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IMMERSION IN ART: HYBRID AND LIVING ART

INTRODUCTION

The word ‘immersion’ has acquired a special social significance today¹: it denotes a great human achievement capable of creating a world that is almost truly real, often appearing more real than the objective world around us.² The root meaning of the word refers to the fact of becoming completely involved in something³ – *immersio* – or “absorption in some interest or situation.”⁴

For centuries, in many languages around the world, especially in Western culture, this word has functioned in the dimension of human everyday life, their activities, and their objective surroundings. As mentioned, in the 21st century, however, it primarily refers to the aspect of reality that concerns technological production.⁵ The use of the word ‘immersion’ almost automatically brings

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² Jean BAUDRILLARD, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), see also Richard G. SMITH, and David B. CLARKE, eds., *Baudrillard Jean: The Disappearance of Culture: Uncollected Interviews* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

³ “Immersion,” accessed October 11, 2025, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/immersion>.

⁴ “Immersion,” accessed October 11, 2025, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/immersion>. *Immersio* originates from Latin *mergere* – “to dip, dip in, immerse, plunge,” from *merge* – which the source also of Sanskrit *majjanti* – “to sink, dive under.”

⁵ Empirical researchers approach immersive technologies in terms of “facilitating and deepening the aesthetic experience” in both cognitive and emotive pathways. See Hyunji LEE, and

modern users into the realm advanced technological artifacts. These products provide comfort and relieve humans in certain areas of life, which elevates these artifacts and sets out the status of the human creator within the world's hierarchy. Humans no longer seem to be merely creators of artifacts, but of reality itself, and at the same time, of a reality more compatible than the often difficult to master and harmoniously manage elements of objectively existing reality.⁶ The high social status of advanced technology products also has a dark side: the utility and comfort provided by these artifacts no longer serve the good of humans, instead they alienate them from the real world, particularly from their communities.

The current shift in the meaning of the word 'immersion' stems from the socio-cultural situation. I perceive this shift as a sign of our civilization, fostering a crisis of social relations that humans have self-inflicted. In this article – by comparing two complex contemporary artistic forms – I want to focus on the stage in civilizational development at which humans find themselves. This is a point at which not only the radical reevaluation of values, once prematurely announced, is being fulfilled, but also a redefinition of the concept of human being and human ontological situation. The result of the contrasting artistic and social facts described in the ensuing will be an image of humans renouncing their humanity, which I perceive in a moral dimension, reducing humanity to aesthetic appeal.⁷ Similarly, human agency, which on the one hand is ennobled to almost creative action, is on the other devoid of moral implications. The easiest way to perceive such a picture, however, is to assume an anthropological conception of art,⁸ distinguishing primary from secondary agency.⁹ This conception

Youn NARA, "Immersed in Art: The Impact of Affinity for Technology Interaction and Hedonic Motivation on Aesthetic Experiences in Virtual Reality," *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 43, no. 1 (2025):355-384. See also Teresa PEKALA, "Ku estetyce immersji," *Sztuka i Filozofia* 55, no. 2 (2019):73-84.

⁶ The impact of virtual exhibitions using VR and immersive technologies on the popularization and expansion of the art market is discussed in Miriam LÓPEZ-RODRÍGUEZ, Vicente RODRÍGUEZ-PÉREZ, Ana F. LÓPEZ RODRÍGUEZ, "Immersive and virtual exhibitions: A reflection on... art?" *Arts & Communication* 3, no. 1 (2024):3688, <https://www.acscience.com/journal/AC/3/1/10.36922/ac.3688>.

⁷ Søren KIERKEGAARD, *Either/Or*, ed. and transl. Howard V. Hong, and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

⁸ Anna KAWALEC, "What Philosophical Aesthetics Can Learn from Applied Anthropology," *Symposion: Theoretical and Applied Inquiries in Philosophy and Social Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2020):41-53, DOI:10.5840/symposion2020714.

⁹ See Alfred GELL, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Anna KAWALEC, *Osoba i Nexus, Alfreda Gella antropologiczna teoria sztuki* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2016).

will serve to verify the processes that result in understandings of the human. These processes are revealed, among many others, in the current revolutionary transformation of the meaning of the word ‘immersion’ (and the related words in its family resemblance).

