

The Immersive Clash of Painting and Video

Julian Stallabrass

'The Immersive Clash of Painting and Video', *Vision* (Istanbul), no. 4, special issue: Can You Believe What You See?, January 2025, pp. 44-65.

Childhood readers of CS Lewis may remember the moment in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* when, as Edmund, Lucy and Eustace are looking at a painting of an old ship at sea, it seems to become animated, and they hear the churning of the waves and the creaking of timbers. They wonder whether this is mere fancy until a splash of seawater breaks through the frame, drenching them. This episode is the prelude to the children being drawn into the world of the picture. The same imaginative impulse is at play in a series of exhibitions which seek to animate painting, provide it with a soundtrack, and make of it an environment that viewers can inhabit. The smack of cold water leaves the children breathless, says Lewis, and this too seems to be a common aspiration of these displays which attempt to fill their viewers with a bodily felt sense of awe.

'The World Around Us', a room in one of these exhibitions, *Frameless*, shows an animation of Rembrandt's *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, accompanied by a very loud soundtrack of the storm and (predictably perhaps) the music of Wagner. The storm suddenly breaks upon the boat, waves churn, and lightning splits the sky. Yet the vessel remains curiously static, except for a single piece of loose rigging blowing repetitively in the wind. Despite or because of such striving for effect, the feeling of manipulation, of the viewer as much of the scene, is never far away. Many paintings themselves are hardly innocent of calculation, being designed to ensnare the viewer and to inculcate particular thoughts, emotions, and experiences. So, we may ask: why is this feeling of manipulation more apparent when inhabiting such displays than when looking at a painting hung on a wall? Is it more than the novelty of this mode of display?



TV arts programmes have a long-established set of conventions when showing paintings, in which the camera typically tracks slowly across the image, and zooms in (or more rarely, out), while an atmospheric soundtrack evokes some well-worn zeitgeist. The manipulation here is obvious: music and sound effects more than imply the appropriate emotional response, while the

camera movements enforce particular acts of attention. In room-sized displays, however, these techniques have become much more elaborate.

In recent years, wealthy cities around the world have seen many immersive video-painting displays as a subset of various lucrative hi-tech environments using multi-media and interactive elements which viewers step into and are surrounded by. The general term for these is ‘immersive art’, a loose shorthand—of use especially as a marketing term—which suggests an enveloping and fluidly mobile environment which acts to absorbing and perhaps hypnotic effect. When turned to thinking about precedents or even traditions, the term swiftly becomes so capacious as to make little analytical sense. Such accounts take in cave painting, much installation and environmental art, and contemporary artists as diverse as Bruce Nauman, Yayoi Kusama and Gustav Metzger.¹ And there is little reason not to add to the roll call many multi-screen video installations, room-sized transformations of space by, say, Duchamp or El Lissitzky, the painted panoramas of the nineteenth century, Versailles’ La Galerie des Glaces, medieval tapestry cycles seen by flickering candle- and fire-light, and the decoration of cathedrals illumined by stained-glass windows.

Here I want to focus specifically on the bringing together of painting and video. Four contrasting displays recently on show in London—two devoted to single artists, Dalí and Hockney, *Frameless* (an ambitious attempt to explore the meeting of the two media), and a single work in a cycle of free displays at a media space outside Tottenham Court Road station—suggest ways into an analysis of this meeting.

Cyborg Dalí

Dalí Cybernetics: The Immersive Experience, shown at The Boiler House off Brick Lane, focuses on the artist’s engagement with the frontiers of science, alongside his abiding interest in Catholicism and immortality, to give a vision of his art as envisaging and even presaging the melding of human and angel. It is an ambition that shares much with the life-extension, technological rejuvenation and extropian fantasies of many among the super-rich today. Dalí made no secret of his erotic obsession with money, and in the short film shown to introduce the display, we see old ‘Avida Dollars’ (in Breton’s anagram) showered with notes and coins.

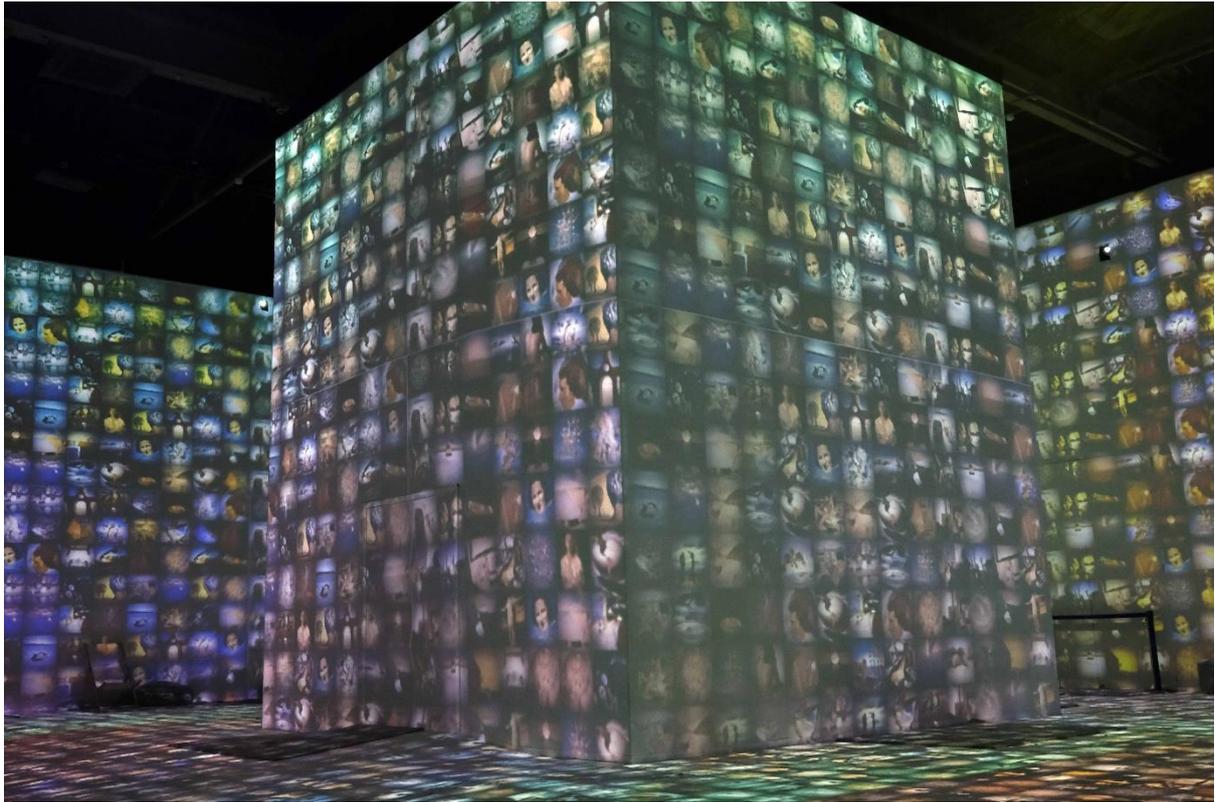
Visitors enter the main viewing space, a room surrounding a large cube onto which images are projected, as well as onto the walls and the floor. In a 35-minute cycle, Dalí’s work is presented in distinct sections which include his engagement with nuclear physics, quantum physics, DNA, artificial intelligence, the fourth dimension and ‘sacred geometry’. In the dual adoration of the artist and the strange universe that he explored, there is an educative and propagandistic urge. Each section is prefaced with texts which slowly unfurl to indicate the depth of their import. These are often mystical and mystifying: one example, ‘The double helix of DNA fascinates Dalí. Spirals that transmit genetic legacy, curves where God transmits his immortality.’

