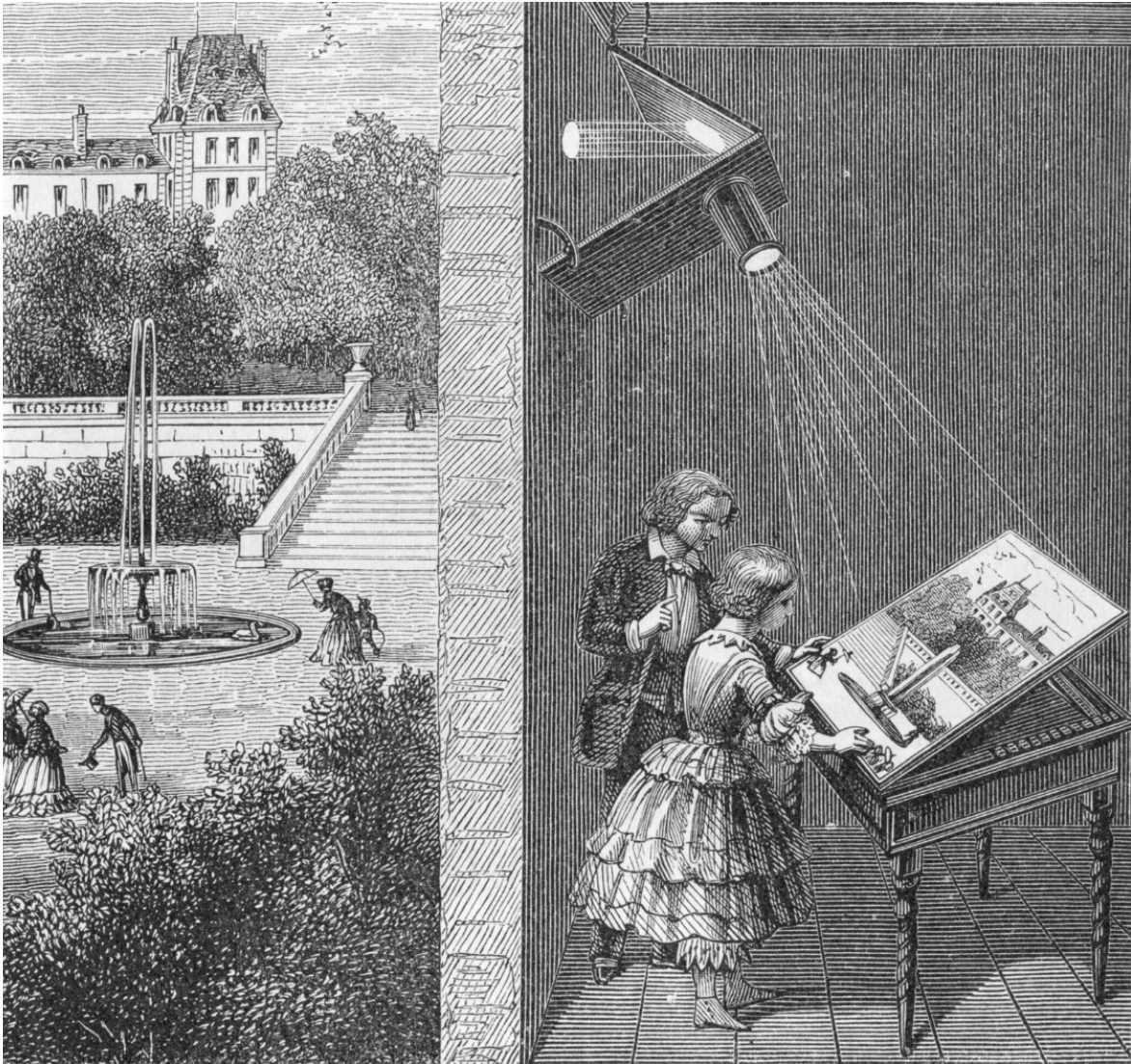


Fig. 8. Children watching an outdoor scene through a camera obscura. Source: Britannica.com <https://www.britannica.com/technology/camera-obscura-photography>