1. BEYOND ‘ART’

The origins of ‘art,’ as it has evolved over the centuries, lie in Mediterranean culture. Art, however, was not born as an autonomous creation, an artistic discipline, but – as anthropologists note: “Art originated in Europe, but not, as Europeans tend to assume, with the cave paintings of the Paleolithic. Rather, it began only a few hundred years ago as a cultural tradition of distinguishing the creation of particular artifacts and activities that communicate significant ideas and emotions.”¹⁰ The anthropologists’ observation will be confirmed by almost every visitor to artifacts traditionally considered ‘works of art’ – the Acropolis or Delphi – the political and religious centers of ancient Greece. An anthropological perspective on art allows us to discover those layers of meaning that are buried under the dust of concepts, ambitions, or supremacy. It reveals the foundation of creations: it discovers the human being.

From an anthropological perspective,¹¹ the definition of art proposed by Howard Morphy is therefore not surprising: “objects having semantic and/or aesthetic properties that are used for presentational or representational purposes.”¹² The Australian anthropologist considers an open set of cultural meanings that fall under the concept of art. Morphy is one of those contemporary anthropologists who attempt to define the concept of art beyond the boundaries of cultures, space, or time, in reference to products that serve as presentations or representations of various political or religious systems.

¹⁰ Ben BURT, *World Art* (London–Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2013), 7.

¹¹ “[T]he caution against ethnocentrism must be heeded: the anthropology of art is not the study of objects of other cultures that Europeans have accepted as belonging to their category ‘art.’ If the anthropology of art is to make a useful contribution, then it must be by virtue of a concept of art that is sufficiently open to allow the analysis of objects from other cultures on their own terms, while at the same time, perhaps, helping to identify categories of objects in other cultures that, though not identical with the European category of art objects, overlap with it to a certain extent.” Howard MORPHY, “The Anthropology of Art,” in: *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Tim Ingold (London–New York: Routledge, 1994), 655.

¹² MORPHY, “The Anthropology of Art,” 655.

One of the most comprehensive anthropological concepts of art, however, was formulated by Alfred Gell.¹³ The British anthropologist wanted to free ‘art’ from the constraints of aesthetics formed in modern Western culture, and therefore proposed a socio-relational matrix in which art is embodied.¹⁴ Gell soon named this matrix (*Art and Agency*), supplementing his semiotic theory with Charles Peirce’s nomenclature.¹⁵ However, anyone reading this nexus in the context of Peirce’s semiotic theory would be mistaken. Gell’s anthropological concept is based on interpersonal relationships. The structure of the nexus is the relationship between the agent and the patient, inspired by an artifact (index). Inspiration is a form of agency, therefore Gell views art objects and other artifacts or indirect actions as a type of agents. These agents are characterized by their agency, similar to humans, but lack essential human characteristics such as self-awareness, intention, will, or responsibility. Gell thus distinguishes human agents, calling them primary agents, and indexical agents – secondary agents. The essence of the nexus is therefore an intentional interpersonal relationship that connects people, even if only in a tentative abduction of agency, thanks to the inspiring role of the artifact. A work of art is therefore a medium for contact with another human being – this is the anthropological foundation of this theory.¹⁶

Anthropological concepts, although they stand in complete or partial opposition to traditional Western aesthetics, draw on their vast legacy. They draw on this vast edifice of thought and achievement to such an extent that Tim Ingold’s question becomes valid: “For how can a discipline whose project is rooted in the intellectual history of the Western world meet the challenge presented by non-Western understandings of humanity, culture, and social life without undercutting its own epistemological foundations?”¹⁷ The issue concerns not only the research discipline but also art. Is a common channel of experience for two different beings possible, as in Nagel’s famous “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”¹⁸ In this case, however, the meaning of this question refers not to a cultural channel or consciousness,

¹³ See Alfred GELL, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹⁴ Alfred GELL, “Technology and Magic,” *Anthropology Today* 4, no. 2 (1988):7.

¹⁵ Charles Sanders PEIRCE, “Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs,” in: *The Philosophy of Peirce: Selected Writings*, ed. Justus Buchler (London: Kegan Paul, 1955), 98-119.

¹⁶ Gell uses the term ‘art’ in relation to different kinds of artifacts, making himself vulnerable to numerous objections. See e.g. ROSS BOWDEN, “A Critique of Alfred Gell on «Art and Agency»,” *Oceania* 74, no. 4 (2004):309-324.

¹⁷ Tim INGOLD, “General introduction,” in: *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Tim Ingold (London: Routledge, 1996), xvii.

¹⁸ Thomas NAGEL, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974):435-450.

but rather to the degree of empathy, to the ability to experience the whole other person with your whole being,¹⁹ to a certain kind of connection with another person. This is immersion. We can associate this experience with other words, such as contemplation, openness, or engagement. What connects the mentioned and the unmentioned, however, is the common denominator of humanity, and with it the need to take into account the overall potential of the human person.

