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The Indigitized Imaginarium: The Immersive Environments Within and Beyond Virtual Reality Museums, Nathan Clark.

Abstract:

This paper begins with the following proposition: in the contemporary landscape with ever-increasing virtual technologies which allow the viewer to be immersed into alternative realities, how does the notion of universal truth become muddled? How is culture mandated by Debord's spectacle unveiled? Using theories from leading anthropological and art historical theorists, this paper evokes the intersections of truth and subjectivity where the virtual and material objects interact with the viewers in interior and exterior spaces.

When the viewer enters the interior (and often private) space of cultural consumption, they engage with their own preconceived ideological relations, which increasingly become entangled with the institution's own values. These latter values are inherently reflected through the displayed art or cultural objects, as Michael Ames and Ruth Philips argue respectively. Using phenomenological methodologies, this paper challenges the transportation of the viewer into ideologically-charged cultural spaces through virtual reality.

Following the exhibition *2167* at the Grunt Gallery in 2017, this paper investigates the intersections between speculation and reality as viewers are virtually immersed into alternative futures. Once the viewer embodies this ontological relationality with the artistically rendered environment, what affective outcome is produced? What truths emerge through this first-person perspective mediated via the headset?

Virtual reality uses Jennifer Kidd's theory of emotioneering as its mode of transporting audiences into a virtual realm where subjectivity and affect reign over Debord's spectacle. This paper illustrates that virtual reality and its rendered environments allow cultures to repossess their histories beyond institutional representation. It is within these public spaces where acts of resistance begin: through the virtual reality headset, viewers transcend the institution's physical limitations to navigate new cultural spaces. Virtual reality, as its own spectacle, becomes a new method and toolkit to challenge colonized ideological frameworks.

Keywords: Virtual Reality, Museums, Subjectivity, Phenomenology, Immersion.

In recent years the evolution of virtual reality has expanded the horizons of possibility for immersive narrative experiences. The term virtual implies a multitude of truth-carrying devices; however, in its affiliation to simulating reality, it is a technological device that manipulates the viewer's perspective with another constructed ontology. Through artistic or institutional creation, these environments permit a more interactive and stimulating environment in one's exploration of a narrative. When questions emerge surrounding the meaning of truth, it can become a complex argument as society is inherently immersed within its inescapable influence. Every society and individual has their own definition of truth, much of which is mandated by their academic institutions in the name of their canonical metanarrative. Yet, what is truth, and how can virtual reality illustrate its fluid and subjective nature? What contradictions can emerge when one attempts to manipulate perspective in these virtual experiences? This is reflected in Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*,¹ wherein he associates illusion with sacredness, which increases with the simultaneous decrease of truth. As the spectacle's own perspective of a truth becomes concretized in a society, their historical consciousness dissolves as the desire for the perpetuated present's immediacy becomes evermore desirable.² These dialectical notions of truth both occur through one's ideological engagement with society. This revealing of "truth" to the viewer reflects the societal opinion surrounding augmented reality; that is, it produces a landscape beyond reality to produce a new perspective.

Towards the end of *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord discusses the evolution of the spectacle's characteristics of preservation of materials and their ideologies, "which ultimately materialize an abstract ideal."³ The spectacle veils its illusory methods with socioculturally

¹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, (London: Rebel Press, 2005), 4.

² Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 50.

³ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 79.

mandated by a total ideological regime, seen by Debord as a dictatorship which materializes within the society that “has become what ideology already was.”⁴ When the illusion triumphs truth in its sacredness, there are no longer any boundaries between truth and falsity, or between the world and the self. Instead, the spectacle only creates further estrangement between individuals.⁵ In these societal landscapes, the individual can only see their own perspectives through the lens of the spectacle. Their own subjective truths become obscured by the distortion of the collective social consciousness into the idealism of the spectacle.⁶ As a society becomes immersed into the system of the spectacle, alienation prevents any of its individuals from recognizing the perspective of another and become “incapable of recognizing [their] own reality.”⁷ Under the influence of mandated ideologies, truth becomes nothing more than a vessel to prevent a re-collectivization of society’s trust in the subjective perspective.

