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Anna Oldfield

PhD, Professor of World and Anglophone Literatures and Cultures,
Coastal Carolina University (Conway, USA)

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9461-2002

email: aoldfield@coastal.edu

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Review

Digital Dreams and Dubious Dollars: The Challenge of Immersive Van Gogh



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Keywords: Immersive Van Gogh, digital immersive, immersive art-themed exhibits, art for profit.

Abstract. The purpose of this study is to discuss the popularity, questions, and controversies surrounding art-themed digital immersive exhibitions based on the life and paintings of Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890). Since 2019, art-themed immersive exhibits have become extremely popular, with attendance that outstrips many museums showing the same artists, spawning controversy and challenging the fine art world. This study examines the rise of immersive art experiences, arguments for and against immersive spectacles as a way of experiencing artwork, and theoretical perspectives. Methodologies include research into historical, cultural, and commercial contexts including reviews, analyses, critiques, and participant observation. The study discusses components of the exhibition and presents specific arguments for and against them by producers, art critics, critical theorists, and spectators. Questions considered include: Are these exhibitions offering authentic art experiences, or are they exploiting great art for profit? Are they making art more accessible, or are they leading people away from seeing original paintings? Is the way people relate to art fundamentally changing in the age of social media, and if so, how will museums adjust? This study is novel in that it presents and evaluates diverging viewpoints on these controversies and proposes a more flexible approach that centers participant experiences over marketing claims and critical objections.

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Анна Олдфилд

Философия докторы (PhD), Coastal Carolina университетінің әлемдік және ағылшын тіліндегі әдебиет пен мәдениет профессоры (Конвей, АҚШ)

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9461-2002

email: aoldfield@coastal.edu

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Ревью

Цифрлық армандар және күмәнді пайда: иммерсивті Ван Гогтың сынақтары

Тірек сөздер: иммерсивті Ван Гог, цифрлық иммерсивтілік, иммерсивті көрме, иммерсивті өнер тақырыбындағы экспонаттар, маркетингтік зерттеу, әлеуметтік медиа дәуірі, пайда.

Аңдатпа. Бұл зерттеудің мақсаты голландиялық суретші Винсент Ван Гогтың (1853–1890) өмірі мен картиналарына негізделген көркем цифрлық иммерсивті көрмелердің айналасындағы танымалдылықты, сұрақтарды және қайшылықтарды талқылау болып табылады. 2019 жылдан бері көркем тақырыптарға арналған иммерсивті көрмелер өте танымал бола бастады, мұнда келушілер бір суретшілерді көрсететін көптеген мұражайлардан асып түседі, мұндай жағдай дау тудырып, бейнелеу өнері әлемінде түрлі сынақтарға алып келді. Бұл зерттеуде иммерсивті көркем тәжірибенің өсуі, өнер туындыларын сезініп қабылдау тәсілі ретінде иммерсивті көрсетілімдерді қолдайтын және оған қарсы дәлелдер, сондай-ақ теориялық перспективалар зерттеледі. Зерттеу әдістемелері тарихи, мәдени және коммерциялық контексттердегі зерттеулерді, соның ішінде шолуларды, талдауды, сынды және қатысушылармен сауалнама өткізуді қамтиды. Мақалада көрменің құрамдас бөліктері талқыланады және продюсерлер, өнертанушылар, сыншы теоретиктер және көрермендер тарапынан мұндай көрмелерді қолдайтын және оларға қарсы нақты дәлелдер ұсынылады. Қарастырылған сұрақтарға мыналар жатады: Бұл көрмелер шынайы көркем тәжірибесін ұсынады ма, әлде олар жоғары өнерді пайда үшін пайдалана ма? Олар өнерді қолжетімді ете ме, әлде адамдарды түпнұсқа картиналарды көруден алшақтатып жатыр ма? Әлеуметтік медиа дәуірінде адамдардың өнерге қатынасы түбегейлі өзгеріп жатыр ма, егер солай болса, мұражайлар оған қалай бейімделеді? Бұл зерттеу жаңашыл болып табылады, өйткені ол осы қайшылықтар бойынша әртүрлі көзқарастарды ұсынады және талдайды, сонымен қоса маркетингтік мәлімдемелер мен сыни қарсылықтарға қатысушылардың тәжірибесін орталықтандыратын икемді тәсілді ұсынады.

Алғыс. Бақылауға қатысу кезінде қасымда болған, фотоқұжаттама жасауға көмектескен, көрмені менімен бірге талқылап, бастапқы жобаға түсініктеме берген Макс Сенарсланға алғысымды білдіргім келеді. Мақаланың соңғы нұсқаның дайын болуына оның қосқан үлесі зор. Сондай-ақ *Saryn* журналының редакциясына және осы жұмысты жақсартуға және оның жарық көруіне мүмкіндік берген рецензенттерге алғыс айтамын.

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Анна Олдфилд

Доктор философии (PhD), профессор мировой и англоязычной литературы и культуры Университета Coastal Carolina (Конвей, США)

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9461-2002

email: aoldfield@coastal.edu

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Ревью

Цифровые мечты и сомнительная прибыль: вызов иммерсивного Ван Гога

Ключевые слова: иммерсивный Ван Гог, цифровое погружение, иммерсивные выставки на художественную тематику, искусство или прибыль.

