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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines a form of video art -- what is called a "video environment" -- that calls upon as much as it departs from familiar conventions that are bound up in museum display. I argue that the way that works in this genre are housed in museums enables them to give rise to a form of contemplation, one involving *immersion*, that is, if not unique to this genre, then certainly demonstrated by it. My examples of video environments make a case for the coherence of this rarely experienced immersive form of contemplation, the value of which, in turn, makes a case for the genre's further development.

## KEY WORDS

immersive contemplation, proprioceptive immersion, video environments, video art, video art environments, video installation, media-saturated environments, aesthetic contemplation, aesthetic engagement

## 1. Prologue on Video History[1]

In the early 1950s, video technology was used primarily for television broadcast by the major studios. With only a few exceptions, such as Nam June Paik's electronic Fluxus sculptures made out of magnetized television sets, first exhibited in 1958, the artistic development of video awaited the Sony Portapak's introduction to American consumers in 1965. Arguably the first time-based artwork in video came in the youth-driven documentary form of the street tape (paradigmatically, Les Levine's *Bum* in 1965), which employed the Portapak to advantage. And throughout video art's brief history, artists have been drawn to the medium in search of such unique opportunities to ride the wave of a developing technology, in the avant-garde spirit of defining a medium and finding new modes of artistic expression.

The moment that digital video became possible around 1990, for example, artists sought ways to exploit "light speed" (Avid , E=MC<sup>2</sup> ) editing systems. The resulting "on-the-fly" editing techniques (editing in the process of recording from a source disk, with no rewinding or previewing involved) did not, however, produce work that (for the most part) outlasted the momentary fascination with the new, though it has become a staple for live-news show editors. Some of the most deeply moving and admired artistic work in video -- such as work by Mary Lucier, Bill Viola, Tony Oursler, Joan Jonas, Chris Marker, Dan Graham, and Gary Hill -- has molded the technology to its own purposes, all but disregarding the state of the technology, though often incorporating new devices. In particular, artists working in the "installation" format ("video sculpture") have conceived of their work in terms that are *continuous* with more traditional forms of visual art, such as painting and sculpture, and their modes of display.

This essay will examine a form of video art that is called a "video environment," which calls upon as much as it departs from familiar conventions that are bound up in museum display. I will argue in Sections 2 and 3 that the way that works in this genre are housed in museums enables them to give rise to a form of contemplation -- one involving *immersion* -- that is, if not unique to this genre, certainly demonstrated by it. In other words, video environments make a case for the coherence of this rarely experienced immersive form of contemplation, at the same time that the

value of the kind of contemplation they enable makes a case for the further development of the genre. By discussing relevant examples of them in Section 4 and thus illuminating video environments as a genre, I will then be in a position to make a case for the possibility of contemplation that is immersive in the foregoing sense, which, in turn, will help me to show how works in this genre can perform the social function that gives them unique value.

## 2. The Museum Context, Defamiliarization, and Contemplation

At some point in the late 1970's, when video artists began to reach a consensus that the medium had been defined, attention turned to the choice among viewing *contexts*. It turns out that one's choice of viewing contexts in video makes all the difference, given that there is such a range of them, from traditional cinema viewing to living room viewing to computer display. Choosing to display video in a *museum* brings it under a set of conventions and expectations that are raised no matter what work is introduced. The one that I am thinking of in particular is the defamiliarization of the familiar. Taken with certain forms of video art, this is a convention for responding to the museum that can be put to new uses that respond to our technologically saturated world.

Pioneered by the Louvre when its doors were first opened to the public in 1793, the convention I am speaking of should be familiar. Think of your own body as you enter an art museum. There is a palpable transformation that occurs as you cross the threshold after having been immersed in the everyday, to which Arthur Danto counter-poses the "merengue," which stands for everything extra-museal: You begin to feel more aware of your own presence in space, and you might even begin to feel more upright in relation to the objects you encounter.<sup>[2]</sup> At the very least, you encounter yourself in relation to unfamiliar objects; thus your body is defamiliarized and your proprioceptive sense is transformed.

