

Immersive Exhibition: Its Theoretical Development, Its Audiences and the Re-discovery of Modern Art Exhibition

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Abstract: As an innovative form of art exhibition, immersive exhibitions have gained popularity all over the world in recent years. Such exhibitions are not only a departure from traditional gallery displays but also lead to different modalities of visiting cultural sites. One distinguishable tendency, one that could be detected in the curatorial strategies of most contemporary exhibitions, is the increasing emphasis put on the aesthetic effect that exhibitions could offer. Correspondingly, the relationship between the visitors and the artworks is changed through the ways visitors situate and perform their bodies within such exhibitions. Unlike traditional exhibitions, immersive exhibitions allow visitors to wander more freely and interact with the settings more engagingly. This essay analyses 1) the common features of immersive exhibitions and the more general theories behind the curatorial principles; 2) the visitor's motivation for visiting, their behaviors during visiting, and how they build their self-image on social media with the aid of immersive exhibitions; 3) the effect and significance of immersive exhibitions in democratizing art and reconsidering the boundary of art. Drawing from the above-mentioned points, some intriguing questions that concern broader aspects within the discipline are also noteworthy.

Keywords: Immersive Exhibition, Museum, Aesthetic Effect

1. Introduction

Considering that 'immersive exhibition' could be suggesting a relatively wide range of examples that are slightly different in curatorial strategies and the claimed effects, this essay makes discussions one of the popular types of immersive exhibition, exemplified by Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience or 'Monet & Friends' Immersive Light and Shadow Exhibition. This section elaborates on the pre-set conception from the gallery's perspective, the principles and theories in a wider context that give shape to this form of exhibition, and some common grounds in curatorial strategies and display settings.

What is core to the conception of immersive exhibitions is intuitively visible in the elements of their publicity and advertisement. The poster slogans of these exhibitions usually label the 'multi-sensory experience of immersion'; and, whether through textual or visual highlighting, they mention commonly the usage of technology, especially light effects, to help realize the immersive experience. In essence, the exhibitions are designed to reach the illusion that the viewers are transmitted and integrated into another specific time and space, a world experienced by the artists that have been

reconstructed. The collaboration of art and technology and the brand-new way of presenting masterpieces have sparked increasing interest among the public.

While the various curatorial strategies of such exhibitions provide the audience with multi-layered immersive experiences, they also reflect the principles that explain the effectiveness of those strategies in creating illusions and enhancing engagement. In both Van Gogh and Monet's exhibitions, the projection of the artists' representative works usually takes up a significant volume of gallery space. Unlike the artworks themselves – static and with subtle details that require close observation – the projections are dynamic and usually enlarged, realized through man-made control that was unavailable during the artists' time. This fleeting nature of the technological version of artworks allows the works and the exhibitions to embrace more possibilities. In Van Gogh's case, the projections – surrounding the visitors in a dark, wraparound space – are of the same work of art (such as *Starry Night*) or works with similar themes like the sunflowers, which is impossible for the authentic work. The audiences are expected to sit or wander amidst the light-and-shadow projections. While in traditional exhibitions the viewers can only crowd in front of the piece of work and glimpse it from a random perspective, the immersive exhibition enables the viewers to be fully 'wrapped' by artwork and to look closely at the subtle details as long as they are willing to. Apart from the projections that fill up the room, immersive exhibitions usually offer installations that originated from artists' representative works. These installations are integrated into a unified and coherent setting where the sceneries that the artist experienced when creating those masterpieces are represented. To augment the sense of immersion, the gallery space is rendered as a set design – one with multiple-sensory coherency. One compelling case is the sea of sunflowers in Van Gogh's exhibition. The audience not only can see and touch the real sunflower – three-dimensional solids rather than planar symbols – but, more significantly, they can also smell the fragrance, hear the sound of the wind, and even feel the warmth of sunshine [1]. As a result, the audience's sense of 'pseudo-presence' in what the artist himself was feeling when painting the masterpieces can be maximized through the deliberate design that engages with all the sensory organs.