Аннотация. Целью данного исследования является обсуждение популярности, вопросов и противоречий вокруг художественных цифровых иммерсивных выставок, основанных на жизни и картинах голландского художника Винсента Ван Гога (1853–1890). С 2019 года иммерсивные выставки на художественную тематику стали чрезвычайно популярными, их посещаемость превосходит многие музеи, демонстрирующие тех же художников, что порождает споры и бросает вызов миру изобразительного искусства. В работе анализируется рост иммерсивного художественного опыта, аргументы за и против погружающих в виртуальную среду зрелищ как способа восприятия произведений искусства, а также теоретические перспективы. Методологии содержат исследования исторического, культурного и коммерческого контекста, включая обзоры, анализ, критику и присутствие участников. В статье обсуждаются компоненты выставки и приводятся конкретные аргументы за и против них со стороны продюсеров, искусствоведов, критических теоретиков и зрителей. Рассматриваются следующие вопросы: предлагают ли эти выставки подлинный художественный опыт или используют великое искусство для получения прибыли? Делают ли они искусство более доступным или уводят людей от просмотра оригинальных картин? Изменится ли фундаментально отношение людей к искусству в эпоху социальных сетей, и если да, то как к этому приспособятся музеи? Это исследование является новаторским, поскольку оно представляет и оценивает различные точки зрения на указанные противоречия и предлагает более гибкий подход, который ставит опыт участников выше маркетинговых претензий и критических возражений.

Благодарности. Автор выражает признательность Максиму Сенарслану, который сопровождал, помогал с фотодокументацией, обсуждал выставку и комментировал первоначальный вариант исследования. Его вклад во многом способствовал написанию финальной статьи. Автор благодарит редакционную коллегию *Saryn* и рецензентов за отличные отзывы и возможность улучшить и опубликовать эту работу.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to discuss questions and controversies surrounding the current popularity of art-themed digital immersive exhibitions, focusing on productions based on the life and paintings of Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890). In 2009, Annabelle Mauger created the first Van Gogh-themed digital immersive exhibit, *Imagine Van Gogh* and the Van Gogh immersive phenomenon has been growing ever since. The genre went large-scale in 2019 with the Culturespaces exhibit *Vincent Van Gogh, la nuit étoilée* at the new digital exhibition space L'Atelier des Lumières in Paris. In 2020, the character Emily in the Netflix show *Emily in Paris* visited the exhibition, creating a viral sensation on social media and a demand for similar experiences. This demand was quickly met in Europe and North America, and the phenomenon soon became global as rival large-venue entertainment companies jumped to spawn new productions, including *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience* (Exhibition Hub), *Immersive Van Gogh* (Lighthouse Immersive), *Beyond Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience* (Paquin Entertainment Group), and *Van Gogh Alive* (Grande Experiences).

These competing digital immersive Van Gogh-themed exhibitions are created on a similar model and include the same basic components: staged in huge spaces that feature gigantic digital replications of Van Gogh's paintings projected by hundreds of cameras to create a 360-degree exhibition, often animated with atmospheric music and voice-overs. During the experience, visuals, words and sound effects create storylines taken from Van Gogh's biography, fine-tuned to evoke the drama of his struggles with mental health. Most immersives include add ons for a price, such as Virtual Reality, AI experiences, or yoga classes, as well as Van Gogh-themed merchandise for sale. Some have taken place in art gallery spaces, but many are staged in empty commercial spaces in malls and former big box stores. Other art-themed immersives created in the same wave include shows based on Claude Monet, Pablo Picasso, Gustav Klimt, and Frida Kahlo, but, as John Faller, executive producer of "Van Gogh, the Immersive Experience" says, Van Gogh is the "rockstar" of the genre (Brown), and there are more Van Gogh-themed experiences touring in 2024 than any other type.

Art-themed experiences are only part of the digital immersive pantheon produced by these production companies. Dozens of digital immersive exhibitions tour the globe, catering to popular themes from Harry Potter and ancient Egypt to the Smurfs. Art-themed immersives, however, stand apart for the questions they raise: Are these exhibitions offering experiences of "art," or are they exploiting great art for profit? Are they making art more accessible, or are they leading people away from seeing original paintings? Is the way people relate to art fundamentally changing in the age of social media, and if so, how will museums adjust? These questions have spurred improbable claims by exhibition producers, fervent disagreements in the art world, and critical challenges for museums. This study is novel in that it presents and evaluates diverging viewpoints on these controversies and proposes a more flexible approach that centers participant experiences over marketing claims and critical objections.

Methodology

This study is based on research on digital immersive arts and digital immersive art-themed entertainment, including background, analysis, criticism, theory, and reviews. Sources consulted include peer-reviewed academic journals, newspapers, magazines, and websites. I engaged in participant observation by attending an exhibition and interviewing others to get viewpoints from people of different ages and backgrounds.

Discussion

Artists have been pioneers in the genre of digital immersive art for over 30 years. As of current writing (2024), digital immersive exhibitions are becoming popular additions to traditional museum experiences. Sophisticated art installations such as Random International's *Rain Room* (2012 debut), which allows participants to walk into a room filled with rain but not get wet, have contributed to the growing interest in art experiences rather than art objects. Digital Immersive art has brought visitors back to museums after the pandemic and are having significant success (Barber and Szanto). Art exhibition spaces dedicated to digital immersive arts, such as Miami's Superblue, London's Frameless, and Shanghai's teamLab Borderless, are opening around the world, and traditional museums are increasingly under pressure to consider adding digital immersive art (Barber and Szanto).