The defamiliarization of the familiar is also the principle driving Cartesian meditation. Contemplation, in Descartes' view, occurs when customary relations with the everyday are suspended, and thinking turns in upon all that it once took for granted.<sup>[3]</sup> In a museum, I propose, the spatialization of this method of eliciting contemplation, the method of radical doubt, turns Cartesian thought on its head and is allied with strains of thought developed in the twentieth century, such as pragmatism and ordinary language philosophy, that take the physical world as a given and not open to radical doubt.<sup>[4]</sup>

As philosophers began to theorize telerobotics and other forms of electronically transmitted knowledge-at-a-distance, including video, Hubert Dreyfus predicted that electronic technologies raising questions of telepistemology would turn around the longstanding triumph of the physical world of science in philosophy, opening consensus once again to radical doubt.<sup>[5]</sup> Instead of being brains in a vat, the doubting Thomas now says, we might all be metazoans running around in a world like the matrix (of *The Matrix*), creations of an evil genius programmer. Dreyfus thought that either thought would go this way, or else the stark contrast between actual and virtual worlds, perhaps just our incorrigible preference for hugs over e-mails, were we ever forced to choose, would fend off the re-emergence of scepticism in philosophy and in popular culture as well. But maybe it is not so far-fetched to hold that global-scale behavior, 'as if' bodies did not exist might subtly, over time,

weave beliefs, even in evil genius programmers, that silicon is as dubious a substance as flesh, and that, as Descartes speculated, an evil demon might be masterminding the modern sense of dysfunction that plagues the cogito otherwise known as humanity.

Doubting not that I think and exist, and that there are similar others in the world who must all somehow dwell on a planet with limited natural resources that we should continue to learn something about, is no dissolute disposition. Being optimistic about the capacity of the human intellect to learn its own nature, similarly, is not a disposition that falls easily into "sceptical paralysis" because, knowing where scepticism leads, one can stop before ever "counterbalancing" beliefs, that is, before entertaining the Cartesian posits (such as evil demons) that are mutually exclusive with one's beliefs about one's beliefs' origins. [6]

By the mere effort at learning where scepticism leads, does one, against one's will, fall into sceptical paralysis for having counterbalanced? In that case, from a position of sceptical paralysis, I can decide with William James, wishfully thinking, that it is best to behave as if my belief that I am embodied is true, because behaving otherwise would not serve any vital function. However, *does* mere counterbalancing amount to falling into sceptical paralysis? I fail to see that it does, in cases where one of the two counterbalanced beliefs tips the scales, and the *attempt* at counterbalancing fails, for example, if I fail to imagine a world in which an evil demon is the source of all of my beliefs about the physical world, newly revealed to be false.

Catherine Wilson's alternative framework for worrying about *behavior as if bodies did not exist*, is modeled on Heidegger's thinking about the dangers of technology and, accordingly, borrows and revitalizes his terminology. [7] On Wilson's view, sceptical thinking and behavior are represented as a kind of wholesale "immersion" in the use of technologies that provide "inauthentic" and "vicarious" access to the "thingliness of things" and also of people that we cannot meaningfully or fully incorporate into our everyday, embodied lives:

"Heidegger assumed that a cultural preference for the mediated over the proximal, and the emotionally complex, excessive, and useless over the concrete and instrumental signified a move away from the 'thingly element of things.' But does not our capacity to produce vicarious experiences bring us ever closer to the thingly element of more things?"

And, indeed, this becomes the criticism:

" Heidegger did not foresee that a problem about technology, if not 'the' problem, might arise not from its monstrous opacity and its inability to function as anybody's 'equipment' but from the effortless access it provides to the 'thingliness of things ' " [8]

I will discuss not the "telefictive" kind of experience Wilson problematizes but the representation of the conditions of telefictive experience (of what I will call the *technological order*) in museums. My discussion will hedge Dreyfus's bets, as well, by suggesting that in the contemporary arts we already have a means of showing ourselves to ourselves with respect to the technological order, in the form of the video environment.

### 3. Video Environments in Museums

When Nam June Paik took a television set in 1958 and magnetized the top of it and set it in a gallery, an unfamiliar relation between the television and its viewer arose in stark contrast to the familiar living room experience. Later in video history, Mary Lucier took an interest in schematizing the living room experience itself, setting *it* in the museum, defamiliarizing it, and redefining our sense of dwelling in the spaces we daily inhabit. She was thus among the first to explore the concept of the *video environment* as distinct from the video installation (c.f., respectively, Mary Lucier's [Asylum](#), [A Romance](#) and Chris Marker's [Silent Movie](#).) (Click for illustrations.)

A video environment such as *Asylum* is a display in a museum or gallery that is encompassed by a divide of some kind (so that it is not subject to juxtaposition with other works). The parts are related intentionally, either as a whole completed in the artist's conception, or as a proposed whole to be judged in the viewer's experience of the work.<sup>[9]</sup> Quite different from projecting oneself into the space of a painting, one is invited bodily into the space of the work.<sup>[10]</sup> And, through defamiliarization, one is invited to contemplate, in the Cartesian sense of the transcendence of the everyday, *one's bodily relation* to technology in a space marked out for temporary habitation.