The specificity of human contribution to artistic endeavor can be viewed in various ways. One important potentiality is ‘meta-sensemaking,’²⁰ but at the forefront, I see the personal moral dimension, which determines the realization of an individual’s potentiality in all their relationships.

2. THE HUMAN AND TECHNOLOGY: ANTHROPOLOGIST’S PERSPECTIVE

The ancient word ‘techne,’ insofar as we know, had a broad meaning of the ability to produce. Throughout the history of culture, this meaning has changed in scope and content, and today ‘art’ is partially returning to its original meaning. According to Gell, art is not the opposite of technology, but rather is technology itself,²¹ and an ideal technology is magic. The contemporary technological drive strives for production without defects, without side effects, without excessive effort or particular struggle and hardship.²² Technology today, however, primarily develops the field of utility, while art – following the passing of Kant’s idea of disinterestedness – is not limited to any function or property, and both also develop far from moral values and goals. In the context of Western culture, which spread around the world with colonization and especially globalization, another aspect is crucial: the emancipation of the field of art and its ennoblement in the social world. This situation has been repeatedly opposed by art professionals,²³ and

¹⁹ Engagement as an experience of mediation of visible and immaterial reality is the subject of, among others, the article: Anna KAWALEC, “Agency of Breath – Beyond Disciplinary Views on Ritual,” in: *The Logic of Social Practices*, ed. Raffaella Giovagnoli, and Robert Lowe (Cham: Springer, 2020), 169-185, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-37305-4_11.

²⁰ Simona CHIODO, “What AI ‘art’ can teach us about art,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 16, no. 1 (2024):2395511, DOI:10.1080/20004214.2024.2395511.

²¹ GELL, “Technology and Magic,” 7.

²² See KAWALEC, *Osoba i Nexus*, 155; on Alfred Gell’s conception of art as technology see KAWALEC, *Osoba i Nexus*, *Alfreda Gella antropologiczna teoria sztuki*, 167-177.

²³ Among others, in the famous statement by George Dicki or the famous manifest of Jean BAUDRILLARD, *The Conspiracy of Art*, ed. Sylvire Lotringer, Transl. by Ames Hodges (New York–Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2005).

the anthropologist Gell also opposed it as a phenomenon of the sacralization of art.²⁴

To distance ourselves from Western aesthetic approaches, Gell proposes examining the art object as an object, without admiring its aesthetic qualities. This objective perspective dictates that the work of art be viewed primarily as an element of humanity's relationship to its social, cultural, and natural environment, as well as a fragment of technological development in the human world.²⁵

3. "L'ART COMME PRODUCTION DE RELATIONS HUMAINES"

There are many concepts of relationality, but they differ significantly. The concept described above, of anthropological provenance, differs significantly from the one developed in Western culture by Nicolas Bourriaud. The French art critic wrote: "The essence of artistic practice is the invention of relations within the context of human culture: the essence of art, the proposition of a common man's life; and the artist's work, the work of rapports with the world's general rapports, infinity."²⁶ This generalized formula of artistic action has its roots in the theory of "l'esthétique de la co-présence" by Michel Maffesoli, whose projects are never completed, project "does not have a specific plan, but is content to live from day to day, in the simple pleasure of living, with others, an existence 'without quality' un *carpe diem* renouvelé."²⁷

So what is the difference between the anthropological variant and Bourriaud's version? There are many differences, but for the sake of the article's problem, which is immersion, I will highlight one: by emphasizing the role of social relations, the French abstract from the categories of subjectivity and identity, reducing the individual to an element of the neo-tribe as a network,

²⁴ In the Western culture, according to Gell, we deal with "Art Cult," as art has become for the society its religion: Alfred GELL, "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology," in: *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, ed. Jeremy Coote, and Anthony Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 40-66. Reprinted in: ed. Eric HIRSCH, *The Art of Anthropology: Essays and Diagrams* (London: Athlone, 1999), 162; reprint: Berg, Oxford 2006, p. 159-186.

²⁵ See KAWALEC, *Osoba i Nexus, Alfreda Gella antropologiczna teoria sztuki*, 167-177.

²⁶ Nicolas BOURRIAUD, "Pour une esthétique relationnelle (Première partie)," *Documents sur l'art* 7 (1995):88-99. See also Nicolas BOURRIAUD, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Dijon: Presses du réel, 1998).

