

## DEATH IS A SHAMANISTIC TRIP THAT YOU CAN WITHDRAW FROM



### The Speculative Cultures VR Show and Beyond

by Tansy Xiao

After Jordan Wolfson made news at the 2017 Whitney Biennial with his age-restricted VR piece, “Real Violence”—a work for which the viewer gripped a railing as they watched a man beat in the skull of a person writhing on the ground with a baseball bat—it’s hard to fault the viewer for associating the artistic medium of VR with shock value.

It’s true with every medium when their potentials are still veiled: let’s not forget that the pioneers in cinema used to be magicians and archaic medicine was merely witchcraft. That’s the stage we’re at in virtual reality, far behind the uncanny valley of storytelling. The visual art world’s take in particular to utilize this new medium is often rather primitive and instinctual, and the result comes out literal: either gratuitous violence like Wolfson’s piece, which essentially appeared like *Grand Theft Auto* on a pedestal; or intense emotions, like *Queerskins* at the last Tribeca Film Festival Storyscapes in

which the viewers were trapped in a virtual vehicle from the perspective of a gay protagonist being exposed to the conversations of his homophobic parents.

The contemporary society is obsessed with getting overdosed with images and sounds. Virtual reality seems to be creating space where there is no room, yet we eager to fill that space up also, with an obsessive hoarding of stimulations. Maximizing the impact of perception and presence, a new form of art that specializes in operationalization and manipulation emerged. Sounds familiar? Back in the days, montage as a film language was theorized and utilized to serve authoritarianism after the Soviet revolution thanks its ability to create a guided view. When you're playing with the psychological effects on the viewer, you're playing with fire.

It was packed at the opening of *Speculative Cultures*, a virtual reality show at The Sheila Johnson Design Center, 2 West 13th St, Ground Floor | Anna-Maria and Stephen Kellen Gallery. More visitors had been stuck in line waiting to put on a pair of goggles like kids waiting in front of an ice cream truck. It's quite a phenomenon that dozens of people could be seen in every direction waiting in actual reality to run around in virtual reality. Back in the days, I was stuck in line for 4 hours to enter *29 Rooms* to take pictures to beat that peer pressure and to prove my presence online. Virtual reality, on the other hand, invalidates this popular ritual—as there's no need or possibility to prove that one has been to a space that doesn't exist.

Just like a near-death experience or being kidnapped by aliens. What immediately captured my eyes in the show was the red tulle curtain installation: a piece called *Neo Kingdom* by Erin Ko and Jamie Martinez. Only one viewer is allowed in at once and they'd be going through a journey inspired by the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. The book, usually a roll of papyrus filled with hieroglyphic script, is a practical guide to the next world with spells that would help you on your journey, a *Lonely Planet* on the afterlife rather than a finite text like the *Bible*. One would, of course, encounter snakes, crocodiles, insects, and demons on their way just like they'd encounter tourist traps in a foreign city. The viewer, all by themselves, would be asked to look up in search for a bright beam of light that is going to lead them to Anubis, the Egyptian god who weighs one's heart to decide whether they belong to heaven or to have their soul devoured by the demon. A fair game. I guess Anubis has tons of appointments since his session is as brief as those at your local DMV for such a long wait. On the side, there are several stone tablets with hieroglyphic scripts for augmented reality effects in the shape of an iPad. It's intriguing to see how cutting-edge technology resonates with the cultural heritage of those ancestors.

Another interesting piece is the one right next to the entrance, Morehshin Allahyari's *She Who Sees The Unknown*. Having researched dark goddesses, monstrous, and djinn female figures of Middle-Eastern origin, the artist collaged different deities together and recreated her own versions of a powerful goddess archetype with multiple heads and a strong serpentine lower body on a digital platform, as well her humid, abysmal shrine. The goddess doesn't really do a thing. She sits silently in her palace or natural habitat, a powerful woman, for the viewers to worship, or to leave alone.

Created a rather interactive psychedelic trip and in his words, to decipher and to manifest the techno-spiritual and cyber-pagan experience, Matias Brunacci guided the viewers through the wonder (or terror) land of chaotic neutral. Like most of the indigenous gods, the mysterious force stands for the universal dualism that embraces both good and evil,

indicating both creation and destruction. Scott Benesiinaabandan, on the other hand, speaks for a more specific group. Planting the narratives and the language of the Anishinaabe peoples in a futuristic setting, it looks more like a poetic elegy rather than the actual preservation of an endangered culture.

By the end of my trip to these reality-based post-apocalyptic virtual lands, I didn't know how to feel. Some sort of new exoticism or a genuine tribute to the deterritorialized cultures, or maybe both. The exhibition takes a more neutral but no weaker position demonstrating the post-colonial conditions of different civilizations and their people, as well situating the influences of colonialism back in a Western context, aka the city that we inhabit in. However, the bidirectional influences between different sociological and geographical territories are more of an organic development rather than a misappropriation. As Kwame Anthony Appiah stated: "Cultures are made of continuities and changes, and the identity of a society can survive through these changes. Societies without change aren't authentic; they're just dead."

As these stories being told over and over again, at various times, via different mediums, at least there's one thing we know, that they're still alive.

*Speculative Cultures: A Virtual Reality Exhibition*, curated by Tina Sauerlaender, Peggy Schoenegge, and Erandy Vergara, continues through April 14th, 2019 at The New School's Sheila C. Johnson Design Center.

**Credit for the Photographs: Installation shot, *Speculative Cultures. A Virtual Reality Exhibition*, (2019), curated by Tina Sauerlaender, Peggy Schoenegge, and Erandy Vergara. Anna-Maria and Stephen Kellen Gallery, Sheila C. Johnson Design Center, Parsons/The New School. Photo: Marc Tatti.**