Immersive art includes unique artwork created in a digital medium. Van Gogh-themed immersive exhibitions, which feature huge, animated projections of Van Gogh's paintings, are in a different category altogether. These high-budget and heavily marketed commercial exhibitions tour from city to city, showcasing flashy digital experiences drawn from the talent, popularity, and mystique of Vincent Van Gogh. These exhibitions promise spectators extraordinary experiences: "Have you ever dreamt of stepping into a painting? Now you can!" (*Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience*); "Step into Vincent's psyche and discover the man behind the masterpieces!" (*Beyond Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience*); "Experience the organic landscapes of Van Gogh's imagination and journey through his brilliance and madness!" (*Immersive Van Gogh Exhibition*). As John Zaller, the executive producer of *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience*, explained, "For us, what this immersive experience is, it's from the minute you walk into the minute you leave that you're fully enveloped in the spirit of van Gogh" (PBS). While "the spirit of Van Gogh" seems as if it could be a challenge to resurrect, these experiences promise just that and more. As an advertisement that appeared in my inbox describes,

Explore his life, his work, and his secrets as never before through cutting-edge 360-degree digital projections, a one-of-a-kind VR experience, and a uniquely atmospheric light and sound show.... Become completely immersed in the works of art around you and feel the shift in reality as you dive deep into the world created by Van Gogh's brush strokes. Get your tickets for Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience in Tucson! (Van Gogh Tucson Exhibit Website).

Who could resist that? In 2024 I had a chance to visit *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience*, which was touring smaller American cities such as Tucson, Arizona, after

making the rounds of major US cities since 2019. The experience was digitally mediated before I even arrived, as I was required to buy tickets online for a specific time and instructed to expect to spend about 1 hour and 15 minutes. I declined expensive add-ons such as “immersive yoga” classes and headed to the exhibit with my son. The venue was in a suburb outside of Tucson, and when we arrived, we realized it was inside a shopping mall, which we understood when we saw the enormous size of the room needed to hold the immersive experience. The ticket takers, friendly local teenagers dressed in jeans and Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience! t-shirts pointed us to a door festooned with huge papier mâché sunflowers.

Entering the first room we were caught in the gaze of a 15-foot sculptural Van Gogh head staring out from a recessed chamber as projections drawn from his paintings washed over in colorful waves. Continuing on, we were offered a short biographical film, emphasizing Van Gogh’s “tragic genius.” Backlit digital educational panels offered information about Van Gogh’s style, evoking his distinctive “brush strokes,” accompanied by another digital on plaster exhibition, a huge vase with various Van Gogh flower paintings washing over it in an ever-changing palette of color shape. A gallery of glowing digital reproductions of about twenty of his paintings offered a career retrospective. Going on we found a walk-in room with a physical reproduction of Van Gogh’s “The Bedroom at Arles” (1888), with life-size furniture to sit on, and a mark on the floor to guide anyone taking a photo of you (several other floor marks similarly indicated ideal selfie positioning).



Figure 1. The entrance to the exhibits at Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience. Oro Valley, Arizona. August 8, 2024. Photo by Anna Oldfield.

But that was all prelude – the heart of the show was the immersive exhibit. Walking through a set of heavy black curtains, we emerged in a huge rectangular warehouse type room two stories high, edged by beach chairs while the carpeted floor offered cushions to sit or lie on. We were initially disoriented by a dark room with projections of a huge oceanic expanse swirling over walls, floor, ceiling, and our bodies as the scene changed into a scene recalling Van Gogh’s “Two Crabs” (1889), with animated crabs swimming all over the room; I inadvertently jumped as one headed for my feet and noticed children in the room running around, chasing the crabs. The swirling scenario melted, fused, and changed into a scenario drawn from “Fishing in the Spring” (1887) with boats cruising around the room and fish leaping out of the water. The projections reproduced the paintings in detail, imagining them beyond the frames and in motion, with dabs of light swirling out to represent the “brush strokes”. The projections cycled through painting after painting, using visual devices to break up the image into splashes of moving color which then reconverged into another motif, turning into fields (with flying crows), almond trees (with petals swirling like snowflakes), and flowers (with flying butterflies), among other images too fluid and varied to completely take in before another would replace it. Atmospheric classical music played throughout, and Van Gogh quotations such as “I dream my painting, and I paint my dream” would boom out, narrated by a disembodied voice. The highlight of the show, based on “The Starry Night” (1889) flowed in with deep blues and violets while whirling stars in bright golds threw off glowing flecks, filling the room with dabs of glowing light and dark cypresses blew dramatically in the wind.



Figure 2. The author contemplates a gallery of glowing digital “paintings”. Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience, Oro Valley, Arizona. August 8, 2024. Photo by Max Senarslan.



Figure 3. A wall size digital image displays a Van Gogh quotation: “What would life be if we had no courage to attempt anything”. Photo by Anna Oldfield.

The exhibit continued in this way, becoming darker and stormier as it approached the end of Van Gogh's life, but ending with a light filled retrospective with hundreds of paintings projected over the walls. The 35-minute show begins again without a pause, cycling through in a ceaseless flow of movement.

Spectators of the exhibition variously sat in chairs or lounged on floor cushions, while some walked around the room. It felt more like a public park than a museum; people moved randomly in the 360° space with flying light images moving all over their bodies, and children ran around freely, laughing and chasing the lights. Some people in the room chatted with their companions, others gazed, transfixed, while others walked around with phones in hand, taking photos and videos. The experience was absorbing, colorful, impossible to look away from (where would you look?), and sensory, with little time to think or reflect between the rapidly changing scenarios.



Figure 4. Families with children relax in the immersion room as digital trains chug by. Photo by Anna Oldfield.

