

Otlet Salons

BOZAR Edition, November 25, 2016

'Virtual Reality – Transformational Aspects'

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SUMMARY

Against the backdrop of the Royal Salon at BOZAR, Brussels, Virtual Reality pioneer and keynote Eric Joris (CREW) steers us through the history, implications and possibilities of VR. Do we need technology to deceive our brain into believing things that aren't there? Should we consider social media a form of virtual reality? And if so, does it give us freedom to become who we want to be, letting go of social differences, or are we trapping ourselves in yet another set of rules? A mind-boggling implication starts to dawn as the evening unfolds - is Virtual Reality as alien as we consider it to be, or are we already submerged without knowing?

REPORT



This last edition within the arts-meets-sciences themed series of Otlet Salons takes place in the Royal Salon of BOZAR, centre for fine arts in Brussels. Virtual Reality pioneer, and keynote speaker, Eric Joris steers us through the history, implications and possibilities of VR – experiencing instead of looking at an image - by means of a career overview. A mind-boggling implication starts to dawn as the evening unfolds - is Virtual Reality as alien as we consider it to be, or are we already submerged without knowing?

Before we delve into copious amounts of charcuterie, we visit 'Collateral Rooms', an installation by Eric Joris' company CREW that is relying heavily on a network of artists and scientist. 'Collateral Rooms' was initially developed for the Frankfurter Buchmesse 2016 and thereafter nominated for the New Technology Art Awards 2016 (NTAA). The NTAA exhibition was on show from 4/11 to 4/12 in BOZAR.

Wearing blue plastic covers over your shoes and a odd-looking frame with spheres on stalks under the piercing gaze of onlookers isn't very attractive, but once one has surrendered, the



miracle of 3D unfolds and the actual surroundings become no more than a vague notion. CREW corrupts our love for green-and-red goggles by proving that even with one eye covered you can walk into a rather improvised looking projection and fool your brain into believing you're actually exploring a rooftop solarium-with-a-view; something that wasn't presumed possible before.

Keynote

Eric Joris (1955, Antwerp) studied film, design and art(history), worked for television, was film director, made comics and even wondered into economics briefly. While his film friend took seven years to fund a movie, Joris chose a more pragmatic approach: for drawing comics you only needed a pencil. Around 1998, when the Internet was becoming household and computers fast enough to draw in real time, the technological aspect seeped into Joris' work.

Joris defines his work as Scientific Fiction, a "method of providing a glimpse of the future by questioning new digital possibilities and putting them to use in an alternative way." Within the framework of his company CREW, Joris works with artists and scientists on projects that aim "to visualize how technology is changing us." They use live art forms like theatre, installations and performances that engage the spectators' body by means of immersion (being completely surrounded by and surrendered to an experience, like swimming under water).

Joris gives insight into the development of Virtual Reality and its possible implications and uses by highlighting several projects. 'Philoctetes' (2002), for example, where a paralysed man on stage resembling an anatomical theatre, becomes one with his highly technological prosthesis. CREW's main point of interest: can we reach the stage where we no longer make the distinction between body and machine? Star Trek's Cyborgs come to mind.

When working on the development on VR-headsets, they discovered the brain needs time to adapt to this new technique. The first users became sick. The addition of movement and sound improved the experience, but still a percentage of users fainted. Neurologists were fascinated with the phenomenon. A dramaturgy that directed people how to move made the brain adapt very fast. Despite an abundance of wires attached to hem, and even though they were actually walking in circles, the body accepted that in VR it was sent up stairs, turning left when they were actually going right.

For 'Celestial bodies', an interactive lecture on astronomy, CREW realised a VR environment, allowing the audience to walk through the solar system and historical models of the universe. "It made quite clear that science is only a way of giving explanations that work for a while and then something changes", says Joris. He concludes: "We can explain quite difficult things with this technology." Currently he's working on creating space in cinema. The 'Collateral Rooms' installation proves what's possible. "It's only since a few months it started really working, without stereoscopy, which wasn't considered possible before", Joris says.

Panel

Dr. Katleen Gabriëls (http://smit.vub.ac.be/person/34/Katleen_Gabriëls) holds master's degrees in Germanic Philology and Moral Sciences and a doctoral degree in Philosophy and Moral Sciences. Her dissertation explores the moral status of social virtual worlds. In her initial reaction she refers to pre-Socratic philosophy: What is real? "The brain is fooling us. We speak of sunset and sunrise, but the sun is doing nothing. We are moving but we don't experience the turning of the earth. We don't need technology to deceive our brains."

"Around 1980 the idea existed that we're leaving reality when we enter VR, but we don't become someone else when we're online."

She cites Jaron Lanier: '[T]here is an experience when you are dreaming of all possibilities being there, that anything can happen, and it is just an open world where your mind is the only limitation. [...] The thing that I think is so exciting about virtual reality is that it gives us this freedom again. It gives us this sense of being able to be who we are without limitation, for our imagination to become objective and shared with other people.'