¹ For an example of such an account, see Eddy Frankel, ‘The Eye-popping History of Immersive Art in London’, *Time Out*, 6 October 2022.



From deckchairs and bean bags, viewers look up at the energetic and sometimes frenetic, animation of Dalí's work. Diverse techniques are used: animating elements from the paintings so that elephants on immensely long and spindly legs stalk across the walls, or (in a dream of Gala's) a growling tiger leaps from a pomegranate; the portentously slow zooming in and out of works indicate the required act of attention. In the quantum-theory section, motes—dust or atoms—wander across the screens to the sound of a tinkling piano. Here the extreme weirdness of advanced physics, to which many Surrealists were attracted, is flattened into a calming, mollifying drift of images to similarly conventional music.² In the AI section, forms swirl, rotate and throb (in a manner not unlike that of Refik Anadol's work). Following Dalí's interest in creating 3D paintings, the section on the anaglyph requires the viewer to put on coloured 3D glasses to see various bodily parts and simple graphical shapes loom into the space. Like the loose rigging on Rembrandt's boat, these animations are often disappointingly localised and crude.

² See Gavin Parkinson, *Surrealism, Art, and Modern Science: Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, Epistemology*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2008.



While each episode has a particular character, the repeated mode is to put paintings into continual movement across the projection environment so that elements drift, float, rotate and transform. Like a TV advertisement set in a sea of soap, the display strains to produce brash, attention-grabbing effects, which include rapid changes of colour and lighting levels, flashing and flickering images, and a proliferation of images shown in little squares across the space. The aim is to produce by the number and speed of passing images a sublime physical and mental overload, an outpouring of data that signals the fertility of the artist's mind. The bean bags and deck chairs are a form of anchoring in this disorienting and sometimes dizzying environment.

We really enter *Voyage of the Damn Treader* territory with the final display which uses VR, and is not played on a loop but has a definite start, progression and finish, at which point viewers are instructed to leave the room. Wearing a VR helmet, you are guided into the space to stand on the deck of a ship as it sets out on a voyage. The ship is a mix of ancient and modern technologies, with its sail, engine-room vents, and a figurehead that faces backwards to regard the viewers. Other people in the space appear as floating deep-sea diving helmets of the kind that Dalí nearly suffocated in during a stunt for the opening in London of the International Exhibition of Surrealism in 1936. Your body is invisible except for floating hands, rendered intricately in bronze, which follow your movements.

The forward motion of the ship is convincingly rendered, as the viewer looks across the deck, up to the sky, or through portholes in the floor to the passing sea floor below. The ship passes in turn through the sea, the desert, and the sky. Familiar pieces of Dalí's iconography appear—giant

ants, long-legged elephants, and so on, while at one point a storm approaches the ship, and lightning strikes the deck; at another, a colossal lobster leaps over it.

Since the effect can be disorienting, viewers may cling with their bronze hands onto the ship's railing, an actual rail that borders the room. It is an appealing effect, even if the registration between the VR rail and the metal one is slightly off. There are other limited moments of interaction: visitors can brush their fingers across the slats of the ship's ventilation ducts, which sound notes like a piano. Or they can put their hands or heads into an egg-like structure on the deck which responds by playing clips of Dalí speaking. Towards the end of the journey, in an effective piece of animation, the egg transforms into a gigantic clock that towers above the viewer, with hands and numbers hanging in the sky.

In all, it is a comfortably tame Dalí that we get here—weird and eccentric, certainly, but also entertaining, mystical, a lover of landscape, an endlessly curious mind at play in the world. There is little hint of his scatological side, of the frightening ugliness of his work (as Bataille described it), let alone of his flirtation with Fascism and fascination with Hitler as a figure worthy of de Sade or Lautréamont: there are no shit stains here, no masturbation, no cutting open of eyes.³ Indeed, all of these exhibitions are suitable for young children, which involves much taming of potentially disturbing content, and a Bowdlerisation of overt sexual material. The introductory film claims that due to an early brush with death, Dalí took erotic pleasure in all of life yet there is little evidence of that in what follows. A little joke for the adults stands out: in a rendering of the violent and sexualised painting, *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)*, a fragment showing a hand squeezing a breast is put into a bizarre bouncing movement so that it hops in and out of the projection space.

The Framing of *Frameless*

The *Frameless* exhibition, shown in a disused underground cinema near Marble Arch, has four distinct rooms, each with a loose theme and a different mode of video display, and each entered off the same corridor space so that viewers can come and go in any order they please.

³ Georges Bataille, "The 'Lugubrious Game'", in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1985, p. 27.