²⁷ Michel MAFFESOLI, *La Transfiguration du politique: la tribalisation du monde* (Paris: Grasset, 1992), 201-202 (own translation). See his most popular book: Michel MAFFESOLI, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2012).

beyond their genetic, cultural, and social motivations, beyond their tribal or national genealogy. The new tribe is a network of individuals connected in various ways, virtually or physically, based on similar hobbies, similar emotions, and similar opinions. A social network created on such a foundation, however, can be a network “sans qualité,” without purpose, without roots, without commitment, and without empathy. It is difficult not to relate this construction to Søren Kierkegaard’s famous lowest aesthetic stage of human life.²⁸ Genealogy is crucial to experiencing the identity of the community, and within it, of each participant. Gell presents the genealogy in the image of fractality – it is difficult to find a theory of a stronger identification of the individual with the community, within which the individual co-realizes the common good in a relatively free and conscious way.

The reduction of the concept of the human person in the perspective of the aforementioned French theories consists in omitting those personal dimensions that constitute a person’s identity, roots, personal history and community, potentialities, especially rationality and volition, the hierarchy of values, and what determines life choices and actions. While the French emphasize the value of social relationships during a crisis of relationships, the question remains: Are the new tribes-networks proposed by Bourriaud and Maffesoli, of a transnational, transreligious, transtribal, transpolitical, and transqualitative nature (“sans qualité”), whose goal is “the content of one’s life in the day, in the simplest of ways,” an environment that corresponds to the overall structure and dynamics of the human person? Is this theory adequate to an integrated, complex, and dynamic concept of the human person and community? Is the concept of relational aesthetics, in which “the artist’s work, the work of the world’s rapports, and the world’s general rapports, infinity,” an adequate response to the crisis of relationships? To illustrate this problem, two socio-artistic-aesthetic situations will be described below.

4. XR FESTIVAL

An example of a socio-artistic-aesthetic endeavor (the order of attributes is important) is the CAPHE (Communities and Artistic Participation in Hybrid Environment) project, organized by ten partners from Europe and Kenya, Africa, under the EU Horizon grant MSCA-2021-SE-01. This part of the broader

²⁸ “The aesthetic choice is either altogether immediate, and thus no choice, or it loses itself in a great multiplicity.” See KIERKEGAARD, *Either/Or*, 188.

endeavor²⁹ took place in Florence under the name XR Festival Florence from June 13 to June 16, 2024. The festival primarily comprised the XR Exhibition, *Orfeo & Lwanda* VR Opera, and a Video Immersive Show & Performance. The exhibition space was the Oratorio Santa Croce al Tempio, while the opera's I Video Immersive Show and Performance³⁰ was the Cattedrale dell'Immagine in Florence. The Oratorio, a single-nave sacred space, hosted various artistic experiments – physical, virtual, and hybrid – sculptures, poetry, architecture, and immersive performances. The aim of these experiments was to explore the limitations and potential of XR in the evolution of artistic expression and the audience's aesthetic experience. The main curator of this part of the exhibition was Aleksandra Łukaszewicz, co-creator of the Festival's concept as Numerical Art. This title essentially encompassed the core of the entire project, as Łukaszewicz's interpretation drew on ancient Pythagorean traditions and applied them to a hybrid environment – a combination of physical elements (art) and digital technologies (science). The experiments explored various forms and proportions of these combinations. Thus, 'numerical art' became the fundamental form of hybrid artistic experiments at this festival and most of the projects of the entire CAPHE project.

The central part of the XR Festival, however, was Friday, June 14, 2024. A marathon of hybrid, physical, and virtual artistic initiatives began at 6 p.m. The first three hours were dedicated to a hybrid opera, as the artistic director and director wrote in one of her posts describing an image from the opera depicting a physical, virtual, and hybrid actor: "the Trinity character." The opera, titled *Orfeo & Lwanda*, was based on the story of Orpheus, based on Claudio Monteverdi's famous work, and the still-living legend of an African hero from the Sidho clan (Kenya), Lwanda (Luanda), Magere, with extraordinary strength and "stony skin."³¹ The creators also treated the opera as an experiment: not only did they attempt to integrate stories, music, set design, and choreography, as well as actors and choirs from different cultures, highlighting their universal meanings, but above all, they employed technologies that met the goals of a hybrid environment. The genesis of the project, which continues to this day, stems from the pandemic period, when an invisible virus dominated forms of social action.³² It was then that the Virtual Stage was created, which has now evolved into a hybrid format. Amid the alter-

²⁹ <https://www.caphe.space/>.

³⁰ Artistic Direction was provided by Carla Zanin and Alessio Bianciardi, and the producers were Federico Bardazzi and Paolo Belloci.

³¹ On the story of Luanda Magere see <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/luanda-magere-the-story-of-the-great-luo-warrior-national-museums-of-kenya/3wVxPc0dTAt5IQ?hl=en>.