Thus we find, in a way that Descartes could not have considered, contemplation without bodily dissociation, contemplation that is possible only in an immersive state; immersion, again, not in the sense of drowning out the senses in pure thought about thought (the *theoria* Aristotle distinguished from *poiesis* and *praxis* that would later be taken up by the theologians), nor in the sense of looking at something through something else, such as a window pane or a picture frame (the modern mode of thinking on thinking by framing thought with the conditions of cognition), but rather in the sense of being inside the chamber of a *camera obscura*, experiencing the ontological difference between the image on the far wall and all else that the chamber contains, including one's bodily self.

The video environment functions like the *camera obscura* in that it defamiliarizes what is familiar (the technological order), yet unlike it in that it links the body with the other contents of the room, so that one's thinking is immersed in the conditions for dwelling made palpable, if not always visible.<sup>[11]</sup> A successful video environment is one that makes some aspect of the technological order, i.e., the way our lives are mediated, organized, or routed by technology, more transparent to those who experience the work as it was intended to be experienced, through immersive contemplation.<sup>[12]</sup>

In everyday experience, we conduct and experience our lives in positive ways or in negative ones (as Wilson describes), but we do not have at our ready disposal a facilitating framework for contemplating an aspect of experience. Artists devise these out of ordinary experience in the arduous process of creating their art, and the museum furnishes the setting for contemplating their creations.<sup>[13]</sup>

It is one thing, for example, to live in a "smart house" (to be immersed or to dwell in it) and another to bracket and represent an aspect of it. Consider the following hypothetical case of a "smart house" represented as a video environment: One enters, unaware that the display's walls are rigged with equipment that caters to one's every need, and that one's needs are being continually monitored. Only by playing along and pretending to dwell in the space does one find the first clue: lamps that light over one's head as

one moves, a refrigerator that asks whether one really needs to eat at two o'clock in the afternoon, and if so, whether what one really needs is a hunk of cheese: "Wouldn't a glass of milk do nicely? You don't want to lose your girlish figure!"

Suppose you're a man of age thirty-eight. Would the success of the environment, in your estimation, depend upon the accuracy of its judgment of your figure, your goals for your figure, your further discovery of the relation between your actual particulars and the utterances of the smart appliances? Would it depend upon your knowledge of how well or wittily the environment corresponds to smart houses you've visited? Or would it depend upon the condition of your memory of the interactive computer you played with at the "Iterations" exhibit at the International Center of Photography, New York City?<sup>[14]</sup> You're stuck. This isn't like Bill Viola's [room of projected angels](#). (Click for illustration.) This is more like a smart house! But it's not very smart. You forgot to look at the title of the display. There it is. It says: "Smart Aleck House."<sup>[15]</sup> Well, you think, if this work was intended to scare me, it's been a success.

In the next section I will delineate the conditions under which contemplation can become immersive (in the above sense) in the museum through the in(ter)vention of a certain kind of artist and the respective video genre, and not through other genres and mere experiences.

#### 4. Video Environments as Occasions for Immersive Contemplation

It seems initially plausible to hold that the proprioceptive link between the body and the objects surrounding it is guided by the dispersal of light in a room. So I turn to consider whether immersive contemplation in a video environment requires that light be present. Take Tony Oursler's [System for Dramatic Feedback](#) (Click for illustration). The gallery is darkened, as in a movie theater, and one is met at the threshold by a rag doll with a face animated by video projection. The doll, reminiscent of television's Mr. Bill, cries out, "No! No!," signaling that something is going on inside that is dreadful and that one enters at one's own risk.

Inside, in the immediate foreground, one sees a conical heap of quilts interspersed with rag dolls similar to the "Mr. Bill" figure, each with a tiny projected video face. From the ceiling, a giant projected video hand sweeps down to repeatedly "spank" a bent-over male figure on top of the pile, who responds by screaming. Other dolls in the heap have different actions that they repeat, as in the compulsive loop of a traumatic childhood memory. Projected on the back wall of the gallery is an image of a movie theater audience. Its members chew popcorn and look on passively at an implied screen. Oursler thus brackets the cinematic mode of regard, and sets it in comparison to the mode of regard of the gallery visitor. Further, by darkening the room and illuminating only the rag doll heap, he establishes a comparison between the traumatic episodes enacted by the dolls and the implied diegetic events on the implied movie screen.