One of these, the 'Beyond Reality' section, devoted to 'other worlds, dreams and the surreal', features Dalí, so that it can be compared to the monographic exhibition. Since this room features video projections on each wall, coupled with a partially mirrored floor, columns and ceiling, it produces a highly disorienting effect, especially when all the projections are simultaneously in motion. The famous melting clocks of *The Persistence of Memory* are dealt with in an imaginative and effective way, filling the space with a dizzying display of clock faces, that pulse and rotate to the sound of a loud ticking.

Otherwise, the room features, among others, Archimboldo, Bosch and the Douanier Rousseau. In a typical section, the jungle of Rousseau's *The Dream* becomes an enveloping visual and aural environment, as flowers open and close, and the tweeting of birds is heard. The wondrous imagination of artists is paraded across the room, accompanied by music which is meant to indicate that awe is the required response (it is reminiscent of similar moments in the Harry Potter films' soundtrack).⁴ Two darker episodes punctuate the unrolling of wonders, showing Munch's *The Scream* and Ernst's 1937 *Fireside Angel*: here the music becomes discordant, and the images briefly nightmarish, before the default mode is restored.

⁴ The music was composed specifically for the display by Chris Hammond.



The Ernst episode is a particularly odd one. *Fireside Angel*, we may remember, is a vision of the demon of fascism as it rampages across Europe and wages war in Spain.⁵ The fireside evokes the monsters of childhood story-telling, of visions glimpsed in the flames, but also of the mental armouring of the narrow hearth against those declared outsiders. Yet, other than some faint alarm at the extremes of the artist's visual imagination, little disturbance is felt; and indeed the Ernst features on one of the publicity posters for *Frameless*, in which a Black woman ecstatically greets this embodiment of ferocious racism and colonial conquest.

⁵ See the discussion in Werner Spies/ Sabine Rewald, eds., *Max Ernst: A Retrospective*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art/ Yale University Press, New York/ New Haven 2005, pp. 27-30.



Another room, 'Colour in Motion' animates various Impressionist and post-Impressionist paintings by Monet, Morisot, Seurat and Signac, among others, that employ distinct touches of paint. Sometimes they are put into interaction so that sound and the visual display respond to visitors' movements. The painted touches are liberated from the image and drift about the space like blossom or little scraps of paper. The visitors, who are patterned with projected light, wade among and kick these elements as they flurry about, or attempt to affect the display by jumping or waving their limbs. People drift about the space, sit or lie on the floor, and use their phone-cameras a lot, especially to take selfies. Here a strong sense of immersion is produced by the patterning of viewers with swirling touches of colour, similar to the effect of a disco mirror-ball.

The disintegration and reintegration of these painted elements is much more effective than the attempts to animate figurative elements. Paintings compose and decompose in a continual churn in which images are only briefly held still. In portraits, the rapid resolving and then dissolution of a face suggests the formation of an individual, their breakdown, decline and death. The technique works particularly well with a blockily painted portrait by Robert Delaunay of his fellow artist, Jean Metzinger, as the image of the artist, who confronts the viewer head-on, is first assembled and then disintegrates into a pile of brick-like paint touches. A Van Gogh portrait, similarly treated, is accompanied by the sound of an ominously ticking clock (in case viewers are a little slow on the uptake).



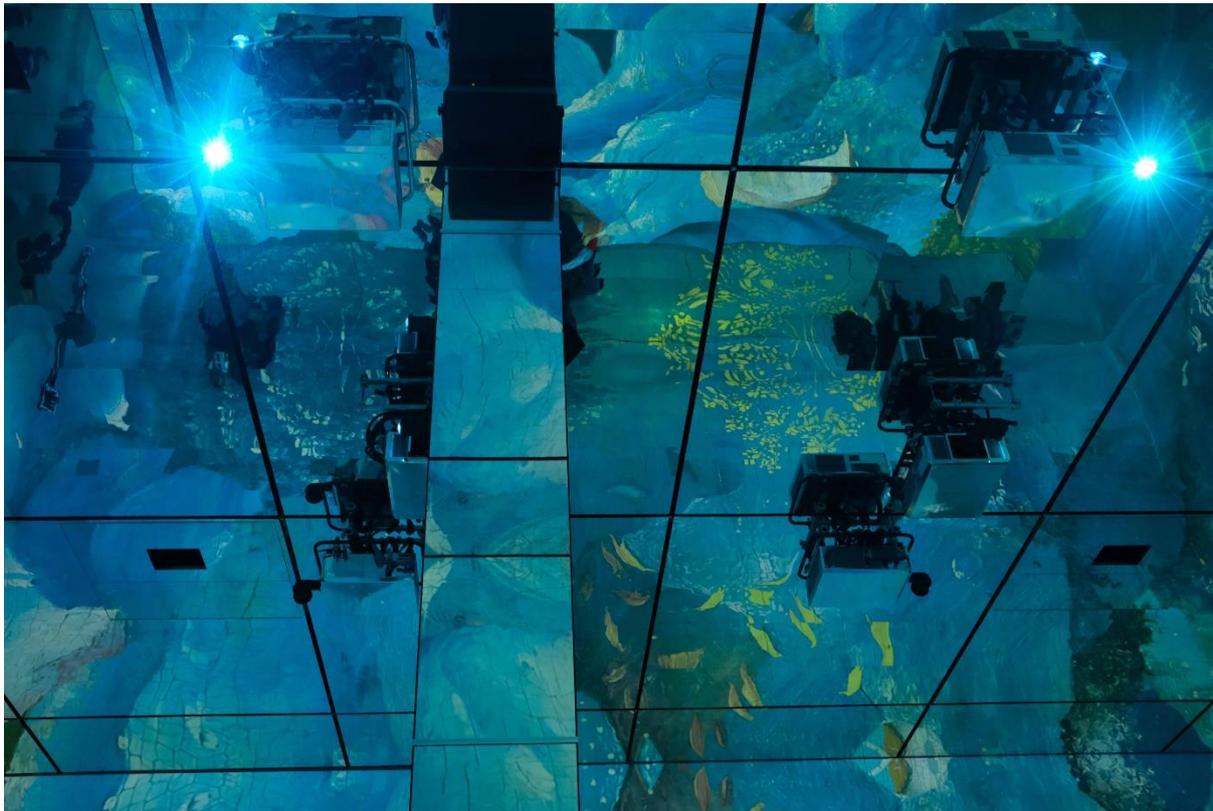
The displays of *Frameless* most effectively produce a sense of immersion when overall patterning falls on viewers, or when the paintings themselves depict a peopled environment, so that, for instance, visitors seem to become additional figures in a Canaletto rendition of the Piazza San Marco, or in Seurat's *La Grand Jatte*. Viewers throw their shadows across the projections, which adds to the effect.