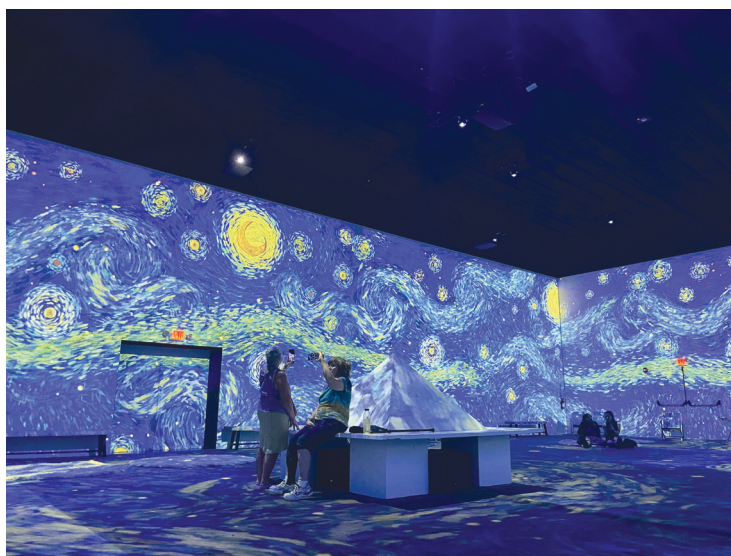


Figure 5. A digital "Starry Night" inspires cell phone photography among many visitors. Photo by Anna Oldfield.



Figure 6. Max Senarslan is covered in flying “brush strokes”. Photo by Anna Oldfield.

After leaving the Immersion room, you could pay extra to experience “Van Gogh’s places” through VR glasses, and for just a bit more you can invite your child (or inner child) to sit and create original art on paper with crayons. Then you will hit the “merch”: Van Gogh-themed hats, umbrellas, mugs, keychains, aprons, potholders, t-shirts, bathrobes, pens, tote bags, placemats, etc., and posters of Van Gogh paintings, signed “*Van Gogh: The Immersive Exhibit*” in the corner in place of the artist’s distinctive signature. Before you exit you are invited to “Become an influencer!” by posting your *Van Gogh: The Immersive Exhibit* pictures on Instagram or other Social Media platforms.

Did the exhibit deliver the “shift in reality” and “deep dive” into Van Gogh’s world as promised? Not to me –



Figure 7. Van Gogh merchandise greets visitors as soon as they step out of the exhibit. Photo by Anna Oldfield.

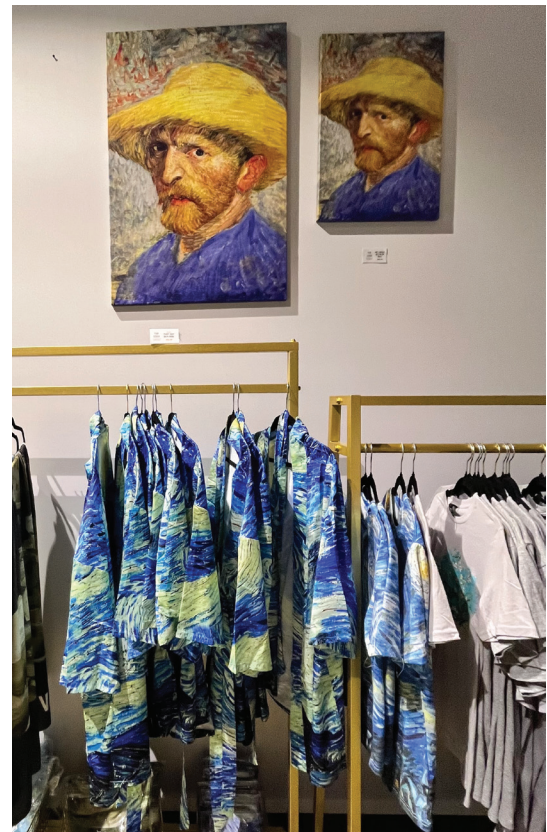


Figure 8. Copies of Van Gogh’s self-portrait appear to contemplate “Starry Night” merchandise below. Photo by Anna Oldfield.

but the huge projections of Van Gogh's paintings were luminous and beautiful, the animations fun, and the effects, although sometimes gimmicky, were sometimes thrilling or moving. My son also enjoyed it, commenting as we left, "We should paint more." Local reviews were often very enthusiastic and seem to justify the advertising claims, such as this one from the online newsletter *Southern Arizona Guide*:

"It made us feel as though we were living inside his paintings...The scenes changed continuously. We watched as hummingbirds and butterflies flickered by and trees waived in the breezes as scene after scene passed in front of our eyes and melted into other scenes. It was mesmerizing Southern Arizona Guide rates this Van Gogh Exhibit Five Saguaros ...Best of the Best! Truly stunning and not to be missed" (Van Gogh Exhibit: An Adventure Review)

"Amazing immersive experience! The art, the history of Van Gogh and his family was informative. His quotes and his art blended perfectly into a completely awe, inspiring artistic expression. I left the experience feeling like I knew him a tiny bit better, and certainly have a new appreciation for his work. Worth going!!!" (Van Gogh *Yelp Reviews*)

The potential impact of a Van Gogh-themed immersion in a small city such as Tucson, where many residents have had no opportunity to see an original, is clear, but big-city venues have also seen remarkable success. In a quantitative study of a data set taken from reviews of immersive Van-Gogh themed exhibits in urban locations, researchers found that 80% of reviewers conveyed positive emotions (África, et. al.). Applying Robert Plutchik's scale, they reported that "the positive emotions of joy, anticipation, trust, and surprise prevail over the negative emotions of anger, disgust, fear, and sadness in terms of frequency (África, et. al.). And this success has translated into financial success for the producers. Zaller estimates that *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience* costs 1 million dollars to set up and exhibit, but the profits far outweigh the expenses (Brown). In 2021 Corey Ross, president of Toronto-based Lighthouse Immersive, crowed that they had "passed 3.2 million tickets sold, which, as I understand it, makes it the most successful attraction in the world on Ticketmaster" (Quoted in Capps). Millions more tickets have been sold since that time.