³² See Anna KAWALEC, "COVID-19 as the primary agent," *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* (2020):295-296, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12867>.

nating sounds of baroque opera and African rhythms, the viewer experienced overwhelming visual stimuli, flowing not only from the main stage, where the actor performed in physical form, but also from a 2D avatar and a video projection. The changing projections of landscapes and geometry on all the walls and ceiling of Cattedrale dell'Immagine (the Cathedral of the Immagine) created a powerful impression. The impact was profound, especially at the beginning of the performance, intended to 'immerce' the viewer into the worlds (or worlds?) of Orpheus and Lwanda. The performance concluded with an open African dance, to which everyone was invited: the creators and the audience.

That evening's "hybrid opera" was complemented by the second part of a virtual art performance. Previous technologies were utilized to maintain an all-encompassing visual and audio experience. It seems that the physical presence of the audience, who were to be transfixed by the variability of forms, colors, and shapes, along with the accompanying music, could be considered a physical element of this performance. During the "Video Immersive Show & Performance," which lasted until midnight, viewers experienced approximately twenty experimental short films (prepared by Teatro Studio Krypton, Roberto Malfagia, BODYNET-KHOROS, Davide Martiello, Federico Niccolai, Anastasia Tsoutsouka, Lui Avallos, and others). Mixed techniques were most frequently used, such as video installations, video animations, CGI encompassing both 2D and 3D graphics, performances, sound design, and XR in interdisciplinary dimensions. All the paintings described themselves as "immersive," and the entire show was described by the organizers as "meditative."

5. A FEW WORDS FROM THE AUDIENCE ABOUT THIS PART OF THE FESTIVAL IN THE CONTEXT OF EXPERIENCING IMMERSIVE HYBRID ART

Both parts lasted over five hours in total. It was a massive organizational undertaking, involving a very large group of artists, technicians, and organizers. It seems the group numbered at least one hundred people. During the opera, the audience numbered only slightly more, and during the performance, it gradually decreased. The immersive experience was therefore short-lived. The visuals and sounds quickly became oppressive, overwhelming, even disruptive to 'meditation.' As a viewer, my first association was with Artaud's "Le Théâtre de la cruauté," but it was quickly verified – in Artaud's theater,³³ the goal was to experience

³³ See Antonin ARTAUD, *The Theatre and Its Double*, transl. Mark Taylor-Batty (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024).

the tangibility, physicality, and literalness of ‘metaphysical’ reality, without any mediation, to shock the spectator into seeing the lie of his world. It was meant to be an experience of catharsis.³⁴ During the shows, viewers had no chance to meditate; after two or three paintings, they stopped following the images, avoided deafening sounds, and, if they remained in the cathedral, they strongly selected the images they perceived. I remember one: Jorge Forero’s *Terra Australis Ignota* – an original historical abbreviation of maps of the Earth. The creators might respond: it is wonderful that something has stuck in your memory, you have been enriched by this experience, and you will continue to be enriched, because – to echo Bourriaud’s words – “the work of each artist, a bundle of relationships with the world which would generate other relationships, to infinity.” But isn’t this precisely Maffesoli’s idea of the human being: “does not have a specific plan, but is content to live from day to day, in the simple pleasure of living, with others, an existence ‘without quality?’” As a result, I didn’t experience catharsis, or if I did experience any form of it, it was as a moral: beware of an excess of visual and auditory stimuli, because their effect will reduce your experience of yourself as a human being, a rich and diverse being with a history and whose goal is to pursue goodness and take responsibility for it.

Thanks to my participation in the CAPHE project,³⁵ I had the opportunity to formulate this moral. However, I cannot omit one more observation. The aim of my participation in the project was to gain insight into the city of Florence and its surroundings, a tourist city with a vast tradition of Renaissance art. The extent to which diverse participants in this community are interested in issues related to the “Fourth Industrial Revolution,”³⁶ how they assess its achievements, how they perceive and value digital or hybrid art forms, and whether they had information about the ongoing XR Festival in Florence and whether they would be willing to participate in such an endeavor. Among the 30 or so interviewees (mostly tourists and four city residents, mostly aged 21–40), approximately one-quarter were familiar with the “Fourth Industrial Revolution,” over three-quarters were critical of its achievements, and the same number acknowledged its contributions to medicine. Four people were aware of the ongoing festival – they were also participants. The most comprehensive critique of technological advancements and their impact on social relations came from tourists, a young

³⁴ On the interpretation of this category in various dramatic forms, see Anna KAWALEC, “Comic Agents: From a poetic to an anthropological paradigm of comedy (Aristotle and Alfred Gell),” *AGATHOS* 7, no. 1 (2016):7-23, <https://www.agathos-international-review.com/issues/2016/12/Kawalec.pdf>.