As already mentioned, the 'World Around Us' section features Rembrandt's boat in a storm. This very large, long room has the most spectacular renditions of the environment, from the false rustic harmony of Rubens' *Rainbow Landscape*, a scene of his own estate, to the volcanic eruption of Joseph Wright of Derby's *Vesuvius in Eruption*, and (with a feeling of inevitability) Friedrich's mountain-top gazer, accompanied by Wagner's *Lohengrin*. With the Friedrich, the clouds are put into animation; with the Rubens, the hay on a wagon waves in the virtual wind like hair. The eruption is the moment of maximum drama and volume, following which the cycle dissolves to black, and we are brought to the calm green of Cézanne's *Avenue at Chantilly* to the accompaniment of a gushy piano passage by Fauré.

Since the cycles in each room, of around twenty minutes, loop seamlessly, they do not admit of narrative. Viewers may enter and leave at any point. Given, though, that episodes of disturbance are much less common than those of calm and wonder, it is more likely that their individual experiences will finish with the latter, in a transition from darkness to light, so the eruption yields to the serenity of Cézanne's avenue, or Munch's *Scream* to Klimt's fishes and flowers as they are brought into gentle choreography.

Of course, painting has long striven to make movement felt in its still surfaces, especially in the great compositional engines of the Academy, with their extravagant gestures, straining

muscles, and flowing drapery. A similar urge to movement is present in much other art, including Futurism and the cosmological fantasies of Suprematism. What is more, the urge to put paintings into total environments and to realise local elements is not new either: Nadar writes of the extraordinary efforts of Louis Ghémar in Brussels to make a ‘universal exhibition’ of all the major works of contemporary art, reproduced in their original sizes with remarkable faithfulness, and supplemented with objects so that an oar sticks out from the edge of a boat, and projecting from Rosa Bonheur’s *The Horse Fair*, there was the a stuffed head of a stallion with hay between its teeth.⁶ As in the late nineteenth century, the technology and economy of these displays seems inadequate to realise such movement convincingly across an entire painting. We are left with relatively timid gestures; the opening and closing of flowers, poorly animated butterflies, or often the mere nodding of some creature’s head.



Generally, across these rooms, the immersive character of projection and reflection cannot but highlight the moments of interruption, the joins and folds, and the presence of the projection equipment. In the ‘World Around Us’ room, projections cover each wall, along with the floor and ceiling with no use of mirrors. Small apertures, opened in the walls for the projectors, interrupt the otherwise unitary environments; when the scene is dark, they shine out like particularly bright planets. In the ‘Beyond Reality’ room, the mirrored floor reflects not only the images and visitors but also the projectors.

⁶ Félix Nadar, *When I Was a Photographer*, trans. Eduardo Cadava/ Liana Theodoratou, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2015, pp. 165-8.

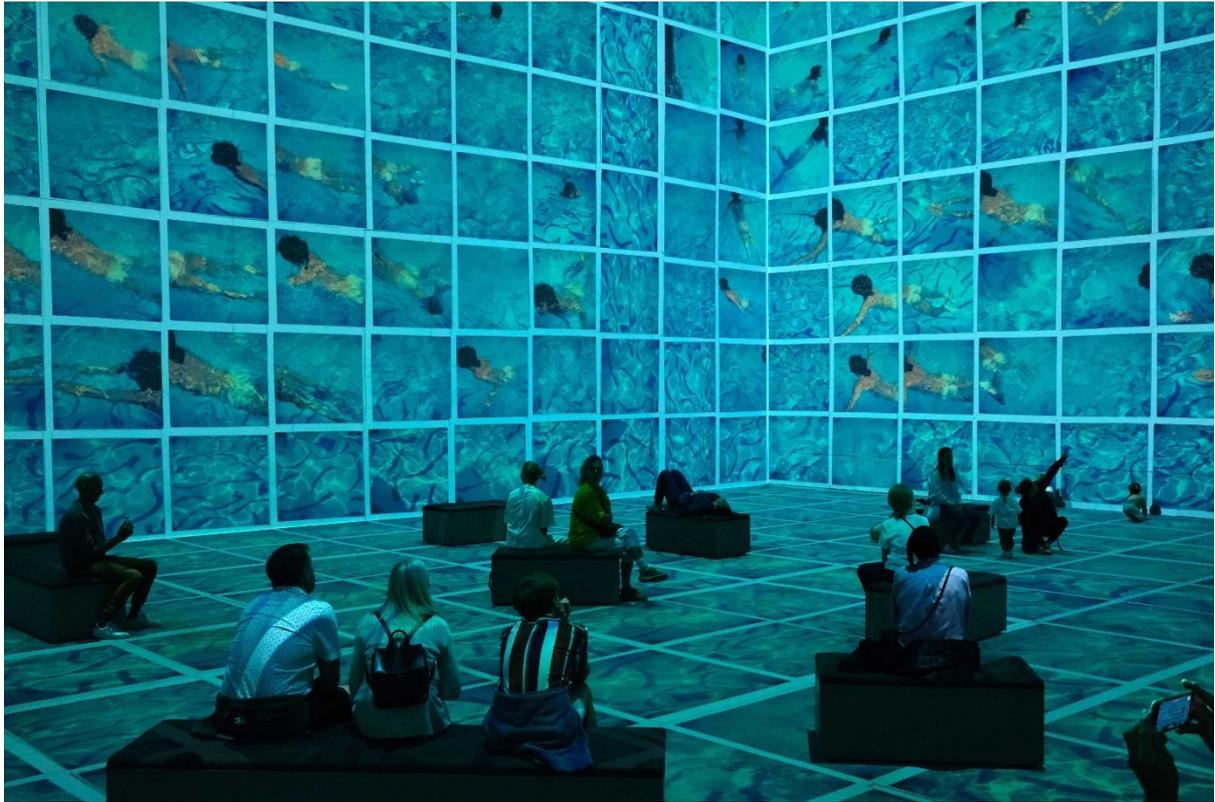
The Hockney Persona



Of these video-projection displays, the Hockney exhibition (shown at the Lightroom space among the massive development area north of King's Cross) is by far the most engaging—and the one that treats its viewers least like perceptual and emotional sponges to be commanded by the digital Svengalis. There are a number of reasons for this: the first is Hockney's involvement. While in voice-over statements, contemporary and archival, he lays down his familiar views—don't trust linear perspective, build time into your work, look closely at the world, especially the passing seasons and weather—there is something touching in this intelligently expressed constancy, and in the changing timbre of Hockney's voice across the decades.