Although they are art-themed and involve artists as designers, the producers of immersive Van Gogh exhibitions are large entertainment corporations specializing in digital entertainment. Zaller has produced digital immersives such as "Titanic: The Exhibition," "Jurassic World: The Exhibition," and "Star Trek: The Exhibition." In a 2023 interview, Faller uses the language of business to explain why Van Gogh is such a successful choice from a commercial perspective: "He is such a public figure. He is kind of like a rock star or a brand name in the art world. It's incredibly emotive, and people can connect with it. It doesn't necessarily require an art degree to approach and engage with a Van Gogh, a Van Gogh painting" (Brown).

Of course, millions of people have seen Van Gogh's paintings without art degrees, but Zaller's point is clear: immersive exhibits make Van Gogh accessible to a much wider

audience. While museum directors may cringe at Zaller's reduction of Van Gogh to a "brand name," Zaller has a point, as Van Gogh-themed immersives have thrived while US museums are still only up to 71% of their pre-pandemic levels (museumfacts.org). Surely having more people exposed to art in any form is a laudable goal, and there are positives inherent in increased accessibility. Kate Morales writes that according to their producers, art-themed immersives "complement" rather than "take away from" museum displays and are perfect for introducing art to children, who may be too small to see the paintings on museum walls, especially a Van Gogh that might have a crowd around it (Morales). More significantly, Morales notes that immersives replace "often rigid museum etiquette" with "a looser atmosphere filled by music, lounging and chitchat" (Morales), which children could find more welcoming and fun. As Kelly Crow, art market reporter for The Wall Street Journal, explains,

people do want to be wowed and they do not want to feel like they're being preached at. They don't want to feel like they're in trouble when they go into an art museum, and art museums have traditionally been places where you are told not to touch. You're told not to take pictures. You're told not to take pictures with flash. You sort of feel like you have to be on your best behavior. There's just a different barrier of entry (Lindbaugh).

The displacement of Van Gogh's art from the urban museum space is an important aspect of increased accessibility. Many people will never be able to see an original Van Gogh in a big city museum or may find museums uncomfortable or intimidating. Unless you already live there, big cities can be confusing, difficult, and expensive to visit. This can restrict access for non-city dwellers who simply don't have the ability to travel to an urban center like New York or Los Angeles. The producers of *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience* estimate that about 50 percent of their audience has never even set foot in a museum (Jefferies). Many visitors probably will never in their lives get a chance to see an original Van Gogh painting. Van Gogh-themed immersives bring the paintings to them.

There are those in the art world who would agree that more people seeing more art, even if it is a digital remix, is better. Nadine Granoff, a fine art appraiser, agreed that these shows have "the potential to be really helpful in understanding the whole artist instead of seeing something just isolated on the wall. It can really make it come alive" (quoted in Morales). And a majority of the reviews written by visitors who are not art critics are joyful and enthusiastic. However, is what these visitors are experiencing "art," or even comparable to it? Art-themed exhibitions, just like "Harry Potter: The Forbidden Forest" and many others, are created by entertainment companies as commercial products; however, it is important to consider the contributions of artists who have conceived and designed these exhibits with artistic goals in mind. Italian multimedia artist Massimiliano Siccardi, who designed *The Immersive Van Gogh* for Lighthouse Immersive, recreates each exhibit to adapt to the site and carefully crafts the experience. Drawing from his background in dance and cinema, he creates immersive spaces in order to create a dramatic shift the spectator's perspective:

"The immersive installation is brilliant because you constantly move from one space to another and constantly change your point of view, and then you make a montage inside your head, that is, you are online with yourself, you walk in this world that I created for you, thinking of you. If you noticed a central theme, it is subjectivity; that is, you never see Van Gogh, you are Van Gogh. You are inside his head. You, the spectator, you, the audience, you are inside his head, and you are immediately catapulted into this world (Bellacosa 176).

Exhibition Hub Producer and Artistic Co-Director Mario Iacampo explains his vision more as an educational experience:

"Digital media in itself is art because we're not just taking paintings and showing them – you know – as a picture. What we're doing is we're exploring each painting. We're animating each painting. We're going a little bit further and really presenting his [Vincent Van Gogh's] works within the context of when he painted them" (quoted in Miner and Spindler).

And while remixing, animating, and contextualizing paintings has long been a part of the art world, some of producers' claims seem overly boastful. According to Faller, for example, Van Gogh himself might have wanted to create immersive exhibits: "We're doing what Van Gogh might have done if he had the technology that we have today" (Brown). Faller comments elsewhere that "We're using his works to create the next version of his works by adding the motion, adding the animation, adding the energy to bring the life to his work that is already there" (quoted in Miner and Spindler). That there would be a "next version" of an original work or that a Van Gogh painting would need digital additions to "bring the life" to it reveals the disconnect between the intentions behind these exhibits and the concerns of many in the art world.

And indeed, many critics "with art degrees" have been forceful in bringing that disconnect out: "these multi-sensory experiences are not art. They're a form of entertainment" the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art states unambiguously (quoted in Linebaugh). And in his op-ed for the *Wall Street Journal*, "Glitch in the Museum Matrix; Large-scale Virtual Presentations of Famous Works of Art Obscure Rather than Illuminate their Sources," prominent American art critic Terry Teachout is uncompromising in his condemnation of these exhibitions (which he refused to even attend):

Attending "Immersive Van Gogh" is not even remotely like the intensely involving experience of encountering a painting up close. Instead, the work of one of the greatest of all visual artists has been turned into something more like a giant video game (Teachout 1).

Jason Farago, an influential art critic for the *New York Times*, similarly attacks the immaturity of those who enjoy these exhibits, noting that "Babies...and others with similar taste will find great pleasure in our culture's latest virally transmitted spectacles, which distill fin-de-siècle French painting into an amusement as captivating as a nursery mobile" (Farago). Farago's ungracious comparison of audiences who enjoy

these exhibits to “babies” smacks of elitism and reveals why some people may find the American fine-art scene arrogant and unappealing.

