

AVD

Seemingly hallowed screens

We have moved from a philosophical exploration of space to, in the mid-twentieth century, an exploration of 'outer' space. Even in its titling, the space race apparently pushed our understanding of this particular ontology of space to its limits. Furthermore, we have managed to reconfigure what this word means in the digital, especially to digital natives who have grown only knowing the plasticity of 'space' and its various uses. Assimilating and expanding the remit of the existing lexicon to new sociopolitical concerns is an age old but dangerous game, one that allows systemic changes to go somewhat unquestioned, to be approached and treated as natural.

To be out of space now is to be full of information. Just as we once exhausted our understanding of space on the ground and looked to the stars, we now fill our phones and turn to the cloud. While similar and comparable in certain ways, these two psychic and other worldly anxieties have distinct differences that their identical languages don't quite take into consideration. Unlike the necessary romanticised showy-ness of nationalistic space exploration, new formations of digital space have masses of physical infrastructure that it is often purposefully made invisible. Arguably, technologies such as VR and AR are taking steps to successfully straddle both the physical and digital realms, integrating our solid blocks of silicon and glass (and the worlds they project) into our *terra firma* experiences. Of course, others would argue that these technologies, especially VR, are masturbatory and digitally isolating.¹

By carrying a smart phone with us almost all the time, we too are entering a complex economy of space. We navigate the world and are free to roam - charges vary depending on network and tariff - with physical blocks of data extraction and storage devices, which are simultaneously mobile yet fiercely connected and tethered to their respective corporate networks. We are connected to our friends, satellites, our future desires, purchases, lovers, and obsessions. While the necessary back end of all this futurity is made invisible to us, the front end interfaces are very much made to be seen and played with; each new model is more haptic and physical and adopts the illusion of an internal, Borgesian space: memory levels rack up, battery lives drop, we open windows and boxes; we expand, pinch, zoom and collapse; and we investigate deeper and deeper into our seemingly shallow screens.

In this instance, for the purposes of *Out of Space* (and the AVD project more generally) the mobile device is the key, the necessary access point for digital art. In my mind, the division of interfaces between mobile/desktop by AVD is an intelligent and insightful one. The fact that mobile phones are one of the most ubiquitous modern objects impels us to consider its cultural place, to think its position in relation to the images that are beamed to it, the art it hosts, especially as more and more art is made to be experienced online. The material of the smart phone is, in this iteration of this exhibition at least, the physical manifestation of the non-physical digital artwork. The exhibition engages with debates that conceptual art has been dominating for decades – that the paradox of any non-physical art form is its necessary physical display.² The site of *Out of Space* is not the sacred white cube, with its own tangled matrix of power relations and unseen mechanisms, but the equally complex space of the smart phone – a solid social indicator housing a messy nest of questionable labour and material concerns.

¹ Douglas Coupland has labeled VR 'the new ultimate masturbation'. I first encountered Coupland's views on VR in an interview of the artist by Daniel Birnbaum in *Artforum*. See: D. Birnbaum, 2017. *Wildest Dreams*. *Artforum*. November 2017, pp. 192 – 201.

² This year, Sotheby's claimed to be selling, for the first time, a concept for an artwork. Xu Zhen's *Xuzhen Supermarket* is still a physical entity, albeit one with a novel and unorthodox foundation in the commercial art world artist-collector relations. See: <https://news.artnet.com/market/sothebys-xu-zhen-supermarket-1339454>

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Ed Florance's spaces are wholly digital and rendered from nothing but a blank 2D screen yet they each have a weird familiarity. In *Over and Out* (2017) we are presented with the implication of a character and the remnants of a narrative played out behind our backs. Yet the flawlessness and sheen, the buffed marble floor, cloudless sky and unscuffed upholstery makes us realise - a little too late, perhaps - that no human has ever stepped foot in this room. We are the voyeuristic apparatus that props up the illusion of a life lived. We project our own experiences into a non-space that has, evidently, experienced none. The fact we cognise as the video loops that *Over and Out* is constructed entirely digitally gives the work an unhomey edge as we look into the screen in an almost nostalgic or half-remembered way.³