Second, Hockney has been consistently involved with photographic and digital technology, and as far back as 1986 made fascinating work with the Quantel Paintbox system.⁷ His more recent work on digital tablets and phones translates well to large-scale digital projection, and allows viewers to see the process by which the work is built up, stroke by stroke. His photographic work also appears to good effect on the massive projection walls, especially his complex Polaroid collages, as Hockney guides us through the circumstances and processes of their creation. Some of his recent very large landscapes—pompous and blockily painted on gridded canvases to build up the vast whole—appear to better effect on video walls where the infelicities of paint handling are flattened in transient displays which do not permit prolonged examination.

⁷ A contemporary TV programme about this work may be seen here: <https://www.openculture.com/2022/03/watch-david-hockney-paint-with-light-using-the-quantel-paintbox-graphics-system-1986.html>



Third, there are points when Hockney's words appear to refer to the Lightroom's 'fully projectable space': when he speaks about the loss of perspective and centre of focus as you stand on the edge of the Grand Canyon, and how the sheer scale of the place makes you consciously look all around you, he could be describing the behaviour of visitors.⁸ There is a conscious play with the theme of 'immersion' in the section on the swimming-pool paintings, as toddlers 'paddle' in the various colours that wash across the floor. In all, with a mix of video, photography, digital work, stage design, and visual references to historical works, maps and other diverse material, and a narrative that guides us through Hockney's sixty-year engagement with art, the effect is often compelling.

That said, the monumental scale and, quite often, the music do instruct viewers in their reactions, and the commands are largely to celebrate the national treasure that Hockney has become. This is made explicit in the memory of another recently passed figure of such status in a cheesily still and reverential moment in which Hockney's *The Queen's Window* (2018) for Westminster Abbey is displayed alongside a 'stone' caption plaque in the manner of a memorial. His eccentric persona continues to be carefully cultivated as he appears, in a poster for the exhibition, looking very much like Toad of Toad Hall.

This is also a family show. A necessary consequence is the delicate skirting around of the artist's sexuality: it is clear that in his escape to California, Hockney experienced the lifting of a stifling social atmosphere, and it is evident that he has an interest in young male bodies, but otherwise the nature of his liberation is left unsaid.

⁸ 'Fully projectable space' is the description used in Richard Slaney/ Nick Starr, 'Welcome', in Thomas Wide, ed., *David Hockney: Bigger & Closer (Not Smaller & Further Away)*, Lightroom, London n.d., n.p.

The Branded Canon

One salient feature of all these displays is the reassertion of the traditional canon: the monographic shows are centred upon not merely famous artists but those who are personalities and brands—Dalí and Hockney (elsewhere Klimt and Kahlo, and above all Van Gogh whose work appears in multiple displays). The reinvention is most jarring with Van Gogh, who has been refashioned as a branded artist, with hideous consequences such as the Courtauld Gallery's marketing of severed-ear erasers.⁹ In *Frameless*, a few lesser-known artists appear and even some women (Rachel Ruysch, Morisot, Hilma af Klint and Tauber-Arp) but it is the most famous males who dominate both the displays and the publicity material. There are no artists of colour.

Even within the bounds of this conservative canon, the version of art history on offer is anecdotal, 'inspiring', flattering, and blindly idealistic with no sense of antagonism between the various elements.¹⁰ It is a cross-branding exercise in which the secure fame of the artists is brought into symbiosis with the production company. The latter are keen to signal their own virtues. The *Frameless* team is in partnership with the Great Ormond Street Hospital, and claims to power its displays almost entirely from renewable energy.¹¹ The resulting vanilla, 'isn't it wonderful?' appeal seems strikingly ideological given the increasing chaos outside—of political life, the economy, infrastructure and the climate.

In these displays, despite their sophistication, the drawbacks of large-scale, enveloping video projection are evident: a considerable amount of reflected light tends to give a washed-out feeling to the whole, especially in the darker shades (the gritty, textured walls in *Frameless* are an attempt to mitigate this effect). Viewers cast shadows on the displays, which only occasionally adds to the intended effect, and as they move about the space are intermittently dazzled by the projection beams. This, along with the presence of gallery and projection apparatus, interrupt and undermine the atmosphere of immersion.

Digital Snacks

All of these drawbacks can be surmounted if you tile the walls with frameless high-resolution screens. Directly opposite a busy new exit, part of the revamp of Tottenham Court Road station to accommodate Crossrail, is a very large atrium in which the walls and ceilings are covered in 8k LED screens. This is the blandly named 'Now Building', part of Outernet London, a billion-pound 'immersive entertainment district', offering cultural and 'retail experiences', along with an up-market hotel which trades off the rich musical history of the area, the physical fabric of which was largely demolished in the revamp. These screens offer a more seamless, vivid and

⁹ Gareth Harris, 'Making Fun of Mental Health? Van Gogh "Eraser" and "Tortured Artist" Soap Removed from Courtauld Gift Shop', *The Art Newspaper*, 16 February 2022. For an acute analysis of Van Gogh immersive displays, see Joseph Henry, 'Blow Up', *Artforum*, 11 August 2021.

¹⁰ I explored the effects of branding on art institutions in 'The Branding of the Museum', *Art History*, vol. 37, no. 1, February 2014, pp. 148-65.

¹¹ See James Griffiths, 'The Making of *Frameless*', in *Frameless London Limited, Frameless: Official Guide*, London n.d., p. 58.

detailed display than video projection, albeit at great cost. It is doubtless only the backwash from the enormous speculative wave in property prices that Crossrail created that has allowed this gift to be offered to the public.

