

# VERBIER ART SUMMIT

## 2018 Verbier Art Summit reflections and findings

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The 2018 Verbier Art Summit took place in Verbier Switzerland on 18, 19 & 20 January around the theme **More than Real. Art in the Digital Age**. The annual Summit is organised by art patron Anneliek Sijbrandij and her team, and the 2018 edition was curated by acclaimed museum director Daniel Birnbaum of Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden. The 2018 Summit was dominated by discussions on Virtual Reality (VR) and its ascendancy, anticipated arrival, utopian promise and dystopian threat.

A great range of vibrant and animated talks were delivered in the Summit's talks from what was traditionally referred to, at least in Britain, as the 'two cultures' mirroring C.P. Snow's tract of 1959, which explored the widening gap between scientific culture and the cultures of literature & art, in the wake of a post-war scientific revolution. It was recognized that our moment is very different, not least because now culture and economy have merged and become largely coterminous, meaning developments in science and technology are immediately taken up by the market and made available for consumption and thus enter into our everyday lives through screen technology, while also being absorbed into the processes and procedures of artists.

In the opening speech by the Summit's partnering museum director, **Daniel Birnbaum**, he shared an anecdotal exchange between him and an industry representative in South Korea about a distinct date of the arrival of VR. Daniel, curious as to when its arrival would finally come as a standard utility of everyday life asked: when? The answer was definitively given as 2023: that is when 'everyone' will have one if not two VR devices.

The writer and novelist **Douglas Coupland** followed suit and took this up positing VR as an inevitability: resistance is futile – our lives will never be the same again. Drawing from the writings of Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan, Coupland identified VR as a 'hot' media or medium. For McLuhan, 'hot' media deliver a total package unified in structure, form and flow; 'cold' media may well be unified in structure and form, but come forward in a fragmentary mode and rely on a viewer, receiver or observer to draw together and assemble the fragments as an 'experience'. The novel, for example, is cold, as would be much, if not all, visual art. Coupland is interested in the narrative possibilities of VR, but also the potential it holds for ecstatic experience (see also his [CNN article](#) about the Summit of 19 January 2018).

What will be the shape of the 'new normal' in such a virtual world? And what will become of our bodily connection to lived experience?

**Paul Verschure**, a Barcelona based research professor working at the intersection of neuro-engineering, synthetic perception, emotive and cognitive systems, made the salient point that there is a 30% increase in depth of memory when viewers, readers and participants are active rather than passive. Following McLuhan, cold media are active, while hot are passive. Professor Verschure put us – we humans – forward as already living machines. Our brain, for example, is an amazing efficient machine in that it consumes little more than 20 watts to run, or the equivalent of a small lightbulb. As human machines, we enjoy an ‘epistemic autonomy’, or the ability to relate to our knowledge as our own. What challenges will Artificial Intelligence (AI) and VR pose to us in light of this? Verschure offered the promise of *eudaemonia* with machines, or a happy, virtuous and flourishing life in tandem with machines, or evolving technology.

**Michelle Kuo**, formerly the editor of Artforum, drew on her PhD research and delivered a talk on the group Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), focussing on the Pepsi Pavilion during the World Expo in Japan during 1970. That structure - still wondrous in the virtual, though very real when experienced (at least initially)- is unfairly little known. The world’s largest mirrored dome produced ‘real images’ of converging waves of light and offered a loss of subject position situated somewhere between the real and the virtual.

**Dado Valentic**, a colour specialist and expert in the production of VR, added weight to the anecdotal in that he has witnessed, year on year, a 50% shift in the speed, ease and quality of VR. 2023 may indeed not be so far away. He promises we now have the possibility of meeting people in VR and sharing experiences with them. Dust off that copy of Cronenberg’s *Videodrome* from 1983, if you still have a copy on VHS (and a device to play it). Valentic put forward that our attraction to technology – VR, AI, our smart phones, whatever it may be –stems in part from our attraction to a loss of control. We dig it. In the current melding relationship between art and technology, Valentic considers that art is doing technology a favour at the moment and science and technology is benefitting most currently from this relationship.

**Susanne Pfeffer**, director of MMK in Frankfurt, explored her work with and curation of artists engaging with new digital and emergent technologies. She identified a tendency for the artists she has worked with to treat space as an image, perhaps drawing on their experience and maturation through a screen. We perceive art and the world now through images. The separation between brain work and the work of the hand has narrowed, while the post-internet generation has gathered and collated much thinking and positions from the past decades. Pfeffer offered the cautionary note that we should attempt to better understand what is going on now – directly under our noses and in our social reality – than focusing on and musing obsessively on the promise of an enhanced technological future. We might consider how technology productively flows through us.

The relation of particular artists to given technologies is nothing new: think of Marcel Proust and his relationship to the photograph, or Hemingway and Mann to the typewriter, or even Eugene O’Neill to the seven newly sharpened pencils and sheets of paper he had set out on his writing table each day. Debates held in the chalets of the Verbier Art Summit’s founding members, also explored the different voices artists and scientists deploy. This in part drew on comments from Paul Verschure the previous day. Art and artists embrace a first-person voice that is subject and also always already self-reflective; their efforts are driven by the qualitative. Science and scientists lean towards the third-person voice of objectivity and quantifiable findings supported by reproducible data and facts. Art is a singularity.

The Summit found two voices speaking from engaged positions and commitments. Both were always passionate. There were disagreements in the debates, particularly around the conditions of representation and the machinic other (pertinent to VR and AI). The invited students from leading art and poli-technic universities also continued this debate. In addition, discussions on the ephemerality of digital art arose, and subsequently on preservation. Contemporary art, time-based media curator at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, **Karen Archey**, discussed that we are still treating the digital age as something to come, wondering what shape it will take in our lives. But digital culture has been around for more than two decades, and one can even speak of digital history, and the loss of the earliest manifestations.