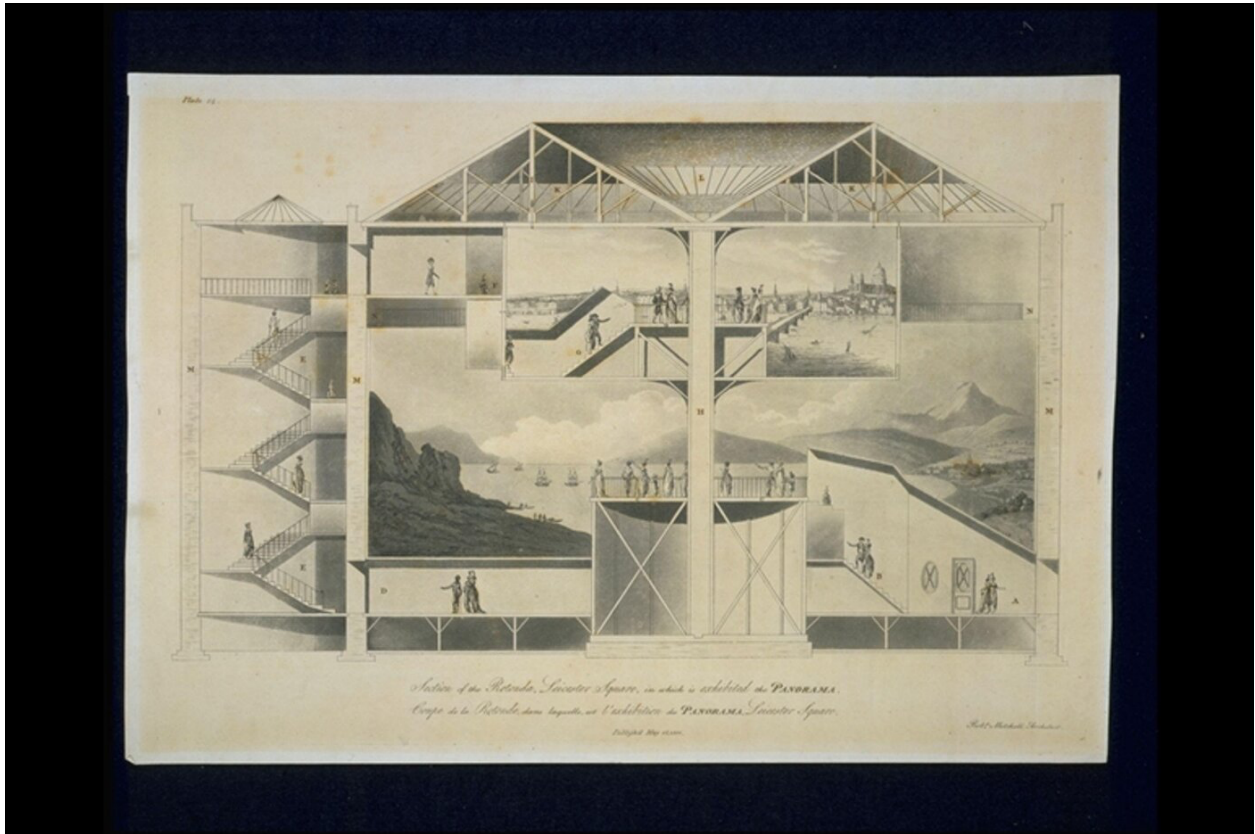


Fig. 9. Section of the Rotunda, Leicester Square, in which is exhibited the Panorama, Architectural Print, May 15, 1801 (published), London, Source: Victoria and Albert Museum.

<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O761231/section-of-the-rotunda-leicester-architectural-print-unknown/>



Fig. 10. *The Battle of Sedan* panorama by Anton von Werner. Painted by E. Bracht and thirteen paintings, oil on canvas, 115 m x 15 m, ca. 1883, Berlin, Germany, panorama leporello of four photographs. Source: Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*.



Fig. 11. Dan Flavin, *untitled*, 1970. Installation view, David Zwirner, Paris, 2019. Source: David Zwirner. <https://www.davidzwirner.com/exhibitions/2019/dan-flavin-paris-2019>



Fig. 12. Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, 2003. Installation view, the Tate Modern, London, 2003. Source: Olafur EliassonPhoto.
<https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/unilever-series/unilever-series-olafur-eliasson-weather-project>



Fig. 13. Olafur Eliasson, *Your uncertain shadow*, 2010. Installation view, the Tate Modern, London, 2019. Source: Anders Sune Berg.
<https://olafureliasson.net/archive/exhibition/EXH102539/olafur-eliasson-in-real-life>



Fig. 14. Olafur Eliasson, *Waterfall*, 2016, Versailles, France. Installation view. Photo by Anders Sune Berg. Source: Studio Olafur Eliasson. <https://olafureliasson.net/archive/exhibition/EXH102421/olafur-eliasson-versailles>



Fig. 15. Doug Wheeler, *SA MI 75 DZ NY 12*, 2012, David Zwirner Gallery, New York. Installation view. Photo. Source: David Zwirner Gallery. <https://www.davidzwirner.com/exhibitions/2012/doug-wheeler-0>



Fig. 16.

Yayoi Kusama, *Installation view of Kusama in Infinity Mirror Room - Phalli's Field*, at her solo exhibition "Floor Show" at R. Castellane Gallery, New York, 1965, 1965, Photo. Source: Artsy.

<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/yayoi-kusama-installation-view-of-kusama-in-infinity-mirror-room-phallis-field-at-her-solo-exhibition-floor-show-at-r-castellane-gallery-new-york>



Fig. 17. teamLab Borderless Tokyo Official Site: MORI Building Digital Art Museum. Installation view. Photo. Source: borderless.teamlab.art
<https://borderless.teamlab.art/>



Fig. 18. Random International, *Rain Room*, 2012. Water, injection moulded tiles, solenoid valves, pressure regulators, custom software, 3D tracking cameras, steel beams, water management system, grated floor. Installation view. Photo. Source: Random International.
<https://www.random-international.com/rain-room-2012>

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