Open on two sides, people wander freely in and out of the space to view a cycle of videos which alternate between art works and adverts. The former range from a brief animated elaboration of Man Ray's famous altered readymade, *Object to be Destroyed* (a lenticular eye which opens and closes as it swings on the arm of a metronome), to a lengthy, rapidly changing animation by Alice Bloomfield in which the face and body of a young woman are integrated with natural and cosmic environments in a curiously hyperactive evocation of Zen meditation.¹² Or rather, its rapidly mutating vistas are no accident, being designed to instantly seize and hold the passerby—at least briefly. As Outernet CEO Philip O'Ferrall says with admirable candour: 'If you spend an extra 30 seconds in my area I can serve more advertising on you'.¹³



The adverts, which appear frequently and lengthily, use similar techniques to secure the spectator. One at least—for Cadbury's 'Time Out'—thematizes the attractive interlude on offer. Harsh lettering on a black ground spells out pulsing and rotating lists of various annoyances including traffic, car alarms, car horns and roadworks which then gives way to the relief of a chocolate bar. Most of these annoyances are present right outside, on the busy junction by the tube station. The solution offered here—an ultra-processed sugary treat, relief in the form of a slow poison—parallel the blasts of entertainment in this controlled enclave.

¹² Alice Bloomfield, *Sister*, produced by Ridley Scott Creative Group and Black Dog Films as a music video for TSHA.

¹³ Quoted in Rowan Moore, 'The Day the Music Died? Welcome to Denmark Street and Tottenham Court Road's New "Digitally Enabled Streetscape"', *The Guardian*, 7 August 2022.

The sheer scale, speed and vibrancy of some of the artistic displays are undeniably impressive, as Lilliputian viewers look up into the space as it rapidly and dramatically changes colour, or is plunged into darkness and then out into bright illumination. The default mode here is of a rapidly drifting, receding or approaching animation, especially in the ceiling display which often shows vertiginously plunging perspectives. The intended effect is to de-anchor the viewer from the street, both visually and bodily, aided by the soundtrack which mostly subsumes the area's ambient noise. Most people stay only for a few minutes and seem to be mildly entertained, gazing up at the displays and taking selfies. Inhabiting the atrium for over an hour is a curious experience, as the cycle repeats, and the assault on the senses become more marked as any uncertainty about what comes next evaporates.

I want to concentrate on one work that uses painting as its source material: *Summer Palace*, by Agustin Vidal Saavedra and Glasseye Productions. It is perhaps the most impressive of those on show, in technical and aesthetic terms, drawing on a large array of sources—architectural, fractal, cosmological and art historical—handled with AI-augmented animation that used vast amounts of computer time to render.¹⁴ The screens show a palace's domed and pillared interior, with paintings and sculpture displayed over two high storeys. The main animation is in the dome: rotating mechanical shutters open to reveal a sequence which includes animated paintings of (often naked) figures by, among others, François Lemoyne and William-Adolphe Bouguereau, and cosmic visions of clouds, rotating galaxies, nebula and fractal patterns which succeed one another in a continual zooming in on the subject, ending with the explosion of a supernova. The passage of eons is more than implied, not just by the cosmological segments but by the architecture of the 'palace' itself, and the flayed figures that stand immobile in its upper walkways.