Whether the subject of contemplation is the media's creation of a feedback loop of the spectacle of human suffering or the passive memory of trauma represented by the looped actions of the dolls and by the daze the movie spectators are in, darkening the gallery invites a proprioceptive comparison of the visitor's body and mode of regard with bodies and modes of regard represented in the display, thus

occasioning an immersive experience of bodily self-in-relation.

More typically, the dispersal of light throughout a room occasions immersion by making it more like a prototypical everyday space in which humans and other animals immerse themselves, such as a home, as in Lucier's *Oblique House*, *Valdez* and *Last Rites, Positano*, or a natural habitat, as in Lucier's *Asylum, a Romance* and *Noah's Raven*. ([Click for illustrations.](#)) When an immersive state has been occasioned, giving rise to contemplation without disrupting the immersion becomes the artist's subsequent challenge.

*Oblique House* is an ideal example of how this works. In the work, the illuminated video environment is actually devised as a house haunted by ghosts of two different disasters, an earthquake and an oil spill, a century apart, that struck Valdez, Alaska. Faces are seen and voices heard on monitors in the room's four corners, each belonging to a denizen of Valdez, each describing a personal loss incurred as a result of disaster. The monitors have sensors that visitors set off as they pass, and the sensors can be set off simultaneously, in orchestrated ways, if visitors experiment and contemplate possible responses to the testimony. As active temporary inhabitants, visitors can thus symbolically "help" the victims join together, mourn, and recover. And in this way, illumination and interactive technology help *Oblique House* bring about the immersive contemplation of a place and a people, and their loss as a result of man-made and natural disasters.

Employing interactive technology is no more a necessary condition for a work to succeed in this genre than is illumination, however. Arguably, *Asylum, A Romance*, succeeds without it. *Asylum* contains one video monitor that has been hoisted on a forklift in a section of the room thematized as a junkyard. It displays junkyard images and emits grating, industrial noises, but is not set up to be interactive. The success of the environment as a dysfunctional whole depends upon the visitor's contemplation of aspects of the environment that can only be noticed through immersion, specifically by noticing the different kinds of partitions in the space. These are thematized by different kinds of gates, from industrial steel to loosely latticed wood plait, that divide a cultivated sculpture garden from an antique tool shed and from the junkyard. Only through immersion can one notice these things, and thus be positioned to contemplate the question the exhibit foregrounds: the habitability of a world in which the different kinds of partitions in question are in place or absent.

All along I have been assuming that a video environment must be constructed literally out of technology. Yet surely there are cases that should be included in this genre where the constructed environment is *about* video or an aspect of the technological order without containing any of what it represents. In the simplest case, imagine a museum display of a contemporary living room in which video technology is nowhere in sight. The display is about video technology if only because it foils strong expectations that video be present. *Assuming*, then, that the living room is clearly contemporary, and that the work is clearly somehow about some aspect of video technology that is expected but missing from sight, as an elliptical sentence can be about the part of it that has been left out, it seems unproblematic to pronounce this a video environment.

The crux of pronouncing something like the above a "video environment" is that *aboutness* is notoriously difficult to

establish (i.e., the "somehow" might be difficult, though I see no reason to think it impossible, for an artist to fill in); for it is highly contingent on established expectations and the conventions governing them, or so we learned as the history of abstract art began to develop in the twentieth century. What is a mere white cube presented by Robert Morris about? We say that there is no knowing without knowing the history of minimalism, and so on back to impressionism.

In contemporary art, lines of interpretation are even more difficult to establish, for there are so many lines cross-hatching. For example, the swarms of butterfly cut-outs presented by Bennie Flores Ansell might be said to be about an aspect of the technological order, though materially they are no more than inkjet photographs on transparencies, not the digital technology itself. A Filipino-American obsessed with Imelda Marcos and her personal style, Ansell has plied the digital arts intending to raise eyebrows at Marcos's spending habits or, rather with her spending habits given her political position (this is what the artist actually told me after a presentation of her work). She crafts butterflies from Photoshopped digital snapshots of the stiletto-heeled Ferragamo shoes that fill Marcos's closet. By covering walls in museums, galleries, and department stores with swarms of these creatures, she creates environments that are beautiful and even faintly menacing.<sup>[16]</sup> Unquestionably, she creates immersive environments; it is only a question of what her works are *about*, for without the understory about Marcos, one cannot detect anything especially menacing about her shoe-flies. They simply look beautiful, even when bending around corners and spilling onto the ceiling.

