

# Personal Take: In the Wake of the Virtual

FRANCES DYSON

In 1995, when Char Davies exhibited her seminal virtual reality (VR) work *Osmose*, immersive media was so novel, the experience so unparalleled, that virtual space was represented as real, habitable and a potential substitute for physical, earth-bound existence. With the 'information age' approaching, volumes were written on the phenomenology of the virtual experience, with commentators engaging in various forms of futurology – establishing the present as always being in a state of anticipation, defined by wild predictions about the next technological innovation and the changes it would bring. Roughly half a decade later, the dot-com bubble burst, followed by the housing bubble and the global financial crisis. In retrospect, those heady, blue-sky assumptions about VR seem almost farcical, and the concept of 'virtuality' itself a remnant from a bygone era, untouched by the daunting finitude of ecological and economic catastrophe.

The 'wake of the virtual' is both a backwash of those heady days and a constant ritual of mourning. While we continue to be shaped by the technologies, visions and artistic expressions of all that the virtual represented, at the same time, we mourn the passing of that era of optimistic, future-oriented plenitude. The storms, heatwaves, floods, droughts and extreme weather patterns that characterise the anthropocene are now impossible to ignore, immersing us in a form of cognitive dissonance that neither technological innovation, nor governmental/corporate intervention, can adequately address. The pressures of economic growth on the one hand, and ecological survival on the other, require a different mode of conceptualisation, a different artistic practice, one that (to paraphrase Jean-Luc Nancy) is cognisant of finitude, but not caught in the narcissism of mourning:

We are at the confines of the multidirectional, plurilocal, reticulated, spacious space in which we take place. We do not occupy the originary point of the perspective, or the overhanging point of an axonometry, but we touch our limits on all sides, our gaze touches its limits on all sides . . . All space of sense is common space (hence all space is common space . . . ) . . . The political is the place of the in-common as such. (Nancy 1997, 40, 88)

For writers, thinkers and artists, the challenge then is to work within these confines – indeed, to be immersed within these confines – and to draw something from them, a map, a way of proceeding, that is also a movement towards the ‘in common’.

Whereas the rhetoric of new media at the turn of the millennium stressed the evolution from ‘seeing’ to ‘being’, what I find now is that artists who were most involved in the early stages of virtual reality – in particular Davies and Australian media artist and organiser Gary Warner – have moved from the overoptimistic and perhaps almost hubristic notion of ‘being’ as an existential condition of virtual reality, to a far more realistic, humble and ecologically oriented notion of ‘being-in-common’.

Davies’s current project *Rêverie*, named after her thousand acres of mostly forest in southern Québec, is both actual land and a 3D virtual environment – less of an installation, or exhibition, than something she describes as a ‘conversation’, involving her in a dialogue with the land she is mapping and technologically visualising, while also inhabiting and protecting. While vastly different to her earlier virtual environments *Osmose* and *Ephémère*, *Rêverie* could not have been possible without Davies’s prior experience in thinking and composing spatially, or ‘in-the-round’.<sup>1</sup> In a way, VR formed her current practice, and yet, as she writes, the ethic of this praxis is vastly different from the ethos of control that VR often represents and that Davies, throughout her oeuvre, has always tried to subvert.

Indeed, Davies’s threefold process of ‘composing, capturing and care’<sup>2</sup> heralds a very different form of immersion, one that is technically adaptive, but primarily and deeply anchored to the earth. Significantly, it is the aspect of ‘care’ that compels her, in the first instance, to her acres of forest:

Here now, in *Rêverie*, I have entered into a lifelong apprenticeship, gradually learning the complexities of this actual forest, the will of water that courses through it, and so on . . . Essentially speaking, I do not own this land: rather it owns me, and for the next thirty years, if I’m fortunate, I am its human.