Using Debord’s lens of spectacle and ideology, truth becomes a construct perpetuated by both the institution and the state. If truth can be seen as an illusion—as a spectacle—it can be just as easily manipulated, and at times dissolved, through the use of virtual reality to create interactive museum landscapes. How does virtual reality effectively shift the perspective of its user? How does simulation produce new ontological approaches, and how is this form of cultural accessibility simultaneously progressive and problematic? Ultimately, what is the role of museums within this new technology, and how is audience engagement altered within its digital matrix? Accessibility and the body become the main sites of interaction within museum

⁴ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 78-79.

⁵ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 79-80.

⁶ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 78.

⁷ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 79.

infrastructure, which will culminate within my argument through a case study of imagineNATIVE's collective project, 2167.

Before discussing the sociocultural value of virtual museums, it is integral to understand how ideologies within museum spaces have traditionally produced “truth” through their displays of material objects. For Vito Acconci, interior spaces are the opposite of exterior, whose ownership is given for common use rather than privately regulated by institutions. In the former, however, “[y]ou pay to belong to the community [...] that is accustomed to use the place. You pay for the fabrication of a past or of a future[...].”⁸ As an interior space, museums contain an imposed barrier that requires an entrance toll to view its fabricated spatiotemporal dynamics. This exclusivity authorizes “accustomed guests” temporary rental of the space, becoming tenants with restricted access to the contained “sacred” material cultural knowledge. This value is further attributed to security perimeters installed around artworks and historical objects, restricting the viewer to a pure visual/textual dialogic relationship with the objects. Experiences thus allude to exclusivity within the traditional museum space, providing permitted tenants a fabricated perception of the past and future.

Within the traditional museum space, “truth” is experienced through the fabrication of object relations, which impose their ideological, ritualistic use-value onto the viewer moving through the interior. Hilde Hein defines private as a “term of exclusion,” which she complicates by claiming that a private space can provide public services to its public outsiders: “[t]he public is sometimes an audience that takes part in an event and is bonded by that experience [producing a] cumulative energy.”⁹ The public/private dichotomy is simultaneously produced through both

⁸ W.J.T Mitchell, *Art and the Public Sphere* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 159;167.

⁹ Hilde S.Hein, *Public Art: Thinking Museums Differently* (Lanham: Altamira Press, 2006), 30-31.

the individual and public body's experience within space. This "psychic space" is part of the aforementioned social construction, which evokes the nature of the body, which is "neither – while also being both – the private or the public, self or other."¹⁰ Hein concludes that the co-dependency between the "private experience and public knowledge" is constituted "within a framework of conventional rules and practices," built by the public's trust in the institution.¹¹ This framework is defined by Acconci as what the public pays for, which legitimates the commodity-produced trust within these private/public institutions. Experience occurs when ideological value is encountered through bodily confrontation to produce a relational network between body, subject, and the object itself.

In these private institutional spaces, experience is consummatory– "you get what you pay for."¹² The viewer's gaze takes in the material object's imposed cultural value that is mandated by the institution. Altogether, truth itself is produced through the museum's segregation of the public from the private. The ideologically-charged realm of experience initiates when the body crosses the threshold after purchasing their entrance fare. However, it is important to note that these fabrications are inherently fictitious, as Hein illustrates: "Public mechanisms have always controlled "intimate" relations."¹³ The private realm (the museum's interior) is therefore an illusion built through a historicized conglomeration of objects. These intimate relations between body and object, body and space, and between bodies are thus interrupted in virtual reality. How can these aforementioned relations of experience be reproduced within? Moreover, can these

¹⁰ Helen Thornham, *Ethnographies of the Videogame: Gender, Narrative, and Praxis* (London: Routledge, 2013), 108.

¹¹ Hein, *Public Art*, 33.

¹² Hein, *Public Art*, 2.

¹³ Hein, *Public Art*, 32.

digital spaces dissolve these barriers? Where would they be placed, and how would they be accessed beyond physical space?