Florance's works are tightly linked to sci-fi imagery and their unsettling powers of psychological questioning, their ability to suspend our disbelief and lower a different type of uncertainty in its place. What films like *2001: A Space Odyssey* and, later, *Blade Runner* got so right with regard to the uncanny was the mundanity of life in the future, the recognisable strangeness. The architecture of contemporary viewership that both grounds us in the scene and functions as the comforting beams that hold up our disbelief of absurd technologies are the reassuring Hilton Hotel signs, the Coca Cola advertisements. Of course, there is no question in our minds that these brands will survive decades into the future and outlast humans and their ex-situ colonies of life⁴ - human or otherwise. As Mark Fisher said, referencing Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, it is easier to imagine the end of the world (at least as we know it) than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.



Conversely, Ololade Adeniyi's *Eden 2.0* (2017) constructs an inviting digital space that is entirely informed by history and lived experience. Partly built from the vernacular blocks of the internet yet wholly responding to analogue life on the ground, Adeniyi's Eden is impossible to completely occupy. We remain poised with one foot in the today's world and one foot perpetually stepping into its future, digital utopia. The next Eden is fated to remain an unknown ideal. Adeniyi's film may invite us in but we stare into its artificial horizon knowing it will never be reached. Just take the first couple of acts to set the scene: moving spatial panes allude to the consciousness of its human construction, the rolling archive of naturally beautiful landscapes unreels as if feeding an algorithm aiming for personalised 'perfection', and the distinctly American symbol of the eagle continuously rears its bald head, acting as a panoptic site foreman.

Cut

Out of breath and running to escape the omnipresent voice of right-wing conservatism, the viewer embodies a demonized, first-person character but without a controller or reset button. The real life audio juxtaposed against the constructed suburban-jungle game environment is jarring in its (other)worldliness. In this Eden, you move from an unoccupied beauty, through the urban, into glitchy modern warzones. The question you are left pondering at the end of the film is whether a fully digital existence can offer any great alternative to the one you are partially sat in now.



A new work by Juan Covelli, developed specifically for the exhibition, questions traditional objecthood in light of scanning technologies and new digital materialities. Stemming from a recent residency in Norway, Covelli's work literally centres around objects originating from the Dogon tribe of West Africa that are held in Guttorm Guttormsgaard's Arkiv. Covelli's inquiry

³ While it is common for the German *unheimlich* to be translated as 'the uncanny', the direct translation of 'unhomey' has been used here. The notion of unhomey-ness is used to rouse an allusion to domestic space, arguably the first dwelling, a demarcated space that not only necessitates measurement and human force over abstract spatial plains but also ownership.

⁴ I had originally referenced that fact that Pan Am operated the ship in *2001*... before realising that it dissolved in the 1990s, therefore rendering that particular argument void. Personally, I blame *Mad Men* for keeping Pan Am alive in my mind.

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mines concepts of the archive to ask what digitization means to art and society. The increased ease and decreased cost of 3D scanning has an impact not only

on what can be access but also how and by whom. Covelli sees digitization as a democratic act that broadens the scope of the archival.

In the context of *Out of Space*, the traditional headrest used for dreaming, praying, meditating, which has been altered and recast into a 21st rethinking,⁵ is in one sense endlessly unique within its material boundaries; it is situated as a (sculptural) body in relation to another body, the user. With each iteration and download, it is rendered anew.⁶ With this in mind, what is the significance of the original piece, which is neatly embedded in the culture and cosmology of the Dogon peoples, and what relevance does it have for each of the exhibition viewers that have only seen the 3D scan? Does the still have an aura or is it redistributed and transferred with each new digitally touristic download?

All art must transcend the boundaries of its form in order to explore new territory. AVD offers artists and curators the perfect platform to do this through its separation of the desktop and mobile interfaces. It is in this way that the physical blunt slab of the mobile phone, and the false sense of authority and agency evoked by the sleek UX of a glass screen, becomes part of the understanding of the artwork via its conditions of display.

Jack Smurthwaite, October 2018

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⁵ The original object that Covelli scanned can be found here: <https://guttormsgaardsarkiv.no/node/277/item/565#>

⁶ The work of Andrew Benjamin is a large influence for this sculptural reading of Covelli's work.