**Ed Atkins** spoke eloquently on loss in relation to the digital. The concept of 'losslessness' in data or digital technology holds that the copy retains and re-produces the fidelity and totality of the original; in fact, the ideal renders considerations of copy and original moribund. What then happens to personal content, or the artist's subjectivity when threaded through such a digital mechanism? Losslessness promises a sort of immortality. Data may be compressed infinitely and without loss of any data or fidelity. Atkins drew from Sigmund Freud's structure of loss, melancholy and mourning and applied this to the prospect of losslessness in the digital. How might we recover and deal with trauma within such a realm? If loss is our exemplar and, in some way structures our lives, or at least drives the attempts we make to recover and redeem what is lost, how might the digital rewrite those psychological moves? Melancholy prefigures mourning, which ultimately acts to acknowledge and track loss. Mourning is mantric. The literal of the digital could well magnify and render loss a perpetual melancholic lost object – at once overwhelmingly present, but at the same time not really there at all. Ed Atkins offered the most convincing relation to technology and the digital an artist might take up: to use and exploit every possibility of new technologies to explore the subjects of life, love, loss, labor and laughter. These are the focus of Freud's own writing and the stuff art is made of, all of which should not be forgotten in the glistening new of technology. We, our figural selves and our psychological content, offer a way to humanize the new.

The artist **Anicka Yi** spoke on her projects that explore how synthetic biology has dismantled and reconfigured our thinking about our species and evolution. Yi is interested in bio-fictions that fuse the writing of life with the creation of life. The non-human is here included and may indeed have their own life worlds, or *umwelt*. In her art, Yi explores the materiality these bio-fictions may put forth: be it scent, object or linguistic. Her art examines the senses and how these may shape our experience. For example, smell is pre-verbal and visceral. Everything that comes later is socially and culturally conditioned. How will the digital and technologies of VR and AI reconfigure our senses?

**Pamela Rosenkranz's** art work examines the shifting meanings of the natural and human, or nature and culture in language and art. She works with immaterial elements and explores the intersection of medicine, microbiology – for example, the links between parasite and smell and how these immaterial forces may define and delimit the journey of attraction between parasite and host. Rosenkranz suggested we register art as movement and deal with it with the same area of the brain that registers predator or prey. Her art explores scent and material, increasingly linking corporate consumerism and the relentless, spectacular expansion and evolution of Amazon.com while linking this to the origin of the corporation's name with the region and river and movement into the land. Rosenkranz has recently embarked on a seemingly impossible project to collect all the names of items available starting with 'the letter a' through the Amazon.com interface. Tying together the ancient, or primordial with the postmodern, Rosenkranz explores how contemporary consumerist products tie into such forces: from Chanel No. 5 and cat pheromones, to Amazon.com or the 2 pounds of micro-biotic organisms we carry with us each day in the human body.

The artist **Olafur Eliasson** concluded the second Verbier Art Summit day with a keynote talk that challenged the Summit to consider how it might not only apply and extend, but disseminate what has taken place in Verbier and apply it to our lives and the 'stuff we do'. Eliasson is largely taken up in his internationally recognized work with dematerialising the art object – stripping away its objecthood – and promoting the viewer's agency and involvement in realising the art work through their perceptions, interaction and involvement. For Eliasson, dematerialising the art object allows one to examine new questions the art object blocks, or stands in the way of. For Eliasson, the perceiver is not a consumer but a producer of his art. This echoes the thinking of Marcel Duchamp.

Eliasson responded directly to an earlier quip from Douglas Coupland that had captured many people's thoughts. Coupland stated: 'I miss my pre-Internet Brain.' Eliasson countered with an excursion into formal medieval gardens, constructed before the developments in renaissance perspective. We are blind to how they organized their gardens in a pre-perspectival mode. He offered, blindness might be a way of seeing things and that we should not lament the loss of our pre-Internet brain. What might we see, or imagine in our collective blindness? Eliasson brought up a point mentioned across the two-day Summit: what happens to the body in VR? Do we lose a sense of our body in space, or how we move through and bodily negotiate space? Eliasson's projects – particularly in *The Weather Project* at Tate Modern in 2004 – re-imagined how bodies might move when they look at art: perhaps by lying or rolling around. How do public spaces and institutions then host these people and their experiences?

Eliasson approaches VR as a language through which he could say things. The task of artists is to introduce a moral compass into VR. Eliasson is a technological optimist, however, he sees some challenges to come to terms with in the advent of new technologies and VR: the corporate objectification of our senses; the redefinition and designation of a public sector.

Ultimately, his concern is who people will identify with. Who will we trust? In our current moment of politics and economy, the cultural sector and its production is the most trustworthy sector. We are in times now where artists can really choose where they operate: the public sector, the private sector or in the resistance. Eliasson therefore urged the Summit participants to engage with this responsibility.

My own early conclusions and findings return me to Walter Benjamin's writings. Benjamin writes that the *Here and Now* of the original art work, or indeed primary experience, underlies its authenticity. VR offers a real potential for multi-disciplinary productions and engagements beyond academic slogans and is too great a potential to be left to the market; the educational potential of VR – from kindergarten to Medical School and beyond – is too great. From science comes a means of unlocking perception, behavior and health. The intersection between art and science is great – perhaps potentially as great now as was the case during the renaissance and Michelangelo. A challenge is presented to artists – admirably taken up in different ways by both Ed Atkins and Olafur Eliasson amongst others – to inject human content and concerns into technology so that it might not simply take us elsewhere, but return us to the lifeworld. To enhance our lives and transform our relation with an analogue world, for which we need to care better.