Within any imposed institutional framework, the visitor's body becomes what Burawoy describes as "the carriers and affect of social relations."¹⁴ These carriers are vessels whose ideological values are confronted by the imposed rules of society and institution as they encounter the valued material culture. The moment they cross the threshold, these carriers of ideological and cultural meanings inhabit the relational network created by the museum itself. As carriers, individuals produce affect through social relationships and situational encounters. Thus mystification, such as that surrounding truth within the aforementioned private sphere, is produced when the interactive process produces a gap between experience and reality.¹⁵ Within the museum-as-institution, the body is what produces, processes, and propagates the spectacle surrounding the private/public dichotomy, which further legitimizes the historical fabrication that is being sold by the museum as its own commodity. Therefore, it is the body that is the centre of the experience with "truth," and would therefore need to be translated into the world of the virtual reality museum.

For Acconci, virtual space obliterates the previously imposed private/public realms, as it "transports the public of the foreign into the private place of the home."¹⁶ This merging of private and public spatial experience therefore challenges the role of the public body as the carrier, as ideological values cannot be strictly imposed the moment one enters the virtual

¹⁴ Michael Burawoy and K. Von Holdt, "Homo Ludens vs. Homo Habitus: Burawoy Meets Bourdieu," in *Conversations with Bourdieu: The Johannesburg Moment* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012), 3-5.

¹⁵ Burawoy and Von Holdt, "Homo Ludens vs. Homo Habitus," 4.

¹⁶ Mitchell, *Art and the Public Sphere*, 166.

environment, the home of the artist's own ontological realm. Virtual reality creates isolated geographic spaces that are "cut off from its neighbours," and no longer a part of the private/public institutional dichotomy.¹⁷ How then is space made familiar to spectators at the level of virtual reality? How does the body's presence effect constructed space itself? For many ethnographers, the goal of virtual reality is to produce immersive experiences for what they deem the "cyber flaneur," whereby their interaction within the digital space would engender learning of heritage through explorations and encounters. These "user-centred interpretive environments" would need to produce an illusory space that would fully engage its audience with presented objects, as education is intrinsically tied to the symbiosis of illusion and immersion.¹⁸ Theorists Marcello Carrozzino and Massimo Bergamasco also conclude that the goal of virtual reality (and thus, its technological implication in museums) is to serve as a tool for communication which blends cultural accessibility with the modern entertainment industry to surround the viewer with "the belief of actually being in a virtual space."¹⁹ Therefore, virtual museum experiences appear first and foremost to be an individualized experience, whereby only through an immersive, educative environment can its technology be truly legitimized.

At the centre of the individual's experience is accessibility to material culture which George Lepouras and Costas Vassilakis argue is enhanced within the virtual environment. In virtual reality, objects that no longer exist, are difficult to preserve, or are in storage can now be made visible to an audience. These objects can be observed even from multiple viewpoints or even manipulated as the spectator directly interacts with objects and their history. Here,

¹⁷ Mitchell, *Art and the Public Sphere*, 166-168.

¹⁸ Natalie M. Underberg and Elayne Zorn, *Digital Ethnography: Anthropology, Narrative, and New Media* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 67-68.

¹⁹ Marcello Carrozzino and Massimo Bergamasco, "Beyond Virtual Museums: Experiencing Immersive Virtual Reality in Real Museums," *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 35, no.1 (2009): 452-53.

spectators learn by exploring and interacting with the floating object, magnifying details as well as disassembling and assembling them at will. To produce an affordable experience, Lepouras and Vassilakis speculate that 3D gaming environment technologies let users freely navigate virtual museums, “even in the location of their own home.”²⁰ Within this game-editing matrix, the museum could produce immersive activities that could trigger multisensorial cues, such as background music, narration, changing of light, as well as navigation tools.²¹

