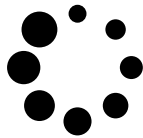


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Immersion and  
Dives: From the

Environment to Virtual Reality,  
Vol. 2, no. 1 (2023)

by Roberto P. Malaspina, Elisabetta Modena  
and Sofia Pirandello

Immersion

Dives

Installation

Virtual reality

Augmented reality

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Edited by Roberto P. Malaspina,  
Elisabetta Modena, and Sofia Pirandello

# Introduction

## Immersions and Dives: From the Environment to Virtual Reality, Vol. 2, no. 1 (2023)<sup>1</sup>



ROBERTO P. MALASPINA, Università degli Studi di Milano – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2372-789X>

ELISABETTA MODENA, Università degli Studi di Pavia – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9582-4875>

SOFIA PIRANDELLO, Università degli Studi di Milano – <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4477-9199>

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### Introduction Vol. 2, no. 1 (2023)

The present volume *Immersions and Dives: From the Environment to Virtual Reality* of the journal *AN-ICON: Studies in Environmental Images* is divided into two issues, each one dedicated to a specific thematic analysis, originated by the same conceptual core. The volume reflects on the concept of immersivity, which has become increasingly prominent in many different fields, including contemporary art. The constant reference to immersive experience is redefining the boundaries of artistic practice

Keywords

[Immersion](#)

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and fruition, highlighting the complex relationships between art, environments, and human perception.

The first issue of the volume, *Immersion*s, discusses the recent “immersive trend” as applied to artistic perceptual dynamics and to display design. Through a perspective that combines both history and theory of art, *Immersion*s provides a broad and heterogeneous mapping of the many uses of this concept, exploring it in different historical contexts and through various methodologies of analysis.

The second issue, *Dives*, will shift the conceptual focus to action. Diving, understood as a preparatory and essential movement of immersion, becomes a metaphor for investigating in particular those performative artistic practices that have engaged in various bodily forms with immersive environments. *Dives* also includes a non-peer-reviewed section devoted to contributions by artists and independent researchers who present their strategy to dive into immersive spaces and environments, in order to physically explore them.

## Immersion

In recent years we have witnessed a growing fashion for every experience to be “immersive.” At least this is what the rhetoric of communication and marketing suggests, promising immersions of various kinds, but with a common denominator that goes beyond a general idea of attention as absorption:<sup>2</sup> the feeling of being physically enveloped and interactively engaged in a multisensory environment.<sup>3</sup> Hence, we speak of immersive environments,

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2 W. Wolf, W. Bernhardt, A. Mahler, eds., *Immersion and Distance: Aesthetic Illusion in Literature and Other Media* (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2013).

3 A. Griffiths, *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); F. Liptay, B. Dogramaci, eds., *Immersion in the Visual Arts and Media* (Leiden-Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2016).

immersive cinema and video, immersive exhibitions and installations, and so on. The term “immersion” has only been used with some regularity since the 1990s in relation to technologies such as Virtual Reality, which was then being experimented for the first time outside the laboratories where it was developed in the late 1960s.<sup>4</sup> However, some researchers have attempted to reconstruct a possible genealogy of immersive environments much earlier. Like a subterranean river, the immersive aesthetic experience would resurface in different periods, beginning with Paleolithic cave paintings, through Pompeian painting and *trompe-l’œil*, and then from Baroque illusionistic ceiling paintings to multimedia installations.<sup>5</sup> A decisive moment for the design of these environments has been traced back to the 19th century, in particular the obsession for *ὄραμα* (from the ancient Greek “view”), which saw the spread of devices such as the panorama, the diorama, the cosmorama, etc.,<sup>6</sup> responsible for the construction of an “emotional geography.”<sup>7</sup> However, one of the most significant moments in this history, which has not yet been sufficiently explored in this debate,<sup>8</sup> is that of the installations and environments that appeared in the first decades of the 20th century in the works of the avant-garde artists of the time. In 1976, invited by Vittorio Gregotti, Germano Celant curated the exhibition *Ambiente/Arte: Dal Futurismo alla Body Art*, held at the Central Pavilion in the Giardini for the 37th Venice Biennale. In this occasion, the history of environments was

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4 I. Sutherland, “The Ultimate Display,” *Proceedings of the IFIP Congress 65. Washington 1* (1965): 506-508; I. Sutherland, “A Head-Mounted Three-Dimensional Display,” *AFIPS Fall Joint Computer Conference Proceeding 33* (Washington: Thompson Books, 1968): 757-64.