Compared with virtual reality, which restricts the illusionistic view to be experienced by only one user, immersive exhibitions enable shared experiences and interactions between viewers.

Immersive exhibitions usually choose to recreate based on those iconic artworks of famous artists. Elements from iconic artworks are easily adapted and are visually recognizable which requires minimal effort for the viewer to understand [2]. Taking Van Gogh's and Monet's immersive exhibitions, for example, another aspect of content choosing is the artistic style. Van Gogh frequently depicted natural scenes with striking brushstrokes and vibrant colors, which makes his artwork visually enjoyable and widely engaging [3]. The universality of appreciating Van Gogh's works – without needing to understand thoroughly a specific culture or profound knowledge about art history – is key to the commercial success of this widespread exhibition. Monet's impressionism style is intrinsically suitable for strategies of immersive exhibitions. Similar to Van Gogh, the main subject of his painting is natural elements that demand 'no specificity of location' nor 'personal connection' [4]. His loose brushstrokes, emphasis on light effect, and delicate color have enough visual appeal that his artwork can be well-accepted even by the amateur. To strike a chord with the general public worldwide, the subject of immersive exhibitions has to be easily approachable and universally appreciable.

These strategies allow the audience to take the initiative in experiencing, understanding, and embodying a story through the displayed objects, rather than passively accepting what is written on the labels [1, 4]. Decentralizing the textual version of information, immersive exhibitions visualize and materialize the information embedded in the works which allow the audience to stylize their experience and interpretation. This form of the connecting viewer to the artworks integrates narrative and meanings into gallery space, and also allows the audiences' emotions to be attached to the context.

Therefore, the right of interpretation transfers from the 'authority' – the museum or the professionals - to the general public with more flexibility and possibility. While, in terms of educating the public, a museum displaying values 'story-telling' of an object over the object itself, immersive exhibitions seem to be more effective in realizing such aim [5].

2. Relative Ideas in Cultural Context

The emergence and popularity of immersive exhibitions reflect and are supported by, the tendencies in a wider cultural context. This section explores the tendency of contemporary art, the expected functions of cultural institutions such as museums, and the importance of experience (an especially visual one) in museum visiting.

Interaction and involvement of the audience are crucial elements and goals of contemporary art. Contrary to the traditional display of art objects, where focuses are placed on the authentic works themselves, contemporary art underlines the relation between art and its public. In immersive exhibitions, the definite boundaries between artwork and space as well as art and visitors are blurred, which conforms to the characteristics of contemporary art. Meanwhile, scholar suggests that the cultural heritage system is meant to provide 'meaningful and pleasant experiences in a very limited amount of time' rather than expecting in-depth, long-period learning. Consequently, art spaces are required to create a setting in which visitors can instantly immerse themselves and therefore access the information more engagingly. In addition, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett regards 'mobility' as the defining characteristic of the museum, from which we can infer the importance of the act of 'moving in the art space' for visiting [6]. This point leads to another relative idea in discussing immersive exhibitions: object-body relations. Although this essay will not have an in-depth discussion around this idea, it is still worthy of mentioning since the modalities of body movement, according to Chris Otter, are decisive in delimiting visuality and visual experience. Immersive exhibitions, on the one hand, provide cultural experiences with multiple senses and novel feelings; on the other hand, it also guarantees quality visual experiences, for sight is the sense that is 'most closely allied with reason' [7].