Virtual reality acts as an extension of the physical body and enacted through affective experience. Anthropologist Jenny Kidd argues that empathy is “key to learning potentials,” which is primarily instigated through first-person perspective, a “deepening technique” that permits the user emotional maturity during their exploration of a game’s environment, achieved through implemented, heightened dramatics that the player will inevitably encounter. Termed the “politics of captivation,” Kidd explains that these techniques are the product of “emotioneering” (also seen as “embodied meaning-making”), which are seen as effective tools to entice non-visitors of museums to engage within heritage-produced environments.²² Therefore, the manipulations of objects and captivating narratives will form an immersive engagement amongst museum collections through “edutainment,” or education through entertainment.²³ Returning to Acconci, it is important to think of the correlative increase between accessibility and privatization of experience, which are both mediated through the body as it is further distanced from the site of the museum and public engagement. Therefore, can virtual reality museums truly

²⁰ George Lepouras and Costas Vassilakis, “Virtual Museums for All: Employing Game Technology for Edutainment,” *Virtual Reality* 8, no.2 (2004): 96-97.

²¹ Lepouras and Vassilakis, “Virtual Museums for All,” 100-101.

²² Jennifer Kidd, “Gaming for Affect: Museum Online Games and the Embrace of Empathy,” *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 4, no.3 (2015): 417-420.

²³ Lepouras and Vassilakis, “Virtual Museums for All,” 97.

dissolve the public/private entanglement, or do they, through a user-centred experience, further fortify the private-experience between the subject and object? Does all truth-making (embodied meaning-making) occur between the captivated body and the object?

Virtually and physically, cultural accessibility continues to be mediated through a restrictive framework regulated by the museum-as-institution. Although implementing gaming technology into virtual reality can allow for an experience beyond traditional visual and textual sources, it is important to investigate Styliani's argument regarding virtual reality and the museum:

Virtual museums cannot and do not intend to replace the walled museums, [but] an extension of physical museums exhibition halls and the ubiquitous vehicle of the ideas, concepts and 'messages' of the real museum.²⁴

Note the author's complimentary use of "walls" and "real" within this statement. The virtual museum would serve solely as a virtual extension of the physical space, and the increase in accessibility would remain within the domain of the traditionally exclusive museum space. Therefore, what purpose would virtual reality serve, if only for emotionally captivating an audience into an individualized, hands-on experience with a museum's collection? Would it not further decontextualize a cultural object further as it merely becomes a game within the museum space, as it would treat the object as a private research investigation within a digital environment? For Ruth Phillips, this extension is the core issue surrounding Western institutions, which seek to give "spatial expressions an objective, concrete form to abstract schemes for the

²⁴ Lepouras and Vassilakis, "Virtual Museums for All," 105.

organization of knowledge.”²⁵ Therefore, space and knowledge are inalienable from each other within the institution, and thus, is fundamental for edutainment and the virtual environment.

Therefore, all institutional spaces become sites for the objectification of knowledge by captivating their audiences with a sense of exclusive access to exploring various cultures, with virtual reality only augmenting these experiences by making a literal game out of them. Therefore, issues surrounding privatization and accessibility occur not at the site of the physical, but at the level of the institutional framework’s contextualization of knowledge for its own consummatory benefits. Ultimately, is virtual reality truly an accessible technology, if it continues to be managed by the museum? In the context of the interactive object, curator Michael Ames attributes placing material culture behind glass cases to producing an “ethnographic present,” which he claims is the practice of institutionalizing reality.²⁶ Therefore, like the politics of captivity, the barrier holds the object captive within a politics of interpretation, these layers intertwined within an individual’s immersive experience. Therefore, these politics converge at the level of the museum’s authority over the interpretation of a culture’s history, which is removed from the presence of the public sphere (i.e: the interaction with bodies) and placed before an individual for a privatized experience mediated behind glass. Virtual reality, too, encases an object within the immersion goggles and behind the screen. All encounters with objects, therefore, are restricted to what is mediated by the museum.

To truly produce a public experience, one must move away from the object-centred experience and its attributed authority over “truth,” and “break the glass” to produce what Ames

²⁵ Ruth B. Phillips, *Museum Pieces: Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2014), 100.