5 J. Nechvatal, *Immersive Ideals/Critical Distances: A Study of the Affinity between Artistic Ideologies Based in Virtual Reality and Previous Immersive Idioms* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2009).

6 O. Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* (Cambridge-London: The MIT Press, 2003); S. Bordini, *Storia del panorama* (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2006).

7 G. Bruno, *Atlas of Emotions: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2000).

8 E. Modena, “Immersi nell’irreale: Prospettive an-iconiche sull’arte contemporanea dall’ambiente alla realtà virtuale,” *Carte semiotiche. Rivista internazionale di semiotica e teoria dell’immagine* 7 (2021): 71-78.

reconstructed from the beginning of the 20th century, when avant-garde artists began to create “wall boxes on a human scale.”<sup>9</sup> These environments allowed the visitor to physically enter the work, going beyond the frame.<sup>10</sup> Since then, artists have increasingly experimented with installations<sup>11</sup> and works that aim to produce enveloping, participatory and interactive physical experiences,<sup>12</sup> also making use of new technologies such as Virtual, Augmented and Mixed Reality. The exhibition itself, as an immersive device, has played a significant role throughout the 20th venues, from the Venice Biennale to the Kassel documenta, is increasingly blurring the boundaries between artwork and exhibition.<sup>13</sup> The physical presence of the visitor in the multisensory space of the artwork,<sup>14</sup> as well as their role as activator and experiencer, is central to any discussion of immersive contemporary art.

Indeed, immersive installations bring to different forms of narration and storytelling,<sup>15</sup> presenting themselves both as an exclusive space (separated from the rest of the world) and an inclusive context (as they literally absorb the visitor). Within the environment (analogue, digital, or mixed),

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9 G. Celant, ed., *Ambiente/Arte: Dal Futurismo alla Body Art: Biennale Arte 1976* (Venezia: La Biennale): p. 6.

10 G. Celant, “La cornice: dal simbolismo alla land art,” in G. Celant, ed., *Il limite svelato: Artista, cornice, pubblico* (Milano: Electa, 1981); D. Ferrari, A. Pinotti, eds., *La cornice: Storie, teorie, testi* (Milano: Johan & Levi, 2018); P. Conte, *Unframing Aesthetics* (Milano-Udine: Mimesis International, 2020).

11 C. Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

12 I. Kabakov, M. Tupitsyn, V. Tupitsyn, “About Installation,” *Art Journal* 58, no. 4 (1999): 62-73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1999.10791966>; J. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001); C. Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005); B. Groys, “Politics of Installation,” *E-flux journal reader* 2009 (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009); S. Zuliani, *Senza cornice: Spazi e tempi dell’installazione* (Roma: Arshake, 2015).

13 E. Filipovic, M., van Hal, S. Ovstebo, eds., *The Biennial Reader: An Anthology on Large-scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010).

14 C. Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*; A. Griffiths, *Shivers Down Your Spine*; F. Liptay, B. Dogramaci, eds., *Immersion in the Visual Arts and Media*.

15 M. Bal, “Narrative Inside Out: Louise Bourgeois’ Spider as Theoretical Object,” *Oxford Art Journal* 22, no. 2 (1999): 103-126. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxartj/22.2.101>; M. Bal, *Louise Bourgeois’ Spider: The Architecture of Art-writing* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001); Allen, N., Combrink, L., “Character (and absence) as a narrative key in installation art,” *Literator* 40, no. 1 (2019): 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v40i1.1449>.

at times artists leave clues or hints of stories; at other times, they build real scripts linked to real or plausible events or based on fictional characters – think of the growing role of science fiction in building utopian or dystopian narratives.<sup>16</sup>

Nowadays also the debate on how best to preserve and respect the authenticity of complex installations is compelling, considering the need to respect their time and site specificity.<sup>17</sup>

As a matter of fact, the latest generation of immersive technologies, together with the most recent theories of the environmentalisation of the image,<sup>18</sup> suggest that we reconsider Boris Groys's assertion about the possibility of interpreting installation as image and image as installation,<sup>19</sup> thus confronting art history and theory with visual studies.