On a more substantial level, Farago and others express frustration at the immense difference between seeing an original and attending a digital immersive, often citing the “brush strokes” that are absent in the digital reproductions. As Farago laments:

If you go to MoMA to see “Starry Night” ...you can spend as much time as you like examining Van Gogh’s mastery of impasto – that is, the thick application of paint that gives the paintings their nervous, shuddering quality. In these wall-size screen savers, impasto has to be mimicked through motion: dancing brush strokes, falling leaves, flapping crows” (Farago).

Farago further points out that MoMA is no more expensive than a Van Gogh-themed Immersive exhibit, so better pay to see the original – but of course not everyone will have a chance to visit New York to see the original. To be fair, I have been fortunate to visit MoMA, and I had to work through a crowd to get close enough to “The Starry Night” to even see the *impasto*. Thus, the argument for accessibility may be a good one. Iacampo puts it this way: “[W]e don’t look at it as ‘Come and see paintings of Van Gogh.’ We look at it [as] ‘Come and experience Van Gogh.’” (Iacampo). As Kate Mondloch notes, exhibition producers

“bypass the issue of authenticity, trumpeting instead their efforts to promote accessibility and anti-elitism, to preserve the aging and ‘over-visited’ Van Gogh originals, to offer a more comprehensive representation of Van Gogh’s vast oeuvre than any single museum could accomplish, and to provide “socially transformational” educational experiences” (Mondloch).

Thinking of the value of authenticity recalls cultural theorist Walter Benjamin’s 1936 article, “The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility.” Benjamin calls the authentic, “cult value” of a work of art the “aura” which is embedded in its unique, physical existence (Benjamin 21). This aura is diminished when an image is reproduced and dispersed. As he explains,

“what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter’s aura the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced” (Benjamin 22).

Benjamin contends that the technological reproduction of art causes “a massive upheaval in the domain of objects handed down from the past—a shattering of tradition” (22). However, Benjamin’s purpose is not to mourn the loss of the aura but to celebrate the transformation of art from the elite to the popular sphere as a precursor for social transformation. As he observes, reproductions can easily travel: “technological reproduction can place the copy of the original in situations which the original itself

cannot attain. Above all, it enables the original to meet the recipient Halfway" (Benjamin 21). In this sense, these touring, art-themed exhibits based on digital replications could be seen in Benjamin's sense as a democratization of Van Gogh's art, "a mass existence" that can meet the audiences "Halfway." And this approach may continue to resonate well in contemporary culture; as Julia Scott-Stevenson explains in "Virtual Futures: A Manifesto for Immersive Experiences": "So why take a user out of the 'here and now' and attempt to situate her somewhere else? One reason is to take her somewhere she cannot otherwise go" (Scott-Stevenson).

However, along with the positive aspects of anti-elitism and accessibility, there is also a blatantly commercial aspect to these Van Gogh-themed digital immersives, created solely to hook visitors into spending money. As Mondloch points out:

"fee-based extras run the gamut from various techno-gimmicks – a VR journey through some of the landscapes on which Van Gogh's paintings were based; an AI component where you can 'write Van Gogh a letter' on your phone and receive a response immediately – to special events featuring commercialized intimacy—the Los Angeles installation of Immersive Van Gogh, for example, markets "immersive" yoga, meditation, and date night packages prominently sponsored by Lifeway Kefir".

Exhibition producers do not hide that they are "unapologetically for-profit enterprises" (Mondloch). Ironically far removed from Van Gogh's own financial struggles during his lifetime, these exhibitions exploit free public-domain images of his artwork and even his mental health struggles to awe the public and make a profit. These aims seem removed from Benjamin's hopes for the impact of technological reproductions, in which "the shattering of tradition" would lead to a Marxist transformation of society. Instead, these immersives exploit the awe generated by Van Gogh's talent to serve wholly capitalist interests.

To be fair, museums also need to make money, and along with selling sometimes pricey entrance tickets feature for pay special exhibitions, add-ons, and gift shops. And now, there is a serious concern about whether Van Gogh-themed immersives are preventing people from going to see the real thing. As Crow relates, in 2021 the Dallas Museum of Art exhibited a unique collection of Van Gogh's olive grove paintings; the exhibit took 9 years to curate and included paintings that had never been exhibited before. However, at the same time, there were two different Van Gogh-themed immersives playing in Dallas, and more people chose to go to the immersives than to see the original paintings: "they can't get people in the door to see the real thing" (quoted in Lindbaugh). It becomes not just a matter of expanded accessibility, but of devaluing the experience of seeing the original, the "withering of the aura."

Clearly, the meteoric rise of immersives has raised a challenge for traditional art museums, and many are scrambling to adjust. Museums that have run digital immersive art have reaped rewards: for example, in 2017 Yayoi Kusama's "Infinity Mirrors" exhibit broke records at the Hirshhorn with over a million visitors. The article "Immersive Art Is Exploding, and Museums Have a Choice to Make" points out that museums need to work out how to compete with the lure of the flashy, fun, kid-friendly art-themed

digital immersives down the road (Barber and Szanto). The former Indianapolis Museum of Art met the challenge by recreating itself. The institution dropped the name “museum,” changing its name to Newfields, cleared the artwork out of an entire floor of gallery space, and installed over 100 projectors for a new digital immersive artspace called “The Lume” (Capps) – and the first show in The Lume was not original digital artwork but, you guessed it, a digital exhibit titled “Here we Gogh!” Much like the commercial enterprises, the exhibition promises visitors a “multi-sensory digital display of Vincent van Gogh’s paintings” complete with extras: “the charming Café Lumière that will serve up thematic bites and festive French sips. The Gogh Play activity space will boast a life-sized diorama of Van Gogh’s picturesque *Bedroom in Arles*” (Schlagenhauff). And of course, “merch,” stated a bit more elegantly: “Complete your trip with a visit to The Shoppe where you can find the perfect keepsake to take home” (Schlagenhauff). The exhibit also invites social media sharing, promising visitors that “the brand-new Sunflower Room will be the photo-op of the season. You’ll glow surrounded by seemingly endless fields of sunny flowers” (Schlagenhauff). In any case, the line between the entertainment business and the art world can be razor thin.