²⁶ Michael Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006), 140-141.

terms the “living museum.”²⁷ What will truly separate institutionalization from accessibility is through the production of cultural narratives within the public sphere itself. For Canada’s 150th anniversary, imagineNATIVE, a collective of First Nations artists, produced a project titled *2167*, whose mandate was to look 150 years forward to create alternative realities of “Indigenous place in the future.”²⁸ In partnership with Toronto International Film Festival, Pinnguaq, and Initiative for Indigenous futures, participating artists Danis Goulet, Kent Monkman, Scott Benesiinaabandan and arts collective Postcommodity were asked to create their own respective interpretations of an Indigenous future. These virtual reality pieces create new landscapes that are shaped through the artists’ passions for science fiction and alternative realities that allow spectators to interact with Indigenous histories and cultural narratives.²⁹ Within these virtual environments, the artist becomes the active proponent of shaping new truths for possible futures outside of the colonial metanarrative that dominates the Canadian contemporary sociocultural landscape.

2167 uses short narratives of two to six minutes to immerse the spectator into imagined landscapes that challenge the idea that many Indigenous cultures remain static in the past and displayed in museums. The artists participating with *2167*, like museum edutainment, sought to use oral narrative techniques translated into virtual reality as an educational tool for its audience. imagineNATIVE’s art director, Jason Ryle, discussed in an interview with CBC how “[t]he artistic story creation in virtual reality offers a point of view and a presence of space and

²⁷ Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*, 141.

²⁸ Rhiannon Johnson, "ImagineNATIVE VR Imagines Indigenous Lives in 150 Years | CBC News," CBCnews, October 21, 2017. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/imagenative-virtual-reality-1.4365311>.

²⁹ “2167, An Indigenous VR Project.” Grunt Gallery. Accessed January 5th, 2022. <https://grunt.ca/exhibitions/2167-an-indigenous-vr-project/>.

environment that may be the closest yet to Indigenous oral storytelling practice.”³⁰ Through storytelling and artistic practice, these narratives converge layers of experience to transform the commodified object into a “living object” within an experience beyond the museum.³¹

For Ruth Phillips, contemporary art practice has turned toward privileging “micro-histories[...]over metanarratives,” the latter being those constructed through global Westernization, a byproduct of colonialism.³² Therefore, removing virtual reality as an extension of the museum space thus transfers its narrative power from a colonial framework toward the public field of culturally diverse voices. Within a virtual environment, these micro-histories become extensions of cultural knowledge, such as those shared through oral storytelling. Laurence Butet-Roch explores storytelling as a sensorial, interactive engagement where identity is embodied into the temporal landscape. In these virtual realms an intimate relationship between the audience and the orator forms as digital connectivity allows for a profound connection with the virtual landscape.³³ In this relationship, affect is produced as the immersed viewer becomes subjected to emotionally charged narratives.

Equipped with the headset, what affect can the story produce through the audience without the orator’s mediation of their gestures and reactions? The embodied interconnection between self and land is mobilized through the virtual reality headset which, like *2167*, can travel to different institutions, yet offer the same experience. This adaptable framework and simple set-up permits accessibility to a wider audience and permits a more subjective experience in its

³⁰ Johnson, “ImagineNATIVE.”

³¹ Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*, 144.

³² Phillips, *Museum Pieces*, 105.

³³ Laurence Butet-Roch, “Virtual Aamjiwnaang: Indigenous Interactive Storytelling,” (M.A Research Paper, University of British Columbia, 2008), 21.

environment. Jeff Corntassel sees that the fundamental goal of storytelling is to educate the community through “truth-telling.” These accessible narratives provide “the ability to speak in one's own voice” beyond those imposed by the dominating nation-states and mediated by the museum.³⁴

Underlying all “truth-tellings” is voice, which fundamentally becomes the authoritative framework that dominates bodily experience. Indigenous-led projects like *2167* seek to look forward into the future, using their voices as forms of resistance to colonization “[by] documenting [ones] reality.”³⁵ *2167* lies within the participating artists’ varying depictions of the future, or what Ryle describes as didactic teachings on “how to live today for a better future,”³⁶ by using the power of imagination as an engaging learning experience. This mode of communication utilizes the imagination rather than the material commodity museums seek to virtualize; storytelling thus expands upon and enlivens those who remain frozen behind glass within the ethnographic museum. As a teaching tool which allows for simultaneous communication, entertainment, and experience beyond the walls of the museum, virtual reality narratives thus become forms of public art, further complicating the dynamics between the public body and the individual’s private modes of experience.