3. Modalities and Behaviors of Viewing Immersive Exhibitions

One interesting phenomenon in immersive exhibitions is the way visitors interact with art, or, how they perceive and move their bodies within the carefully designed space. The modality of the act of 'walking' in an immersive exhibition is unprecedented. Nancy Forgione regards walking as 'a coherent intertwining of body, mind, vision' and 'the exploitation of this triad of faculties', which makes clear the link between walking and thinking [8]. It is very common to expect visitors to pose deliberately in such exhibitions: they interact with the properties, fit themselves in the installations, or are even prepared with matching outfits. Their walking routes and body movements become varied and irregular compared with those in traditional museums. Bodily interactions are not sufficient for most people – after adjusting their bodies to an appropriate position and posture, they take photos that capture their presence and interaction with the exhibition. Then, a great number of visitors would post these photos on social media – after selecting and beautifying them, the photos would be composed with layouts and companies with texts after deliberate thoughts.

Combined with the common templates of exhibition settings, visitors adjust their bodies in certain patterns to help to meet their expectations. Three frequently-appeared types of setting templates are 1) projections of representative works that fill the entire room; 2) domestic settings that resemble the artist's room or studio; 3) solid installations such as artificial landscape, usually including recognizable symbols from the artist's work. Visitors expect to embody certain messages in their photos by integrating themselves into the settings with different postures respectively. In the

projection-filled room, visitors ensure the integrity and legibility of the content of the projection, while their presence – usually in the form of silhouette – is the core of the image. In the resemblance of an artist's studio or room, various types of furniture and props are condensed into one single room, which both reduces the expense of set-up and facilitates the audience's need of experiencing more scenarios in a shorter walking time. Visitors' postures are more of a narrative one, where they are staging as if they were an artist or even the artist. When it comes to the installations, such as Monet's garden with bridge and waterlilies, visitors usually aim at acting as if they were actually in the painted scenery – they try to situate themselves in the artwork. This indicates their desire of being captured in a work with high artistic value, which is passed on to the audience through their integrity to the installations. Based on the above-mentioned, it can be summarised that visitors aim at obtaining aesthetic values and artistic connections from integrating themselves into various settings, and, subsequently, recording in the form of photography.

What is largely affected by physical movements is the 'visual', an indispensable mediator between walking and thinking. The manifestation of 'visual experience', in this case, study, is photography. Mechanisms of photo-taking in tourism could be referenced, as Forgione points out the similarities between museum visiting and tourism. In both situations, similar modalities can be easily observed, and the setting of immersive exhibitions (unlike in traditional museums where objects are displayed in rigid sequence) is particularly akin to tourist sites. In Monet's exhibition, the use of bridge and lakeside botany – backgrounded with Monet's iconic paintings of water lilies – composes a 'natural landscape' that simultaneously functions as a site to visit and adds artistic value achieved by artificial means. Since she places 'visual' as the center of tourism, can and people use the image as a sort of experience collection, indicating their presence at different sites. Recently, the focus of such images, whether in tourism or exhibition-visiting, has shifted from 'capturing the extraordinary' to 'producing social relations, which will be discussed in terms of self-image and social media [8].

In essence, in immersive exhibitions, facilitated by innovative curatorial strategies, the visitors take the initiative of stylizing their visiting routes or their body movements within the space; as result, their visual experiences become various and personalized [9, 10]. Correspondingly, what the audience expects to gain in immersive exhibitions is significantly different from those in traditional exhibitions – or, at least, the didactic or informational goal traditional exhibitions envisage.

4. Discussions

As mentioned earlier, many visitors of immersive exhibitions tend to produce staged photos attached to wanted values, and this is, this article argues, probably one of the most decisive motivations for a contemporary audience to pay a visit to immersive exhibitions. Although visitors also take photos in traditional exhibitions, this phenomenon is exceptionally striking in immersive exhibitions [11]. It has to be admitted that producing eye-catching photos is, of course, not the only reason why people pay a visit to immersive exhibitions, but this factor can best reflect the departure from past exhibitions. Since this motivation largely focuses on the photos taken and processed to be posted on social media, it cannot be discussed without analyzing the output. The ultimate goal of such behavior is the construction and enrichment of self-image - to be more specific, the self-image shown on social media where the users take full control in deciding what values are added to their personas [12, 13].