¹⁴ For an account by the creators, see <https://www.glasseye.ie/summer-palace/>

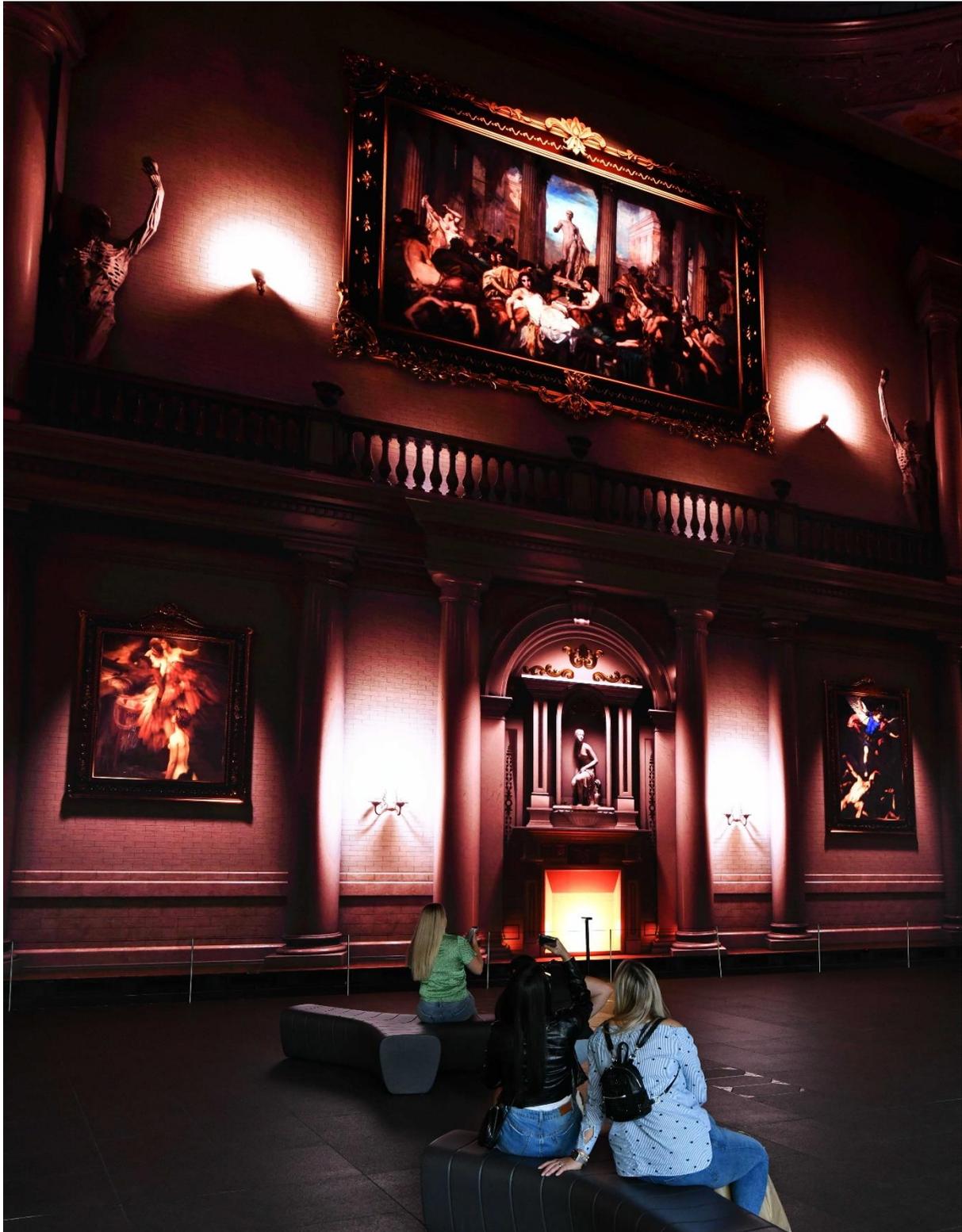


As with the animation of figures, an implied desire of past art is brought into effect, particularly in the dome. Brian O'Doherty archly describes the Baroque ceiling, which sought to be anything other than a shelter, often becoming a sky or vortex through which figures 'vanish through a celestial hole, like a sublime overhead toilet'.¹⁵ In *Summer Palace*, the effect of that swirling recession is actualised in continuous movement. Once again, we experience a 'storm', in which the palace is plunged into darkness, punctuated by lightning flashes, before passing into full illumination in lurid tints.

In contrast to the video-projection displays, the paintings shown here are generally not very well known. Among the most prominent is Herbert James Draper's *The Lament for Icarus*, a piece of technically competent late-Victorian mythological soft porn in which naked nymphs pose amid the lush feathers of the fallen flier's wings. Another shows a similarly titillating scene, dressed up as a moral lesson: a crop of Thomas Couture's *The Romans in their Decadence*. First shown at the Paris Salon of 1847, it depicts said Romans fully indulging their lust and gluttony under the severe gaze of the statues of their stricter ancestors. The painting was widely seen as a reflection on the decadence of monarchical France.

None of the art works used are identified anywhere in the Now Building display, so there is no question here of the elevation of the work by the cachet of genius. Rather, there is a distance taken from its often-creepy source material, which bears, in over-elaborate and kitschy compositions, the putrid whiff of reactionary propaganda—that of the Baroque, of absolute monarchy and of imperial nineteenth-century academic painting.

¹⁵ Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1986, p. 66.



While the ambition to over-awe the viewer is common to all these displays, the overall effect of *Summer Palace* is quite different from the focus upon the spectacle of human creativity on offer in the paid exhibits. We may imagine this domed and decorated hall as the property of some sinister oligarch or autocrat with a taste for decadence. The contrast between the art on display and the Burkean sublime of the cosmological and meteorological elements produces a mild and

entertaining disturbance, which bears upon the consequences of the titanic quest for riches, renown and distinction among those at the pinnacle of the elite.

The Painting-Video Hybrid

In this collision of media, there are losses as well as gains, and they are arguably graver for video than they are for painting. Painting loses its scale, most of its texture, and its subtlety of colour and touch. Many Dalí paintings amaze the viewer with the level of detail achieved in modestly sized canvases; for instance, *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee Around a Pomegranate a Second Before Awakening*, from which the elephants and the tiger are taken, is twenty inches on its longest side, and *The Persistence of Memory* only thirteen inches. All that is lost in the massive magnifications of the video rooms.

In confining itself to the representation of two-dimensional surfaces, video loses its control of perspective and depth of field, and with it much of the accepted language of the moving-image camera. The distinction between panning and tracking is lost since there is little point in panning across a flat surface. Likewise, forward camera movement and zooming-in become equivalent when the filmed surface is flat. Much of what goes on in the displays attempts to compensate for this loss, putting depth into the images by breaking them up into distinct elements, and casting them into differential movement. Video also loses the expressive and artistic edge of the frame, in an effect similar to Hockney's 'Grand Canyon', in which there is a lack of focus, attention and coherence. Framing decisions are still made, of course, but they are played down by continual movement and by carrying images across walls, floors and ceilings. The ethos of the seamless world that engulfs the viewer, as it unfurls its wonders, requires that the fade and the dissolve are much favoured over the cut.

There is a marked dialectic in this meeting of media. Much contemporary art including painting is of course created with social media in mind—so-called 'Instagrammable art'. With the partial exception of Hockney (despite his iPhone paintings), whose long career frees him from the taint of such opportunism, the art cast into motion in these displays is not at all like that. It carries the traditional cachet of something antique that has been borrowed to elevate the immersive spectacle beyond mere entertainment. While this is the main reason behind the revival of such a restrictive canon, in doing so, the displays transform their source material into selfie fodder. There is a sense, within the displays and in the contemporary art market generally, of painting, that old bastion of distinction, crumbling, rather as Delaunay's Metzinger portrait falls apart into its painted blocks.

Cubes and Boxes

The white cube and the black box both offer an ideal enclave at the price of disciplining the viewer. In the white cube, the social, garrulous, rubber-necking life of the salon is hushed in an atmosphere of subdued reverence. The distractions of the outer world—noise, trash, pollution, and an overtly commercial culture—are excluded from its pure spaces. It was and often remains

an exclusive space of social elitism, a meeting of the ‘social, financial and intellectual snobbery’ of the upper-middle class.¹⁶

The cinema does something similar, not by excluding commercial culture but by encouraging a singular focus on a framed fragment of it. In its black box, as Gabriele Pedullà has brilliantly described in his book, *In Broad Daylight*, film is removed from the culinary and cultural diversions of the boulevard theatre into a space where, once again, the noisy audience is hushed, and there is little to attend to but the screen. For the mass audience, cinema’s palatial décor once marked the transition from the mundane round of work and domestic life into a passing spell of fantastical immersion.¹⁷

The postmodern period weakened both ideals, in concerted attempts to break open or out of the gallery, and by showing films on TV. Writing of early video art as shown in the gallery, Chrissie Iles argues that the resultant space can be seen as a hybrid of white cube and black box, so that the work shown there, informed by phenomenology and Minimalism, invites participation, movement and the sharing of multiple viewpoints, in ‘an analytical and distanced form of viewing.’ In conscious opposition to both the white cube and the ‘hypnosis’ of the darkened cinema, the dimly lit projection space encouraged viewers to become attentive to screen and setting, to the viewing apparatus and their own body.¹⁸ In the following decades, many further hybrids emerged, especially as video projection became a norm in the gallery, and many artists explored the legacy of cinema in sometimes spectacular installations.¹⁹ As Boris Groys has pointed out, the effects often bewildered viewers: in the white cube the works were static and viewers moved between them, while in the cinema the works moved and viewers were static. When both were put into motion, viewers no longer knew what to do.²⁰

¹⁶ O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube* p. 76.