Land and environment is also an aesthetic engine of sorts for Gary Warner. Deeply influenced by the solitude that being immersed in nature affords, Warner recommends spending time

in a place where man-made structures are distant and media technologies absent; where old life prevails, where contact with other beings and changing weather conditions is immediate, rather than mediated.<sup>3</sup>

In reflecting on his years of involvement with immersive media, Warner describes his current work as a way out of the continuous cycles



**Figure 14.1** Gary Warner, *3-pendulum harmonograph* (2015).  
Formply, brass, timber, perspex 1200 mm (w) × 1200 mm (h) × 600 mm (d). Image used courtesy of Gary Warner.

of ‘embodied obsolescence’ – a process common to many artists involved in digital media where not only are media platforms made obsolete (e.g. VHS video) but human modes of engagement (muscle memory, learned programs, all the skills that go into mastering a certain technology) become outdated every few years.<sup>4</sup> Warner’s shift to ‘energetic’ artworks, often developed on the land he owns in the Origma Reserve (an off-grid undeveloped bush property an hour northwest of Sydney) is in part motivated by a desire to embody, or re-embody, physical forces (weight, gravity, centrifugal momentum, vibration, resonance, impact, etc.). The ‘visual and sounding machines’ he builds from the cans, bottle tops, bits of wire and other detritus of human consumption are at once sonic and symbolic, aesthetic structures and lessons in the physics of movement and sound. His *3-pendulum harmonograph* (2015, Figure 14.1), for instance, ‘requires no external power source but rather is activated by transference of energy from a human body to weighted pendulums’, and then left to ‘create drawings [and sounds] as the energy is gradually “lost” in the system’.<sup>5</sup> *The social lamellaphone* (2014, Figure 14.2), ‘made from cast-off street-sweeper bristles . . . collected from the streets of inner-city Sydney’, is a collaborative experimental musical instrument/sound sculpture that requires ‘no power source for its activation other than fingers and mind’.<sup>6</sup> With its voice-like tonal qualities, *the social lamellaphone* ‘induces a frame of mind conducive to conversation’ that occurs during its playing.



Figure 14.2 Gary Warner, *The social lamellophone* (2014).

Blackbutt tops & bridges, jelutong sound boxes, plywood stand, brass fixings, steel tines 1120 mm diameter  $\times$  980 mm (h), 270 steel tines each 3 mm (w)  $\times$  110 mm (l). Image used courtesy of Gary Warner.

These conversations spread aesthetics through social space – the space of the ‘in-common’.

Conversing with forces that are intuited rather than landscapes that are masterfully navigated and motivated by serendipitous events rather than programmable outcomes, both Davies and Warner exemplify an approach that takes the commons, the environment and the space we all share as a fundamental point of reference. In doing so, they enable an aesthetic sense to develop which is not merely sensuous, but is sensible: a vehicle for *making* sense within, and despite, the conflicting pressures that define our present *as* an era that seems to make no sense at all.

## Notes

- 1 For more information on Davies’s work see her website [www.immersence.com/](http://www.immersence.com/). Davies writes: ‘I would not be doing my current work if I had not made these imaginary immersive landscapes first. In hindsight, it seems inevitable that my creative process has expanded, spatially as well as temporally, to working with this actual landscape, all around.’ (Personal correspondence with the author, September 2015.)
- 2 “‘Composing’ involves focusing attention on actual sites within *Rêverie*, each with its own ecological history, seeking to amplify what I find most special here . . . We are also “capturing” certain places here, some composed and others left untouched, through 3D visualization technology in order to manifest how I see, what I sense, beyond conventional assumptions about the world as a collection of solid static objects in empty space (a longstanding goal since I began working with 3D digital technology in the mid 80’s).’ This and the following citations are taken from Davies’s reflections on *Rêverie*, September 2015, personal correspondence with author.
- 3 Excerpt from talk ‘On spending time alone’, Sydney, July 2015.
- 4 Conversation with Warner, Sydney 2015.
- 5 Warner, artist notes, *3-pendulum harmonograph* (2015).
- 6 Warner, artist notes, *The social lamellophone* (2014).