³⁵ The internship lasted from May 30 to June 28, 2024.

³⁶ Klaus SCHWAB, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* (n.p.: Penguin Books, 2017).

couple from Japan, emphasizing their reducing impact on social relations at various levels, which they illustrated with examples from their hometowns. Six participants expressed interest in the festival. The results of surveys and interviews, as well as the festival's reception experience, suggest a significant, though perhaps obvious, conclusion: There is a small group of people in society interested in technological advancements; the rest view them quite critically, yet appreciate their usefulness in helping others. Does digital or hybrid art fulfill this function? Do the tools used by digital artists serve the good of humanity and the human community? A significant portion of respondents responded negatively. This conclusion resonates with the aforementioned idea of neo-tribes, with all the unfortunately shortcomings of these digital or hybrid 'communities.' The main slogans of the CAPHE project: Art-Education-Community, seem to be implemented by a small group of creators interested in the topic, much less often by the environment (many of whom see significant shortcomings in the dissemination of this form of activity and the use of the 'art' label³⁷ and are financially supported by EU grants.

Without a doubt, mobility, conversation, and experimental production foster networking. The question remains: At what cost? And it is not just about European funding, but the price our neo-tribe civilization will pay in the context of world history. If the goal of "immersive hybrid art" is precisely – and solely – to pose this question, then the Festival has fulfilled its purpose.

6. INTEGRAL AESTHETICS – AESTHETICS OF CONTEMPLATION

The opposite of the above-described socio-artistic CAPHE initiative is another example of a socio-historical-artistic project, discussed in this article. For this purpose, a permanent museum exhibition was selected in the Pavilion X of the Museum of Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic at 37 Rakowiecka Street in Warsaw. This exhibition could be perceived as a type of site-specific art, if the concept of 'art' did not disrupt and reduce the meanings of this reality.

The example to be cited is not only contrasted in terms of tools, purpose, and effectiveness, but also alludes to the space in which the events in Florence unfolded. The Oratorio and the Cathedral, the festival venue, presented original architecture, complete with original religious frescoes. The Cattedrale dell'Immagine is the name of the Ex Chiesa di Santo Stefano al Ponte – a Romanesque church,

³⁷ See CHIODO, "What AI 'art' can teach us about art," 2395511.

restored in the 17th century, now dedicated to digital art.³⁸ Both sites are rooted in the turbulent religious tradition of the Florentines. During the festival, the cathedral's walls were covered with distracting hybrid essays of varying provenance, and the altar was replaced by a physical-hybrid figure of an opera actor.

The opposite happened with the space at the prison on Rakowiecka Street. This building was constructed in the early 20th century, while Warsaw was under Russian rule. During World War II, the Germans imprisoned political prisoners there, and in 1944, Warsaw insurgents. After the war and the takeover by a government subordinate to Moscow, this prison (like the first prison known as Toledo in Warsaw's Praga district, which was developed into a housing estate in the 1970s) became a place of martyrdom and death for Polish political prisoners until the 1980s.³⁹ Unlike Toledo, the building on Rakowiecka Street was not demolished, and in 2016, the then Minister of Justice decreed the closure of the prison and its redesignation.⁴⁰ A museum was established.

When, in subsequent years, the staff organized the exhibition of Pavilion X – the central part of the museum's martyrdom architecture – they decided to include a copy of the icon of Our Lady of Częstochowa, commemorating the 1966 imprisonment of the image, which concluded its pilgrimage around Poland before the Jasna Góra Vows.⁴¹ Originally, the icon was to be placed in one of the prison cells as a memento of the imprisonment. However, when the image was brought from Jasna Góra by the Pauline Fathers to Rakowiecka Street, the artistic director decided to place the icon at the central intersection of the interior of the cuboid architecture of Pavilion X. The image is located at the height of the first floor, visible from almost every part of the pavilion. Today, several rows of chairs are placed in front of the icon, prepared for participants in services for murdered patriots and for museum visitors who wish to pray before the Mother of God.

³⁸ This year, 2025, the event is an immersive presentation of the achievements of Leonardo da Vinci.

³⁹ Among those murdered on Rakowiecka Street were General August Emil Fieldorf "Nil," Major Zygmunt Szendzielarz "Łupaszka," the commander of the National Military Union Józef Kozłowski "Las" and the well-known Captain Witold Pilecki.