Veerle Meurs (<http://brio-works.squarespace.com>) is a therapist and organizational coach. She

shares her ideas about why VR helps us to a large paradigm switch: -The way I perceive influences what I perceive - What I perceive influences the way I perceive, and the consequences for our understanding of our senses, 'truth' and creativity. She focuses on what she calls 'the transitional zone', the shifting moment in between the perceived and embodied world where we connect with the environment on another level; a level where we are able to experience how the perceiver/observer and the perceived/observed are one. It is in that space, where the possibility of ridding us of all pre-assumptions, we can truly understand each other.

Meurs feels we need to learn to work with VR, create sensitivity for meaning or lack thereof. Eric Joris reacts: a cat couldn't do anything with VR, but we can learn it. He's convinced that pre Renaissance people couldn't see perspective, but we can.



Wouter Vermeulen (<http://yesplan.be/ovBerons/>) is founder of Yesplan, a company that specializes in software architecture for the cultural sector. It is the largest SaaS-company in the event sector in the Benelux and through Vooruit, received the Price of the Flemish Community for Cultural Management 2010-2011. Vermeulen reacts on the possible applications of VR, like creating a virtual office environment that can even predict when to heat certain spaces in a theatre (internet of things).

Discussion

The excitement over the royal surroundings and visiting the royal restrooms, once exclusively meant for queen Elisabeth, soon vanishes when the audience is invited to share its thoughts and becomes immersed in the discussion. As always, the audience determines the discussion's direction with its questions. Roughly three topics unroll simultaneously.

On the relation to the other / understanding

Audience (A) – I fantasize about the possibility to be in someone else's head, a member from the audience sparks up the discussion. The possibility of being connected to the experience of the other person to help me feel more at ease when connecting to what I experience as threatening and to lay down pre-assumptions is exciting.

Kathleen Gabriels (KG) - That's already happening to evoke empathy. In C-mine Genk you can experience working as coal miner through VR.

A - How can you use this technology to evoke a feeling of stronger connection, not to recreate or approach reality, but to bring about a change? Basic technology already creates powerful experience in film. We don't need VR for emotion.

- We could use VR to explain for example anxiety disorder: without it I can listen and explain, but I can never experience how it feels to be anxious.

- This technology enables a human being to go beyond the limitations of his physical presence.

On the senses (and definitions)

A – Someone from the audience admits he's bothered by the term 'virtual', because VR always looks like our own reality. Current applications are focussed on being here, on seeing, but we can go deeper and bring different senses into perspective.

Eric Joris (EJ) - Tests are exploring that. The best emersions had to do with other senses than seeing. The developments of those aspects are very slow..

KG underlines that money is mainly going to research into interaction within VR and the visual aspects.

She also stresses the importance of a proper definition. The problem with defining everything as VR is that in the end you talk about nothing anymore.

EJ responds: VR used to be something related to technology, not a construction (like Facebook).

On social media (and living in VR)

KG – Cyborgs, Stephen Hawking, pacemakers connected to Internet... The idea of technology as extension of the body is very old. We should take care with considering social media as extension of the body - you used to have pen pals you would never meet...

A – There's a lot of power within imagination. If the message is put nicely, like in commercials, we believe anything, even without pictures as 'prove'.

EJ - We don't live in anything but VR, we're hardly ever in the here and now, only when we panic.

KG – 'Second life' developers are working on an environment where VR and real world mix in daily experiences (like Pokémon).

A - What about when people start living in VR?

KG - Virtual reality is (a) reality as well. It might not be actual or tangible, but it is a reality. Isn't money in the bank virtual also?

A - Christianity was a form of living in VR as well. How did people deal with it back then?

- What's the problem with living in VR, with a perfect happy version of your?

- The image is so important nowadays. Facebook is more important than real life.

- VR is not completely free; 'happiness' comes at a price. There's a question of autonomy involved because of technological restrictions. You are forced to maintain a certain image within a certain framework – people / audience expect updates and you have to comply with that in order to make it work.

- Nowadays' youth does not have autonomy yet but is growing up with these media, will they miss having autonomy?

EJ refers to the animation movie 'Wall-E' where humans are living on a ship without autonomy, trying to escape a post-apocalyptic world.

A response from the audience: In VR algorithms are everything; they create a strong problem that gets stronger when you start living in VR because you get directed and being deprived of the freedom to explore all possibilities.

Tips

For full immersion into the topic, Otlet Salons asks keynote and panel for a tip.

-Veerle Meurs: I all wish you five minutes of silence a day.

-Eric Joris: 'La Jetée', a 1962 sci-fi movie by Chris Marker. 'Using still photos to explore ideas of memory, regret and nostalgia is an aesthetic and emotional masterpiece.'

-Kathleen Gabriels: Two ideas for further thinking. 1 - Terre des Hommes (a Dutch NGO) created Sweetie, a digital Philippine girl, to attract 'predators'. 2 - Virtual child pornography as therapy for paedophiles.

-Wouter Vermeulen: A general recommendation: a film about guts, believing in accomplishing what's considered impossible, strength and perseverance: 'Man On Wire' by James March, on the French tightrope walker Philippe Petit.

Nice to know: 'robot' means 'slave' in Czech