As the main medium in this self-staging process, certain qualities of the photograph are key to its effectiveness. One aspect that closely relates to photography is communication, for a picture is a kind of message that functions in the communication process [14]. Without entirely relying on textual accompaniment to communicate the information, photos provide easier access for a wider audience to one's home page on the Internet. In terms of the information embedded, when detaching a photograph from its original context – the immersive exhibition or the artistic realm – the image could be attributed with new meanings and interpreted from new aspects, which may not exist from the

outset. The malleability of the photograph makes it more efficient in giving its protagonist enough power of stylising their digital identity more flexibly and creatively. This property not only allows the audience of immersive exhibitions to generate extra ideas after a series of processing the photos – shooting, cropping, choosing filters, adjusting layouts, adding texts, etc. It also leaves space for other people to imagine what qualities the image owner might have without fixed labels. These qualities of photographs meet the needs of the audience of immersive exhibition.

Given that photos can communicate and facilitate the construction of self-image, social media serves as the major platform where these photos rest. The idea that social media communicate experiences and identities explains why people use it as one of the most effective tools for building self-image [15]. Francois Soulages present the idea of 'photographic cogito', which links 'the act of photography with an indication of one's presence and 'emphases one's existence' [16]. As proof of the image owner's life experience, these interesting photos are metaphors of their owner's quality of life that is worth experiencing and envying [17]. That is to say, the posted photos and the commutated values are the testimony and manifestation of various sides of their owner's self-image. This process of stylizing or self-designing, whose impression left to others is largely in the control of the photo owner, is justified or objectified by rendering the protagonist in a perspective from the bystanders. People do so to reduce the sense of artificial and narcissism brought by staged photos, as well as to pretend as if they are naturally fitted in this setting. Combined with the flexibility of interpreting photos, this naturalizing process proves that such cultural experience is common in the photo owner's daily life, and, consequently, labels him/her with both artistic tastes and attractive appearances.

Notably, while their posts of museum visiting may receive countless likes – whether, for their artistic taste, aesthetically pleasing photos, or the content of the exhibition itself – most of them get to know the showcase of the exhibitions from similar posts on social media. Sometimes the popularity of a museum or exhibition is led by celebrities who have paid visits and, more influentially, have taken photos and posted them on their account with hashtags and site-marking. By 'celebrities', also includes 'internet celebrity, which has a much lower requirement but has a competitive influence on social media users. It is suggested that people post their selfies – or, in another word, photos with their deliberate presence – on social media to compete with photos of others. Visitors want to be outstanding among the endless post-exhibition photo dumps. It will be of great pride if they are commented to be 'looking like a celebrity' or even 'excessing the photos of celebrity'.

Powered by the desire for creating a self-image on social media, people usually pay a visit to immersive exhibitions with expectations of 'outputting useable photos' – photos that are, generally, more about indicating the values they have than carrying on the artistic information embedded in the exhibitions. Meanwhile, the characteristic layout and display of immersive exhibitions have also formed a sort of template that effectively caters to the audience's needs for photo-taking.

5. Effect and Significance

This newly emerged form of the exhibition offers the audience unprecedented experiences of interacting with art within the art space, and, in terms of disciplinary significance, it challenges the tradition in various dimensions.

Compared with traditional modes of viewing art, immersive exhibitions, to some extent, offer the audience better experiences. Generally, visitors would find the museum space crowded and disillusioning, where they need to 'negotiate sightlines amidst other bodies and glimpse out of the corner of one's eye' [18]. While in traditional exhibitions, artworks are required to be viewed from certain fixed positions, visitors may frown especially in front of worldly famous works – the more famous the work is, the more difficult it is for the viewer to look at it closely. Apart from this, most of the museum spaces are stuffed with a great number of works where the viewer's attention and contemplation about one single piece of work can only be focused in a small area and on a shallow

level [19, 20]. Their experience and impression of artwork, an artist, or a theme are therefore segmented and transient. On the contrary, immersive exhibitions use projections to fill the entire room with pieces of artwork and build vivid installations (such as sunflowers or waterlilies) so that the painted scenes can jump out of the planar world. Triggering all senses, such multisensory immersion extends beyond the physical entities of art and into the entire art space.