Regarding the affects of edutainment, author Elizabeth LaPensee argues that diverse cultural worldviews produced in Indigenous digital environments allows for an enduring cultural presence, which reflects both survivance and self-determination to their viewing audience.³⁷

³⁴ Jeff Corntassel, Chaw-Win-Is, and T’Lakwadzi, “Indigenous Storytelling, Truth-telling, and Community Approaches to Reconciliation,” *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 35, no.1 (2009): 145-146.

³⁵ Corntassel, Chaw-Win-Is, and T’Lakwadzi, “Indigenous Storytelling,” 147.

³⁶ Johnson, “ImagineNATIVE.”

³⁷ Elizabeth LaPensee, “Games as Enduring Presence,” *Public* 27, no.54 (December 2016): 184-185.

Termed the “hyperpresent now,” Indigenous oral traditions are now interconnected with digital mediums to communicate beyond the “ethnographic present” and re-engage Indigenous presence into the fabric of the public sphere. As discussed, bodies are neither public nor private until they engage within a space; therefore, the public sphere is described by Acconci as an individual’s engagement within the “presence of other bodies,”³⁸ becoming an analogue for diverse modes of communication and inclusivity. Public space is “giving up the home” and immersing oneself into the circulation routes of a community’s social fabric and its “multiple voices” which frame bodily experiences.³⁹ Therefore, enduring presence occurs through voice that is visually activated within a virtual environment; it is the blend between the experiential exhibition, immersive gaming, and oral storytelling. It is an entangled environment of art and architecture beyond the Western imposed duality of the private and public, as the body is the ultimate mediator of experience.

Public art such as *2167* thus functions at the level of the social, re-engaging with the power relations that reside in all objects, as stressed by Appadurai.⁴⁰ Therefore, the use of oral narrative moves virtual reality away from museum curators and institutional frameworks, a power shift that allows First Nations to reconstruct the histories surrounding their intangible heritage interwoven into material culture, “investing [these narratives] with the authority and privilege of those currently possessing it, who then impose on it their own histories.”⁴¹

Ultimately, the issue with virtual reality museums is that they are limited as an extension of their physical counterparts, thus maintaining authority over a collection’s history to impose their own

³⁸ Mitchell, *Art and the Public Sphere*, 167.

³⁹ Mitchell, *Art and the Public Sphere*, 168-169.

⁴⁰ Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*, 144.

⁴¹ Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*, 144.

modes of communication. Embedding cultural narratives into virtual forms of public art thus aids in answering the reoccurring inquiry of “how might Indigenous specificity be embedded in shared platforms that are therefore central to all of our digital lives? These narratives must be embedded into the public sphere in order to be communicated effectively.

Rosalyn Deutsche argues that public art is “art plus function,” which inhabits the social fabric to engage within its public body. To complicate matters, Deutsche mentions that these works “rapidly leave the environment of art to enter the realm of artifacts,”⁴² which is essential in understanding virtual reality’s productive role of accessibility within a public. Therefore, public art alters the “ideologies of space”⁴³ which it occupies, similarly to how oral narrative temporarily embeds itself into the audience’s environment; both therefore interact within the social environments they occupy. As a mobile technology for ⁴⁴travelling exhibitions, virtual reality, too, can alter the environments it occupies by imposing a new perspective into the public sphere. Although not site-specific like traditional public artworks, *2167* engages with the public body by functioning as alternative perspectives, interacting and intervening with the complex set of cultural networks that simultaneously co-exist within the present. Therefore, the virtual reality headset unveils the layers of existence that lurk beneath the Western imposed metanarrative that segregates existence into the public and private.

Virtual reality’s role is to be an extension of varying ontologies that are accessible to the public. This technology moves away from the private realm’s authoritative decontextualization

⁴² Mitchell, *Art and the Public Sphere*, 163.