In this respect, this first volume brings together different strategies and fields of analysis that have reasoned about the processes involved. In her essay, Mieke Bal places a strong emphasis on exhibition practices as key for understanding the contemporary realm. Bal calls for the recognition of the interplay between past and present, advocating for visitor engagement that solicits affective empathic attitudes. Through her video installation *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*, she stresses the transformative potential of art-making as a tool for cultural analysis.

Giuliana Bruno challenges the established notion of immersion itself by introducing the concept of “environmental projection.” Bruno invites us to reconsider the ecological dimensions of representation, particularly in terms

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16 D. Byrne-Smith, ed., *Documents of Contemporary Art: Science Fiction* (London: White Chapel Gallery, 2020).

17 B. Ferriani, M. Pugliese, *Monumenti effimeri: Storia e conservazione delle installazioni* (Milano: Electa, 2009).

18 A. Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell'immagine: Da Narciso alla realtà virtuale* (Turin: Einaudi, 2021).

19 B. Groys, “Multiple Authorship” in B. Vanderlinden, E. Filipovic, eds. *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005); E. Modena, “Immersi nell'irreale: Prospettive an-iconiche sull'arte contemporanea dall'ambiente alla realtà virtuale,” *Carte semiotiche. Rivista internazionale di semiotica e teoria dell'immagine* 7 (2021): 71-78.

of movement and scale. She questions the relationship between immersion and magnification, ultimately proposing the notion of “empathic projection” as a means to transcend human-centric perspectives in immersive experiences.

Lucia Corrain’s text delves into the immersive qualities of art, particularly in the Chamber of the Giants by Giulio Romano in Mantua (Italy). Corrain explores the phenomenological and ontological aspects of immersion in art, emphasizing the viewer’s sense of awe and estrangement.

Filippo Fimiani analyzes allegories of immersion through the lens of the *LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS* series, considering in particular the episode *Fish Night*. He examines the cultural topos of immersive experience, highlighting the ambivalent relationship between living bodies, images, and media in deep time-bending scenarios.

Roberto Pinto shifts the focus to the intersection of art and history through Jeremy Deller’s immersive performance *We Are Here Because We Are Here*. Deller’s work exemplifies a change in commemorating historical events, focusing on individual stories and emotions rather than traditional heroic narratives. The artwork engages the audience on a personal level, prompting reflection and emotional connection, ultimately redefining the role of public art in collective memory.

Francesco Tedeschi’s paper takes the reader on a journey through Italian environmental art, examining the transformation of space by artists such as Lucio Fontana, Gruppo T, and others in the 1950s and 1960s. Tedeschi’s investigation focuses on the evolving link between interior and exterior spaces, the concept of passage, and the reasons which invite viewers to traverse rather than merely inhabit spaces.

Annette Urban explores the blurred boundaries between art objects, space, and beholders in VR art and exhibitions. She discusses how VR art challenges traditional subject-object relationships and often embeds itself

into physical exhibition spaces, resulting in potentiated environmentalisation.

Stefano Velotti's suggestion to revert the usual perspective on the concept of "immersivity," consists in introducing the idea of "an-immersivity," namely the ontological condition of individuals who are immersed in reality but aware of it. In order to do so, he discusses the limits and characteristics of immersive VR experiences, the role of art, and the tension between control and uncontrollability in immersive encounters.

Lastly, Giorgio Zanchetti examines the persistence of the locution "looking glass," – that primarily comes from Lewis Carroll's novel – which highlights the duality of a glass surface as a means of viewing the world and as an object to be observed. Italian artists of the 20th century, such as Lucio Fontana and Luciano Fabro, frequently explored three attitudes: looking through the glass, observing the reflected image in a mirror, and examining the glass itself as a tool for presenting and representing spaces.

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**AN-ICONOLOGY**  
**History, Theory, and Practices**  
**of Environmental Images**



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