The intended criticism of the effect of Marcos's style on her constituency is nowhere apparent because cutouts of digital photographs are removed from what they take critical aim at: there is nothing especially menacing about shoes, even stiletto-heeled ones photographed and morphed into butterflies, and considered apart from their owner's behavior. A history of conventions linking shoe-flies to a media-induced culture of envy is simply not firmly in place. Thus, Ansell's work is not clearly about the technological order, as against nature or fashion, and it could certainly not be called a video (or even a digital photography) environment.

Bill Viola's [\*Five Angels for the Millennium\*](#) (click for illustration) introduces the inverse possibility: that an apparent video environment might be about something other than the technological order. Viola projects on the walls of a gallery five sequences with angelic figures, surrounding the visitor with staggered sound and visual effects. In this darkened gallery, unlike a movie theater, one becomes aware of the 360 degree moving arc of one's eyes, then head, then body, contemplating the relation between the projections; and it is difficult not to be aware of one's body, softly illuminated, in relation to the life-size angel projections before one. Without question, one contemplates these figures and the work's meaning with proprioceptive awareness. Every demarcating feature of the video environment genre seems present, every one but the representation of the technological order.

How can one tell what this work is about? First one sees that Viola's video sequences are representational in that they contain humanlike figures. The action, however, is non-diegetic: There is no represented world like our own, causally ordered and inhabited by fully-defined characters. In short, there is no world order. We might then suppose that, since they are called "angels," these figures are, in fact,

symbols, but of what? They are rendered nearly tangible, more than symbolic paintings can make them, anyway, for here they loom before one, life-sized, moving, and audible. In representing angels, figures that by convention symbolize something, namely, a spiritual order, media technology is made to serve as a medium of an order quite other than itself. [\[17\]](#)

In some sense, then, it is about the technological order. However, the otherworldly aspect of it strains the lines I want to draw between video environments, where one might dwell, and, say, video visitations. What makes *Angels* so interesting is that it sticks a toe over every line I want to draw. Is it a video environment? If not, it comes close on every vector.

Finally, what kind of environment does a video environment have to be to occasion immersive contemplation? The definition in Section 3 bears repeating because it highlights the bracketing aspect of an environment:

"A video environment is a display in a museum or gallery that is encompassed by a divide of some kind (so that it is not subject to juxtaposition with other works), the parts of which are related intentionally, either as a whole completed in the artist's conception, or as a proposed whole to be judged in the viewer's experience of the work."

In paragraph two of Section 3, above, I add that we tend to find an environment immersive if and only if it is "like a prototypical everyday space in which humans and other animals immerse themselves" or dwell. Could an everyday dwelling space satisfy both conditions, that is, be immersive and yet bracketed, artfully arranged and presented to viewers without being presented in a museum? Outside of the museum, people are seen dwelling in media-saturated environments constantly: Digital cameras hidden in homes can be accessed on the Internet by anyone with the requisite technology who knows the websites to visit. As a result, it cannot be claimed that the museum *alone* can bracket everyday experience or set dwelling in relief from the flow of experience. For, if an audience as widely drawn as the museum-going public were directed to one website, this would seem to be the equivalent of what a museum can achieve. [\[18\]](#)

If my language is tentative, it is because I register a difference between what can be experienced at a desk in front of a computer and what can be experienced at a museum. *Only* at a museum, or at a desk in front of a computer in a video environment at a museum, does one become *bodily* immersed in the environment one contemplates. By taking in a scene with one's eyes only, what one gains in enjoyment of the spectacle one loses in immersive appreciation of it. Perfectly immersed, the star of the Reality TV show in question knows *what it is like* to dwell in that environment, assuming that the star is aware of the level of media saturation he or she is faced with, while the voyeur, *not* immersed, can only contemplate in the more limited pictorial mode. What it is like to be the star of a Reality TV show, where one lives every aspect of one's domestic life in the public eye, I could not convey here by phenomenological description and, at the risk of circular argument, must defer to artists who create immersive video environments for museum display. [\[19\]](#) Thus, I can only conclude that a video environment must be displayed in a space to which those who would appreciate it can have physical access.

But what is so limiting about the pictorial mode, after all; or,



conversely, what is so special about bodily immersion? The 2004 remake of *The Stepford Wives* depicts smart people living in smart houses in an affluent Connecticut suburb; *Brazil* also, more futuristically, depicts people living in smart tenements, surrounded by smart appliances. Given that both movies and video environments have the bracketing necessary to give rise to contemplation, what differentiates the value of these films from that of "Smart Aleck House," in Section 3, above, as criticisms of the smart aleck aspect of the technological order? The film's degree of remove from experience that qualifies as "bodily immersive" can count for or against its valuation. As a complex narrative case against smart aleck technology based on the story of individuals represented by actors depicting fictional characters, it is almost categorically impossible for a film to compare with a video environment.