⁴³ Mitchell, *Art and the Public Sphere*, 159-160.

⁴⁴ Michelle Raheja, “Imagining Indigenous Digital Futures: An Afterword,” *Studies in American Indian Literature* 29, no.1 (2017): 173.

of material culture and takes back control over their own lives.⁴⁵ Virtual reality reinstates truth as subjective, where the object's authenticity becomes tied to the culture's ideology rather than that imposed by the institution that once housed them. Using the technological toolkit of gaming engines, virtual reality allows for traditional narratives to be accessible through their reproductions beyond the oral medium. Although virtual reality reproduces the museum object, it does not extend its presence beyond its interior; rather, it augments the audience's captivation of the represented ethnographic authenticity and value imposed upon the exhibited object. Therefore, virtual reality remains entangled within the visual spectacle, permitting the audience's access to the "magical realism" surrounding the museum's objectification of the object's history.⁴⁶ Within the museum space, the audience's experience isolates an object to produce a private encounter, rather than being immersed within a communal narrative activated by the orator's voice. So long as the private experience remains in the interior space, the object's spectacle remains influential.

Malcom Miles summarizes the museum experience when he says "[a]ll history is, after all, invention. The stories change because they are our subjective impressions[...]Perhaps art can help us create places for people out of public spaces."⁴⁷ Virtual reality can extend from the material toward the conceptual by embracing narratives that reanimate the intangible nature of cultural objects. Therefore, *2167* provides multiple subjective perspectives toward historical perspectives made by the present, transferring power from an "official" history to a "people's history," created through both the daily experience and encounters with ordinary objects.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*, 146.

⁴⁶ Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*, 145.

⁴⁷ Malcom Miles, *Art for Public Spaces: Critical Essays* (Winchester: Winchester School of Art Press, 1989), 212;220.

⁴⁸ Hein, *Public Art*, 18.

Therefore, immersion should transform the viewer into an active listener engaged within the animated narrative than into a consumer of the object's aesthetic and "cultural" value. However, if public art is to reflect subjective attentions, then narratives, too, are ambiguous and open to interpretation. Rather than submit to an objectified view, narratives, like art, produce multidimensional experiences framed by a sensorial and interpretive experience.⁴⁹

At the moment of encounter, total ideology is the mediator between the body and its surroundings, alienating the subject from their environment. Contrariwise, virtual spaces immerse the subject into its interconnected private and public spheres: here, the spectator's body becomes totally immersed in the ideologies. The illusion is that of the spectacle, whereby objects are objectified to produce a sacredness that coincides with the exclusivity of the museum's private, consummatory realm. Within the museum, virtual reality becomes merely another tool to propagate and further make a spectacle out of exhibited objects, as they are further decontextualized to fit into an individualized, immersive experience. Therefore the notion of "truth-telling" comes not through an individual's narrative, but from the source communities' production of their own respective narratives. It's time to use virtual reality to see through the imposed institutional aura into "truth-tellings" evoked through the plethora of subjective worldviews. If virtual technology can produce limitless forms of experiences that can extend beyond the museum's authoritative barrier, then what role do museums have in this virtual future?

⁴⁹ Hein, *Public Art*, 112.

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Nathan Clark is a first year Masters of Art History in Critical Curatorial Studies at the University of British Columbia, where they also received their Bachelors in Art History and Museum Anthropology. Nathan's research focus is on the phenomenology and narrative poetics of virtual reality and digital immersive installations and the importance of embodied, affective relations between the viewer and the work of art. They also research digital queerscapes and the disembodiment of users within cyberspaces, and how artists are responding to this "Wild West" of new mediums and artistic processes. The body is the primary point of concern in understanding how we interact with this new "ontological turn."

In their emerging curatorial practice, Nathan is interested in modes of allyship between queer curating and collaborative work with Indigenous and minoritarian artists as they navigate representing their ontological frameworks in the exhibition space. How do immersive and digital exhibitions illustrate the multiplicities of subjective truths, and how can this be translated to the viewer? Through the lens of queer phenomenology, they focus on how immersive works' meanings are entangled in a network of complex layered relations and realities.