¹⁷ Gabriele Pedullà, *In Broad Daylight: Movies and Spectators After the Cinema*, trans. Patricia Gaborik, Verso, London 2012, pp. pp. 32-4, 56

¹⁸ Chrissie Iles, *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964-1977*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York 2001, pp. 33-4.

¹⁹ For a detailed account of these changes, see Jihoon Kim, *Between Film, Video and the Digital: Hybrid Moving Images in the Post-Media Age*, Bloomsbury, New York 2016, ch. 5.

²⁰ Boris Groys, *Art Power*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2008, pp. 88-9. Groys thinks that this confusion has the positive effect of thematising the instability and invisibility of the digital image.



The 'immersive' total environment traps the viewer in a disorientation which is clearly at odds with the critical distancing of early video installation. Unlike the white cube, in which the wall becomes a material and ideological presence, in the video room, it must disappear.²¹ And unlike the white cube in which each work is given sufficient space to ensure its autonomous presence, in the video room it is treated instrumentally, and radically transformed. The effects of these video rooms, as we have seen, are largely to do with the exploitation of scale, and motion at scale, rapid changes in light and colour, and attention-grabbing effects. This explains the attraction of storms which are found in *Dali Cyberbetics*, *Frameless* and *The Summer Palace* so that the volume of thunder can be added to flashes of light, and dramatic changes in illumination.

At first sight, the 'immersive' video box does not seem to be a space that seeks to discipline viewers. They can and do chat to one another, at least when the volume of the soundtrack permits; in some rooms, they move around a lot, and are constantly on their phones. Where there are interactive elements, they play freely, jumping and gesturing to wring a response from the algorithms. Even when those elements are lacking, the children, who are such a strong presence in these rooms, play anyway, chasing each other about in the changing light, fascinated by the patterning of their bodies under restlessly changing coloured beams. If a discipline is insisted upon, it is that of a sufficient reverence for genius and the wonders of the cosmos.

The viewer called to by each space is distinct. The white cube addresses an elite bourgeois viewer, an autonomous individual who brings their intellect and taste to the appreciation of an equally autonomous work of art. It is entirely up to this viewer to choose what to look at and for how long, and how to respond to it. The black box of the cinema addresses a mass audience which is supposed to be held in thrall by the glistening spectacle on screen. The viewer of the

²¹ O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, p. 29.

early gallery video space is harder to tie down but may be thought of as a sophisticated, critical, counter-cultural strand of the art audience, liberated through a ‘death of the author’ effect.²² The immersive painting-video room addresses, as is standard in the progressive neoliberal realm, a wide, non-classed audience which is diverse, polite, and in the paid exhibitions well-heeled enough to afford the steep admission charges.²³ They lack the autonomy of the increasingly vanishing bourgeois viewer, since their apparent freedom to look around and move around is countered by insistent orders to respond, instructed by animation and soundtrack, and the imposition of time and sequence.



Two main claims are made by those defending these displays: that their accessibility ‘democratises’ high art and brings it to a wider audience; and that against the environment of individually tailored social media feeds—accelerating, toxic and autophagic—they offer a collective, salvaging experience.²⁴ Both are doubtful. Of the first, given the strong tendency to favour the canon and, more than that, branded personalities, the effect is very slight: Van Gogh, Dalí and Hockney need little help in reaching people. As for such displays serving as defences against the world beyond, they are mostly very expensive and temporary ones. Since the symbiosis with social media sharing is at the heart of their commercial model, and phone use in their rooms endemic, their protective effects are at best weak.

²² On the disavowed class position of the early video maker and viewer, see Liz Kim, *Schizophrenic Video: The Reception of Early Video Art in New York, 1969-1985*, PhD thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, 2016, pp. 259-60.

²³ Nancy Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot be Born: From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond*, Verso, London 2019.

²⁴ On these claims, see Eddy Frankel, ‘Why is there so much Immersive Art in London Right Now?’, *Time Out*, 27 June 2022.

Painting-video displays are often compared with other products in the large and lucrative multi-billion-dollar immersive experience industry.²⁵ Disney is sometimes evoked, since its theme parks represent the technical pinnacle of such displays. We may think here of Eisenstein's thoughts about the frightening perfection of Walt Disney's work, in which coordinated sound and vision are placed in 'a vice of the strictest plastic and temporal calculation' so as to activate the natural child in the viewer, and to produce wonder at the flight of a butterfly or the growth of a flower.²⁶ The ethos of these painting-video displays is exactly like that, even as their execution falls far short of it.

The technology, however, is in its infancy. In these displays, it is possible to glimpse a future in which the challenging art of animating painted figures is automated, in which surveilled viewers feed data to evolving AI-programmes which are geared, like social media feeds, to condensing maximum attention, engagement and profit from the social atmosphere.

An eerie averageness is already apparent in these displays, as the most celebrated artists and the most famous works are chewed up by their engines of wonder and consolation: if a café painted by Van Gogh is shown, it must be to the sound of the accordion. There is an affinity here with AI-generated 'photography' which, mining the statistical mean of culture, piles cliché upon cliché in weirdly disjointed articulations. It takes the incessant copying and conventionality of capitalist culture, with its dense atmosphere of déjà vu, and shows it in a fairground mirror. Some of these displays, as we have seen, are produced by algorithms; but they also amply show that humans are, for now, just as capable of producing this uncanny rendition of mainstream culture as it continually consumes itself.

²⁵ Nevertheless, making such displays can be risky: see Tim Jonze, 'Immersive Art Firm behind Van Gogh and Monet Shows Files for Bankruptcy', *The Guardian*, 3 August 2023.

²⁶ Sergei Eisenstein, *On Disney*, ed. Jay Leda/ trans. Alan Upchurch, Seagull Books, London 2017, pp. 5-6.