⁴⁰ See the relevant legal act: <https://sip.lex.pl/akty-prawne/dzienniki-resortowe/utworzenie-i-nadania-regulaminu-muzeum-zolnierzy-wykletych-i-wiezniow-35073734>.

⁴¹ The Vows, as well as the planned Great Novena and nine-year pilgrimage of a copy of the icon of Our Lady of Jasna Góra, were intended to prepare the faithful for the celebration of the Millennium of the Baptism of Poland. These celebrations were to culminate on May 3, 1966, with a solemn Act of Dedication of the Nation to Our Lady for the freedom of the Church in Poland and throughout the world. See Kordyasz Piotr, *Jasna Góra Vows of the Polish Nation (1948-1956), Stalinism in Poland (August 15, 2021)*. <https://przystanekhistoria.pl/pa2/tematy/stepan-wyszynski/85559,Jasnogorskie-Sluby-Narodu-Polskiego.html>.

The exhibition organizers, however, prepared another form of exhibit – traditionally museum-like, yet surprisingly harmonized with the exhibition’s purpose, location, and time. On each floor, in front of almost every (open) cell door, on the corridor side, they placed a life-size photograph of a prisoner who had (or was presumed to have) been in that cell. Next to the black-and-white portrait photograph was a biographical sketch, sometimes with fragments of words spoken or written by the prisoner or their loved ones as they sought to bury the body of a son or relative. The photograph was mounted on cardboard on both sides, so that visitors walking down the corridor and past the cell, facing the door, could look at the prisoner’s face and read his words and note, and could see the same face from anywhere in the block. The face on this side faced the center of the space, toward the Icon. The purpose of the space, in the case of the Florence festival and the Warsaw museum, therefore has a symbolic, yet real, contrasting history. It seems that the history of their destiny corresponds to the situation of European civilization in which we find ourselves.

The Icon’s location in the prison-museum on Rakowiecka Street, along with photographs of prisoners and chairs for religious services, has its own special value, which I will at least mention.⁴² This seemingly trivial exhibition device of a traditional museum serves a threefold function. First, it serves as a fundamental informational and aesthetic element of any cultural institution. The location and the simple interactive method employed create a meta-mimesis effect,⁴³ ensuring a direct experience. The organizers do not employ any advanced technologies or flashy methods of interaction. The traditional museum device allows for a personal, intimate relationship with the protagonist, his choices, actions, and demeanor during interrogations. The prison visitor pauses, stands silently, gazes into the depths of the originally preserved cell, looks into the protagonist’s eyes, and sometimes reads his words, revealing his exhaustion and heroism. He stands and watches. Secondly, placing the prisoners’ portraits on the other side of the cardboard boxes, facing the icon of Our Lady of Częstochowa, creates an uninterrupted and invisible connection between Mary’s gaze and the face and cell of each tortured prisoner. Mary’s gaze is directed directly at the viewer; one cannot help but feel that, just as Our Lady is looking at me in this moment, standing before Her Face, she is also looking at the face of each prisoner – “looking with the heart” in this immaterial, authentic relationship. Thirdly, however, the photographs placed in front of

⁴² I discussed the above-mentioned functions of the Icon’s influence in more detail in the article *Mother of God in the prison on Rakowiecka Street*, which is currently forthcoming.

⁴³ See Anna KAWALEC, “Evolutions of Metamimesis – Between Theoretical Category and Method of Artistic Practice,” *Zagadnienia Naukoznawstwa* 2, no. 212 (2017):261-277, <https://bibliotekanauki.pl/articles/577876>.

each cell create a spherical circle of permanent participants in the ongoing service, who never ‘leave’ the church, as happens among believers carrying out their daily duties. They remain in a holy place, in peace, forever. This dimension of the exhibition reveals the reality of universal and eternal laws that transcend human laws.

Visitors to the prison-museum can pause at various levels of experience. However, each experience, thanks to the realism of the place and the maximum transparency of methods and means, offers a chance to experience who a person is. It is a chance for a holistic ‘catharsis,’ for a compelling answer to the question “who am I and what must I do to be human?” These are questions of Kierkegaard’s “either/or” or Marcel’s “being and having.”⁴⁴ These questions, and the answers we sometimes offer ourselves, fulfill the function of an integral and effective immersion.