This pressure on museums raises the question of whether artistic spectatorship is changing profoundly as generations grow up in a digitally mediated world. There is no doubt that social media sharing has become an important way of interacting with art in the last decade, and people often take selfies with original artwork in Museums. But as Mondloch points out, the Van Gogh-themed immersives have built social media sharing into the fabric of the experience, noting that while “phone-reliant viewing now verges on being normative even in ‘traditional’ art museums...the Van Gogh immersive experiences... take these phone-mediated experiences to a new level, deliberately designing a screen-based, social media-centric environment” (Morales). The producers of the Van Gogh-themed immersives are enthusiastic about the social media aspect of their exhibits. A producer from Impact Museums, the company behind *Immersive Van Gogh*, claims breathlessly that the sharing of digital immersive experiences on social media can create a “movement” to “make a difference”:

“Our vision for the business is to build experiences that tell those incredible stories where people feel inspired to share on their social media and become a part of the movement and feel less helpless and feel their individual actions can actually make a difference because they see all of the individuals they come through with, plus their hundreds or thousands of millions of followers engaging, and we become an amplifier for a movement” (quoted in Baltin 2021).

The actual aims of this “movement” are undefined, and they forget to mention that being an “amplifier” on social media primarily provides enormous free publicity for the producers. Mondloch reads this as a business strategy: “by rewarding social media habits and explicitly rejecting ‘elitist’ art museum protocols, these immersive exhibitions allow viewers to literally see themselves within Van Gogh’s art – your own selfie inside the image of ‘The Starry Night,’ shared on Instagram” (Morales). It fulfills the fantasies that the marketing promises of ‘stepping into a painting’ – at least for those already

immersed in the digital world.

Social media engagement with art is certainly better than no engagement, and it could alternatively be viewed as a positive way to engage more younger viewers in a meaningful way. Changing spectatorship and the rise of digitally mediated participation in art is an emerging topic of both academic and art market research. In "How Selfies Are Changing the Way We Interact with Art," Rebecca Carlson reconceives the spectator's personal journey with art as an "adventure," contending that social media provides "a place to document experiences and share those adventures with followers." While traditional museums feature exhibits framed and contextualized by experts, selfies can "empower 'art consumers' to develop their own 'narratives and identity projects,' allowing them to participate more in the creation of their own experience (Piancatelli, et al). In "#artoninstagram: Engaging with Art in the Era of the Selfie," Elizabeth Hunter echoes the empowering quality of the selfie, arguing that

"museums perform institutional control over displayed objects through guards, vitrines, and motion sensing alarms that beep if visitors get too close, but museum selfie takers steal a little control back, using the presence of their bodies in the frame to commandeer the viewer's attention" (Hunter).

The selfie becomes an anti-elite force that, thinking back to Benjamin, disrupts the "aura" of the original by reproducing a copy that now belongs to the phone holder. It is a very 21st-century way of meeting spectators "halfway."

But do spectators using selfies and social media really meet the claims of producers to feel "less helpless" and "make a difference" by making meaningful social media connections with followers? (Baltin). Farago observed the opposite tendency during the Van Gogh-themed immersives he attended: "Individual absorption, rather than shared wonder, is the order of the day now. From every vantage point you will fill your phone's backlit screen with glowing imagery...and there's more than enough space to crop out other visitors and frame only yourself" (Farago). Perhaps these exhibitions simply fuel the alienation of the digital world? Or is the urge for digital mediation and social media part of a larger phenomenon of the pervasiveness of "digitally mediated and profit-driven 24/7 immersive attention in art and in everyday life" (Mondloch). Is the social media culture of Van Gogh-themed immersives making it too difficult for people to pay attention to small paintings that do not move?

Mondloch warns that the impact of Van Gogh-themed digital immersives will have dire cultural consequences, predicting that

"for production teams such as Impact Museums, reworking Van Gogh's life and paintings into easily digestible, art-themed multisensory presentations is just the beginning. The long-term influence of the consumerist, screen-based immersive attention they foster in art and in everyday life remain to be seen" (Mondloch).

Farago sees the exhibitions as a crisis that diminishes Van Gogh's art issuing a call to action: "I want everyone to discover, right there in the thick grooves of the oil paint,

the wonder and vitality of art that needs no animation... There has got to be a way to lead people back to that discovery" (Farago).

Mondloch and Farago may be giving Van Gogh-themed immersives more power and influence than they actually command – surely, they are more of a consequence of the screen-based attention culture than they are a cause, and their impact on the art world could be a healthy wake-up call to address issues of accessibility, as well as how to engage younger people – goals that many artists themselves have taken on. Siccardi hopes that his Immersive Van Gogh may bring people back to the paintings:

One no longer sees art because it is boring, or because the visit takes ten hours straight from start to finish. One goes to see an immersive installation and maybe after that, one wants to see the painting in person. I don't know, it's wishful thinking, I guess (Bellacosa 179).

Whether that happens or not, the museum business will surely benefit from the self-reflection.