On a Platonic view, according to which a representation of something exists at a compromised level of reality, a video environment might seem to have more direct personal relevance to its audience. Though a representation, bracketed and in that sense like a narrative film, it is less removed than a film is from what it represents. Accordingly, the closer a representation is to being actually lived, the more moving it can be; and the more moving, the more valuable. The conditions for reception are also a factor; immersion goes beyond mere bodily presence in the space of the work. In a video environment, one is free to probe and to discover the order created by the artist in any order one chooses. One is confined to something like a *diegesis* (the narrative world of the film) only insofar as the technological order represented in the environment is a representation of the world we recognize as our own, with the same causal laws and, perhaps, similar human values. One can experience the environment in a way that fails to make narrative sense, or argument, or criticism, of the artist's intentions, but it cannot be said that a video environment coerces the understanding by adhering to narrative conventions as mainstream films do. [20] Rather, its force derives from its nearness to lived experience; for it is, as a narrative film cannot be, a representation of the technological order that is, in the above (more active) sense, immersive.

At the very least, one might argue, in order for the viewer of a film, or a painting or photograph, to pass from voyeuristic to immersive mode, provisions for a more immersive reception than is traditional would have to be made by the curator. It was asked, when I read an earlier draft of this paper at the University of Washington, Seattle, whether a painting would become a different kind of work if a painter were to require that a magnifying glass be hung next to it in the museum so as to encourage the spectator to experience the surface and frame as three-dimensional. Granted, the added spatial dimension invites the mode of regard belonging to sculpture, and the moving frame of the magnifying glass brings a temporal dimension to the experience that is like the mode of viewing video installations. However, to claim that the experience of the painting is then fully immersive would seem to require something more.

In a passionate argument for an "engaged" mode of viewing paintings and of experiencing both art and everyday life, Arnold Berleant argues that, indeed, when we look closely and actively at representational paintings, we can enter their perceptual space, thus dissolving the boundaries between subject and object, and engaging with the work. [21] It seems, however, that to deny the distinction

between the space of the viewer's body and the space represented in the painting would be to accept that space is not the space of Newtonian science and, commensurably, linear perspective, and that the experience of space(s) can be coherently conceptualized in more than one "natural" or naturalistic way. A phenomenologist, for example, would make this argument, but anyone committed to making a physical distinction between the space of the museum and the space of the painting, whether merely for convenience or out of some dogmatic physicalist commitment, would grant that literal "immersion" within the museum is possible only in the space of the museum: one can sit on a chair in the museum, but not on the chair in a painting. So it seems that while there might be gradations of invited engagement with works, such as paintings, photographs, and films that jog the memory of actual dwelling more than others, true immersion begins and ends in whatever space is occupied by the body, the space that, because of walls and such, can actually compel and legislate experience.<sup>[22]</sup>

##### 5. Conclusion: The Value of the Video Environment as a Genre

In summary, one can contemplate something immersively only if one can be immersed in it and, moreover, only if contemplation is possible in an immersive state. I hope, in this essay, to have illuminated the conditions under which both of these conditions can be satisfied.

The value of the video environment, I have further argued, is that it shows us powerfully and directly our mediated lives and the possibilities for them in ways that facilitate and require the proprioceptive immersion in question. By confronting the represented technological order with the body, and vice-versa, the work assaults the everyday mode of dwelling that we now or could in the future take for granted, punctures it with our presence, and shows us how the body shapes and is shaped by technology in everyday life. The overarching value of such a genre, despite its relative expense, is that it allows us to more fully grasp aspects of the relation between our embodied needs and technology and to judge the humanity or inhumanity of the seemingly endless variety of ways in which our lives are technologically mediated. In order to evaluate a dwelling condition, one must be in a position to know what it is like, and this is the primary challenge of the video environment, whereas traditional art has often served, conversely, to prove dwelling conditions that may once have seemed beneath notice to be worthy of recognition (Vermeer's art is exemplary of this).