7. INSTEAD OF ENDING

Representatives of some tribal communities in the southwestern United States separate Western ‘art’ from the reality of life. This is a simple and deliberate division. In this article, we follow this path. This decision stems from the conviction that Western culture, and today even global culture, has subjected greatness and the inseparable responsibility of a person to the current of technologicalization, speculation, and conformism. Stefan Swieżawski warned 30 years ago that the development of sciences, technology, and convenience has been paid for at an unbelievably high price, because it leads to the loss of wisdom and sapiential-contemplative values.⁴⁵

Wisdom in its original sense develops in fundamental questions, at the interface between humanity and the difficulties of life. This is where immersive ‘art’ is born – without attractions,⁴⁶ sophisticated theories, sophisticated terminology, and without comfort, without colorful images and technical aids that block access to the fundamental existential problems and questions of human beings. Such ascetic, immersive art teaches how to live. The nature of such ‘art’ is explained by the following examples of Native American statements:

⁴⁴ Gabriel MARCEL, *Being and Having*, transl. Katharine Farrer (Glasgow: Dacre Press Westminster, 1949).

⁴⁵ See Stefan SWIEŻAWSKI, *St. Thomas Revisited*, transl. Theresa H. Sandok, Catholic Thought from Lublin 8 (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).

⁴⁶ On the asceticism of art allowing immersion, see Anna KAWALEC, *Killers of Justice: An aesthetic and anthropological perspective*, Leiden University, Institute of Cultural Studies, accessed October 11, 2025, <https://www.itiwana.org/copy-of-ica-1-2024-aesthetics>.

My grandparents are artists as defined by Western culture, one is a silversmith, and the other is a painter. They are also artists when they plow their fields, tend to their horses, and grind their corn. I am also an artist when I make a basket to take to the kiva or bake bread in the horno in preparation for a feast day. To me, <art> is my children , my work, my home, and my community (Paula Rivera from Taos Pueblo)

and

The word “art” is not found in our language. But what do we call a piece of work created by the hands of my family? What will we call that piece which embodies the life of its creator? What will it be if it has a life and soul, while its maker sings and prays for it? In my home we call it pottery... We make pieces of life to see, touch, and feel. Shall we call it “art”? I hope not. It may lose its soul. It is life. It is people (Michael Lacapa, Apache/Hopi/Tewa)⁴⁷

and

The word “art” is not found in our language. But what do we call a piece of work created by the hands of my family? What will we call that piece which embodies the life of its creator? What will it be if it has a life and soul, while its maker sings and prays for it?... We make pieces of life to see, touch, and feel. Shall we call it “art”? I hope not. It may lose its soul. It is life. It is people (Michael Lacapa, Apache/Tewa).⁴⁸

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⁴⁷ Joan K. O’DONNELL, ed., *Here, Now, and Always: Voices of the First People of the Southwest* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2001).

⁴⁸ O’DONNELL, ed., *Here, Now, and Always*.

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IMMERSION IN ART: HYBRID AND LIVING ART

SUMMARY

This article examines the characteristics of art attributed to artistic activities and creations that use the latest technological tools. It also considers the process by which this art influences the viewer. In this article, I will demonstrate the appropriative and reductive nature of this meaning of ‘immersion.’ To this end, I will utilize the anthropological concept of art, especially that of A. Gell’s, which emphasizes the relational nature of art. Through description of two case studies: a performance produced as part of the XR Festival in Florence in July 2024, and the time-space of Warsaw’s Cursed Soldiers Museum, I will explore the scope of this currently popular concept and propose a direction for interpreting ‘immersion’ in the human world.

Keywords: immersion; life art; hybrid art; integrated life; Festival XR; Museum of the Cursed Soldiers

IMMERSJA W SZTUCE: SZTUKA HYBRYDOWA I SZTUKA ŻYWA

STRESZCZENIE

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje cechy sztuki przypisywane działaniom twórców wykorzystujących najnowsze narzędzia technologiczne. Rozważa również proces, w jaki ta sztuka wpływa na odbiorcę. W artykule zademonstruję zawłaszczający i redukcyjny charakter tego znaczenia „zanurzenia”. W tym celu wykorzystam antropologiczną koncepcję sztuki, zwłaszcza koncepcję A. Gella, w której podkreśla się relacyjny charakter sztuki. Poprzez opis dwóch studiów przypadku: performansu zrealizowanego w ramach Festiwalu XR we Florencji w lipcu 2024 roku oraz czasoprzestrzeni Muzeum Żołnierzy Wyklętych w Warszawie, zgłębię zakres tej obecnie popularnej koncepcji i zaproponuję kierunek interpretacji ludzkiego „zanurzenia” w świecie.

Słowa kluczowe: immersja; sztuka żywa; sztuka hybrydowa; życie zintegrowane; Festiwal XR; Muzeum Żołnierzy Wyklętych