The emphasis on experience and the accessibility for the general public mark that the emphasizing value of artworks and exhibitions has partly changed. The prioritized focus shifts from the original art objects that bear with the authentic 'aura' to the sensationalism that the digitalized version of art pursues and achieves. Technological strategy is largely what makes the artworks more accessible, whether in terms of time-space or the requirement of professional knowledge. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes the participants of multisensory activity as 'being fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity [21]. This theory lays the foundation for the democratizing effect of immersive exhibitions. As he puts out, for non-specialized visitors, information delivered through sensorial feedback is more comprehensive [21]. Without needing the actual, physical presence of the original art objects, immersive exhibitions have the potential of juxtaposing artworks in a freer manner. Particularly in the age of COVID-19, this form of art display weakens the inconvenience of travel restrictions. In other words, immersive exhibition and art experience disrupt the art-centered viewership of traditional museum experience and place the feeling and experience of the viewer – the consumer of experience rather than the object – at the highest priority. This shift marks the process of de-sacralization of cultural institutions and the democratization of the previously high art.

Immersive exhibitions also blur or even break the boundaries between several subjects within the museum. While the viewers integrate themselves into the settings that resemble the scenes in the artworks, they become simultaneously the second-hand agency of art creation and the protagonist in artworks. This is not merely a group photo with the original artworks, but, more importantly, a recreation of art – usually in the form of elegantly staged photographs – based on the iconic imagery of masterpieces. The general public participates in this process of art creation with nearly no specialized requirements. Besides, the extension of the artwork into three-dimensional space challenges the clear boundary between art objects and art space. In this sense, art space no longer functions as merely the carrier of objects but becomes an indispensable part of art. To some extent, in immersive exhibitions, space and objects form a coherent work of art that creates the illusionistic effect of the presence in the artist's world. This emergence of the art object and art space further implies a symbolization of artworks. The complete set of artificial scenery is not derived solely from one artwork; rather, it contains various elements – individually representative and immediately recognizable – from different artworks of the artist to build an inclusive setting. Art symbols and elements are extracted from the artworks as abstract imagery and then re-applied to other mediums. The main concern of immersive exhibitions is the question of integrity and authenticity. Some scholars criticize immersive exhibitions for their emphasis on 'aesthetic adaptation' over 'authentic display'. The weakening of the authenticity of the original works is a key issue immersive exhibitions are facing. Even if the original works are hung up on the gallery walls, viewers may still be unavoidably distracted and interfered with by various kinds of technological effects. Cody Delistraty describes immersive exhibitions as 'an empty mimicry of the original work' that ceases to focus on the integrity of the artist's original ideas and the artwork itself. For in immersive exhibitions, the viewers are only required 'ambiguous attentions', whether they can deliver effectively and whether they can offer valuable information about art become problems to be further discussed. If they mainly focus on experiences or sensorial information rather than professional knowledge, are they qualified in being art exhibitions? As Matt Stromberg stated, 'does it matter if the general public doesn't get her art in the way that curators and experts think they should?' Rob

Horning even questions the actual value of immersive exhibitions – whether they are offering 'art' or not.

6. Conclusion

Although keep gaining popularity in recent years, there have been criticism and challenging voices on immersive exhibitions. Whereas technology, such as light effect or simulated fragrance, plays a crucial role in creating an illusionistic presence, it may also disturb the visiting experience. The looping, non-stop technological effects could cause sensorial fatigue and distract the viewer from the original artworks. Also, it is not that easy to balance between 'an interesting storyline' and 'a pile of dazzling images'. It is rather another detour to the authenticity of art in modern times.

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