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, one art form has given way to another, painting to photography, photography to film, and film to video, in the quest for the more perfect, more fully *immersive* way of representing reality, physical or mental, and the way it is constituted, as this essay has described it.<sup>[23]</sup> Has this essay been an argument along those familiar lines, an argument that video is the culmination of the momentous movement toward one comprehensive medium? I have argued that video environments make use of conventions developed in museums for the display of paintings and sculptures, but for a new purpose that does not supplant the old ones. I have also shown how video environments compare with narrative films, and have demonstrated that one cannot be seen as an improvement over the other in all ways. Therefore, this should not be mistaken for an argument that video environments *supplant* other art forms or genres.

A third challenge inherent in the genre under discussion is

that the artistic status of a video environment, as in the case of any artwork, depends upon how well the proposed work *fits* within a *frame* of tried and true works that are also, one hopes, witty and prophetic. [24] Since they occupy physical space and tend to be made out of technology that represents itself, however, video environments correspond more to lived experience than to other artworks in museums, and thus are mainly comparable with other video artworks. Moreover, as environments as opposed to installations, they defy juxtaposition that facilitates interpretations that lead to the classification of mere things as works of art. Thus, the question of their status and value *as art* may seem, at best, an afterthought.

This does not make video environments something other than art, but it does put them at the other end of the development that conceptual art opened up: the obsessive testing of the boundaries between art and non-art. The genre's function, its social purpose, has outstripped the need for it to contend for a place in the art museum, as opposed to any other kind of public display space, and now it finds itself between one kind of museum and another. Its permanent home, typically, is on videotape or in the artist's space, but a video environment at its best, ultimately, is an immersive, contemplative, and transformative experience like no other that we take home with us and keep in memory.

#### Endnotes

[1] This paper was first read as part of a panel that I organized entitled "Video in the Museum" at the October 2003 meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics. Other panelists, whom I thank for their participation and their comments, included: Linda Norden, Federico Windhausen, Christopher Eamon, and Ivan Gaskell. I also thank audience members, Arnold Berleant in particular, for their input at the session.

A revised version of the paper also benefited from comments when I presented it to the Philosophy Colloquium at the University of Washington, Seattle (January, 2005). I wish to thank that audience for many attentive comments, and Andrew Light, in particular, for inviting the reading, and for helping me put together a slide show presentation that was important for my visually-based argument. Finally, I also thank Arnold Berleant, again, and two anonymous reviewers for this journal for their close commentary and their willingness to work with me through extensive revisions to the original paper that I wrote in 2003.

[2] Arthur Danto, "Museum and Merengue," in *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994).

[3] "First Meditation: What Can Be Called into Doubt," in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol. II.*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (New York; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 12-15.

[4] See John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 2nd ed., 1966). Also, or alternatively, see Juliet Floyd and Sanford Shieh, eds., *Future Pasts: The Analytic Tradition in Twentieth-Century Philosophy* (New York; Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[5] "Telepistemology: Descartes' Last Stand," in Ken Goldberg, ed., *The Robot in the Garden: Telerobotics and*

*Telepistemology in the Age of the Internet* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

[6] "Counterbalancing" and its consequence, "sceptical paralysis," are terms that Peter Unger uses to describe the bind of the sceptical argument. See Peter K. Unger, *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[7] Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1977).

[8] Catherine Wilson, "Vicariousness and Authenticity," in *The Robot in the Garden*, 86. 88. (See note 5, above).

[9] Melinda Barlow has written of Lucier's thematization of *dwelling* in her work, in "The Architecture of Image and Sound: Dwelling in the Work of Mary Lucier," in Melinda Barlow, ed., *Mary Lucier* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, Art + Performance Series, 2000). She discusses Lucier's *Antique with Video Ants and Generations of Dinosaurs* (1973), *Asylum, A Romance* (1986/1991), *Oblique House, Valdez* (1993), *Noah's Raven* (1993), and *Last Rites, Positano* (1995).

[10] Chrissie Iles discusses the Postminimalist decentering of the viewing subject and the "new language" of the representation of space it created for artists working in projected film, video, slides, holographs, and photographs in which "the images appear in the darkened gallery space in a radically different form from those experienced in cinema." Chrissie Iles, *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art, 1964-1977* (New York: Publications and New Media Department, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001), pp. 34-5.

[11] Iles also notes Catherine Wilson's reflections on contemplative space, which they both discuss in terms of the amount of illumination present in a room, whether of the *camera obscura* or of an installation space, and its metaphorical link (initially made by Nicolas Malbranche) with *inner* illumination. (*Ibid.*, p. 35).

[12] There is an operative assumption in creating video environments that an artistic rather than a nuts and bolts approach to reducing the mystery of technology, an approach focused on representing technology's effects rather than understanding its workings, can help us face down what Heidegger refers to as the "danger of technology" in *The Question Concerning Technology*. (See note 7, above.) Not all artists and curators who construct or curate media environments would agree that our technological order poses the dangers described here or by Heidegger in his essay.