More seriously problematic than the social media aspect of these exhibits is the manipulative quality built in to trigger visitor emotions as a commercial policy. Exhibition producers make no secret of their intentions to mine the emotional riches of Van Gogh's troubled life and enhance their impact with sensory experience. As an exhibition designer describes, "The cool thing about the immersive world in general is that we are able to play with smell, taste, sight, and all these other things that are sort of built-in natural emotional triggers" (quoted in Baltin). Siccardi's *Immersive Van Gogh*, in which "you walk in this world that I created for you, thinking of you" (Bellacosa), expresses a manipulative shade along with the nurturing intention.

While this may not be threatening in itself, marketing, narration, and emotional triggers mediate the artwork for the viewer in optimally dramatic ways, raising the stereotype of "Van Gogh as a lone, tortured genius rather than a figure of history" (Farago). The immersives have a chronological 'storyline' that opens full of light and promise, growing ever darker and stormier as they approach the end of the painter's life. In *Van Gogh: The Immersive Exhibit*, the biographical film instructs viewers that the cypress tree in "The Starry Night" is a sign of Van Gogh's growing madness, while later in the immersion room, giant digital cypresses toss in a fierce howling wind, bringing a menacing quality to the "The Starry Night" projection, while the words "I put my heart and soul into my work, and I lost my mind in the process" boom out from a disembodied voice. Marketing copy makes promises such as to "experience the organic landscapes of Van Gogh's imagination, and journey through his brilliance and madness" (Immersive Van Gogh), drawing on the romantic and emotional appeal of the painter's personal tragedies.

As entertainment producers know, emotional triggers impact audiences (Bagozzi, et al. 184). Orpee Cataldo, artistic co-director of *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience*, is clear on the choice of Van Gogh precisely for that reason: "we had an interest in Van Gogh's paintings because it's [sic] full of emotions...when you look at his tableaus, they're already immersive" (quoted in Baltin). He goes on to consider how this impacts the exhibition's overall design, claiming that Van Gogh has "done the work for you. You just have

to expand it" (quoted in Baltin). Similarly, the Van Gogh-themed digital immersives "do all the work for you" – all the spectator needs to do is sit back and receive it.

When every moment of an encounter with artwork is digitally mediated, pre-interpreted, and set with emotional triggers, the spectator loses the power to perceive the painting directly without interference. A visitor to a museum can stand in front of a painting and evolve their own aesthetic and emotional relationship to it over time. Surely this is a more essential form of empowerment than a selfie or an Instagram post. Van Gogh-themed digital immersives bombard the spectator with overwhelming sensory input and change so fast there is no time to reflect. University of Washington Art History Professor Marek Wieczorek reflects that during a Van Gogh-themed digital immersive "what is taken away from you by being presented an image of Van Gogh that is not Van Gogh is the essence of your participation. In a way, you're robbed" (Brown).

Nonetheless, Van Gogh-themed digital immersives bring joy to the majority of their visitors. Recalling Benjamin, perhaps the disconnect between the opinions of art critics and general audiences represents a cultural divide that exists in many societies between average people and the intelligentsia: "The masses are criticized for seeking distraction [Zerstreuung] in the work of art, whereas the art lover supposedly approaches it with concentration. In the case of the masses, artwork is seen as a means of entertainment; in the case of the art lover, it is considered an object of devotion" (Benjamin 22). To an art critic who privileges the original, the immersive exhibit is a mere copy, even an insult; but to the visitor who cannot even dream of seeing an original Van Gogh, it can be an authentic, even transformative, aesthetic, and emotional experience.

Conclusion

The Van Gogh-themed digital immersive phenomenon has precipitated a commercial explosion, a social media phenomenon, a storm in the art world, and a crisis in museums. Yet under examination, it is neither the transformative, utopian experience described by producers nor, despite the warnings of critics, the destruction of art as we know it. While these immersives are not exactly art, they are not wholly 'just entertainment' either, but something in between.

When I first read the advertisement copy asking if I had ever dreamed of 'stepping into a Van Gogh painting,' I recalled the section "Crows" in Akira Kurosawa's film *Dreams* (1990). In "Crows," a young painter silently studying an exhibit of Van Gogh's paintings suddenly finds himself inside the world of "Le Pont de Langlois à Arles" (1888) is suddenly transported, with his easel, into the world of the painting. He searches through the French countryside filled with streams, fields, cottages, and living people, and finds Van Gogh in a field, painting. After he has a conversation with the master, the young painter takes a joyful journey through larger than life three-dimensionally constructed paintings, sometimes sliding down the famous brushstrokes. The segment ends as we watch Van Gogh walk away over the horizon, easel on his back. The scene is a tribute to the power of art to immerse the heart, the soul, and the imagination, from the inside.

While there is no comparison of the grace of Kurasawa's film with the bluster of the Van Gogh-themed immersives, there is a kernel of similarity in the dream, perhaps

an ancient one, to bring a painting to life. It is a dream that perhaps the visitors to Van Gogh-themed immersives share with the great Kurasawa. Whatever Van Gogh-themed immersives are, they are not “video games” or “nursery mobiles.” Although their patrons are not visiting museums, it is encouraging that among all the digital immersives that are out there, Van Gogh-themed immersives are by far the most popular and reflect a draw to the awesome and beautiful that goes deeper than a search for entertainment. And Kurasawa reminds us that art is to be recreated, enjoyed, and played with. The children running and playing in the immersives, dappled with colored lights, may indeed be drawn to seeking more art and beauty in their lives.

In the Van Gogh-themed immersive exhibits, the authenticity is gone, the impasto is gone, and even the paintings are gone – but a nucleus of the magnificence of Van Gogh’s artistry remains, shining through and untarnished by the voice-overs, the VR, and the merch. There is a core of his art that cannot be removed, even in the most commercial and socially mediated enterprise. When I attended the exhibition, I noticed several older visitors, watching quietly, with deep attention, without cell phones, and joy shining in their faces. The creators of the digital immersives cannot replace Van Gogh, but they cannot ruin him either.

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