For example, Iles, also curator of the film and projected media program, "Dream Reels: Video, Films, and Environments by Jud Yalkut" (Whitney Museum of Art, 2000), has written in catalogues and programs about works that might satisfy my understanding of a *video environment*, but she describes them as creative experiments in perspective and subjecthood, stressing their originality. (See note 10, above).

[13] Need the museum environment be an art museum? The answer must be open-ended. Since the immersive mode of contemplation includes questioning the nature of the environment one is immersed in and how it might have been constructed otherwise, the environment in question can be

considered as a work of art in an art museum, but need not be. Displays of other kinds in other museums are constructed as well, after all: for example, museums dedicated to the history of man as slave to technology, or of man as prisoner, or of man as animal, though they do not ask to be thought of within the history of art, nor as works of art. The answer and level of contemplation therefore depends upon how the designer of the environment, artist or not, relates the work to other works of art. For the purpose of putting on trial a selected mode of dwelling in relation to technology, there may be no reason to weigh the experience down with the question of its art-worthiness. The argument that art status depends upon the framing context for it can be found in Tiffany Sutton, *The Classification of Visual Art: A Philosophical Myth and Its History* (New York; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[14] I refer to Grahame Weinbren's "new cinema" interactive work, *Sonata* (1991/1993). "Iterations: The New Image," International Center of Photography, New York City (1994), curators Timothy Druckery and Charles Stainback.

[15] Julie Iovine, "Why Smart Houses Turn Smart Aleck," ([click for article](#)), January 13, 2000. This article was not an artwork and didn't inspire one, to my knowledge; nor do I base my example on any immersive video environment or artwork that I know of.

[16] Bennie Flores Ansell, "Fashion To Forgeries," Feminist Caucus, American Society for Aesthetics, Houston, 2004.

[17] Relatedly, an immersive environment employing video could be made to represent a *marvelous* world in which causal laws such as we know them do not apply, where, for example, people turn into mushrooms when as they pass a video camera, which morphs the subject's image into the shape of a mushroom when they pass in front of it. More on the subdivisions of the marvelous can be found in an as yet unpublished paper: Tiffany Sutton, "The Marvelous and Mili s," the American Philosophical Association, Seattle, 2002. A referee for this journal suggested that I consider a castle environment, and I am not sure whether that would be more like "Smart Aleck House" or "A Trip to the Moon": futuristic or *marvelous*.

[18] It is well known, for example, that the White House hosts a website ([www.whitehouse.gov/barney](http://www.whitehouse.gov/barney)) that shows us the White House Christmas festivities through a camera attached to Barney, the President's dog.

[19] Of how much help would it be, for example, to say that an immersive video environment might contain the means of finding out what it is like to live one's life as the star of a Reality TV show; and that part of experiencing life as the star of a Reality TV show might be learning what it is like to be scrutinized by total strangers who are seeing one through hidden cameras and who are judging one according to schemata that cannot, at first, be anticipated? Does this include the other links in the chain of experience, the totality of which is accessible only within the immersive experience, for example, the initial discovery of a reason or reasons for believing that there are hidden cameras or audio transmitters, and one's judgment of the effect of one's discovery of the equipment and its uses on the schemata according to which one is estimated by the voyeurs.

[20] Grahame Weinbren's *Sonata* was a work that allowed the audience to shape a narrative out of visual sequences that were stored as files under provocative labels with

representative images. (See note 14, above.) One could assemble the story by opening the readymade files and linking them end to end, as in a parlour game.

[21] Arnold Berleant, *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

[22] Berleant writes, "Art does not legislate experience, it invites it," thus limiting the notion of engagement to a mode of experiencing an artwork, as opposed to claiming that some work is made to engage us and that other work is not or cannot. (*Ibid.*, p. 74).

[23] Hugo Münsterberg staked the first claim for film's "comprehensive" mimicry of the path of consciousness, and Maya Deren was to echo him, as did many others subsequently. See Hugo Münsterberg, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (New York: Dover, 1916); also see Maya Deren, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality," in *Daedalus (Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Boston, Winter 1960). Arnold Berleant also has marked the importance of film by saying that it "does more still than render reality: it constitutes it" more fully than other media, in *Art and Engagement*. (See note 21, above).

[24] I here lean on the definition of art in my book, *The Classification of Visual Art*. (See note 13, above).

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