A Forest. A Clearing.

Ross Gibson

Abstract

This paper examines the modes of engagement activated when participants are immersed in extra-cinematic, audiovisual art installations. These modes — simultaneously intensely involved and reflectively critical — are shown to be germane to contemporary needs to understand complexity, dynamics and entropy in everyday experience.

Keywords: immersion, critical reflection, complexity, dynamics, interaction

Introduction

In this brief meditation on the theme of “inside & outside”, I’ll offer something I’ve learned from making and installing an immersive audiovisual artwork called “Street X-Rays”. I’ll gather a few glimmers about art, about the world, and about the process of being historically conscious in the dynamic scenes of everyday space and time. Let’s call it a small quantum of knowledge, researched and evidenced. To get this knowledge across to you — to shift it from being tacit within me so that it can be explicit and communicable to you — I’ll need to describe the artwork. And I’ll have to give you some ways to delve into it, to investigate and interrogate it so you can test the ideas and affections that I contend are generated by your presence amidst it.

But first, a couple of stories. Stories about forests. Stories to get us thinking about inside and outside, about immersion and critical distance.

Forest Story #1

Pedro Fernandez de Quiros was a Portuguese mariner who rose to prominence in Spain's imperial navy during the 1600s. Like Christopher Columbus before him, Quiros dedicated his voyage to the Franciscan missionary order. This meant that his explorations were governed by the precepts in Francis of Assisi’s “Rule of Life”, a text urging devotees to range the earth and convert pagan souls to Christ. St Francis (1182 - 1226) had envisaged a world order governed by his interpretations of the gospels.1 And four centuries after their initial decree, these precepts remained fundamental.

In December, 1605, Quiros led a flotilla west from Callao in Peru, into unknown realms of the Pacific. He was well prepared: lest all the novelty overwhelm the...
voyage, Franciscan chaplains were on board and Quiros took regular counsel from their time-honoured edicts and verities. Thus while he was generating new knowledge, gleaning it everyday from him investigative procedures, he was also relying on established knowledge stored in axioms predetermined by the forces he accepted as authoritative. His new, discovered insights wove into his received wisdom; his evolving, procedural understanding meshed with his incumbent, principled understanding.

The ships bumped eventually into the island-cluster which is nowadays called Vanuatu. Quiros dubbed the landfall “La Austrialia del Espiritu Santo”, an elegantly efficient name: it honoured the Holy Ghost, whose feast the voyagers were celebrating on this Pentecost Sunday, and it also emphasised the Austrian heritage of the Spanish sovereign Philip III whilst simultaneously describing the southerly aspect of the country.

Quiros was convinced he had encountered the east coast of the oft-predicted Terra Australis Incognita and he declared the isles to be the site of a New Jerusalem. For thirty-six days his crew busied themselves establishing a village (called Vera Cruz) on the shores of the harbour where the flotilla took shelter. Boats skiffed back and forth, a slice of open land was cleared into the shoreline, soil was tilled, and the indigenes made sure the newcomers knew they were about.

Fatalities among the islanders seem to have been fewer here than had become customary whenever the European carnival of death visited the “New Worlds”. Perhaps Quiros insisted on humane behaviour. Perhaps he was being prudent after calculating the overwhelming numbers of Melanesian warriors. Or perhaps he succumbed to a loss of faith in his principles, contributing to a kind of normless inertia, for all reports from the days at La Australia tell of a paralysis of will. So close to his presumed Utopia, Quiros seemed unable to “realize” it, unable to get his ideas and desires matched to the material attributes of this portion of the world. As O.H.K. Spate reports, on May 25, the feast day of Corpus Christi, Quiros “walked a league inland, past the already sprouting gardens he had planted, and on his return casually announced that since they stood little chance against native hostility, they would leave next day and visit the islands to windward”.2

No sooner had they weight anchor than fickle winds freshened and everything went awry on the command ship. There was dissension among the crew and Quiros was stricken with something like catatonia while junior officers seized then lost control of navigation, with the result that the command ship failed to tack into shelter, getting buffeted instead into gales and open ocean. Eventually Quiros rallied enough to order the crew to veer north and catch the winds that blew the ship east toward Acapulco, back through ocean tracts already known to him.

Meanwhile, the other ships waited at Vera Cruz until, after days of searching for the commander, Luis Vaes de Torres took charge of the remnant flotilla. He sailed a guesswork course through uncharted seas toward the Spanish colony in the
Philippines and thereby completed the famous voyage across the previously unmapped strait that still bears his name. In Manila, Torres was received as the triumphant conquistador who’d arrived clutching new charts full of fresh knowledge. In Acapulco, Quiros was shunned as a craven bungler who’d brought nothing but shame back to port.

What happened in the forest on that feast Day of Corpus Christi, 1606?

Quiros never offered details. But it’s not difficult to imagine a plausible scene. Leaving the gridded garden, Quiros ventured into the dense forest. He would have lost visual perspective almost immediately. He would have sensed the uselessness of his surveyor’s skills. Unable to rely on straightlined vision to know where he’d just come from, where he was placed right now and where he might go, he would have been assailed by smells and sounds coming at him from every direction. He would have been in panic. Literally, PANIC — he would have felt the seemingly indiscriminate wildness all around him, the excessive stimulus and threat coming from everywhere, no way to overpower or organize it, no way to apprehend quickly and safely the reliable principles in this environment, if indeed it had any principles. Sensing the inadequacies of his own cognitive systems, Quiros would have felt the need to investigate this “new” world, to learn its qualities and tendencies. He would have felt the need to become attuned to it, to be immersed and explorative in it, to feel his own constitution deform and meld with the environment so that he could alter his consciousness by imbibing the consciousness of the forest. AND he would have sensed how little security he was afforded to do so. With the indigenous warriors all around him, offering him no safety, no guidelines, he would have felt unable to let go of his precepts despite how inadequate these precepts were proving to be in the jungle. He would have felt unable to loosen comportment in order to align himself to the unaccustomed dynamics and patterns that might have prevailed in the forest. Most likely, he sensed only chaos in the steaming environment and he had no way to get clear of the enveloping stimuli, no way to reflect on the forest, to rationalize it and know something of its peculiar principles before getting engrossed again so as to investigate the profusion further, in an investigative rhythm of immersion/reflection/immersion/reflection.

Scampering back to the beach, therefore, Quiros signaled to the ship and aborted the mission, convinced this was not a place that would be readily overlaid with prescribed plans; nor would it allow him to survive the alterations and vulnerabilities implicit to investigating and imbibing local principles.

Forest Story #2

In the middle of the nineteenth Century, when Henry David Thoreau went to dwell amidst the woods near Concorde (Massachusetts), he scraped a clearing for himself alongside Walden Pond, and he made a scene for consciousness. Not only a metaphor (although it IS a metaphor), Thoreau’s clearing is much more than a
place; it’s also an unstable process in time and space, a blur between the
phenomenal world and the noumenal self. Thoreau’s clearing at Walden is a
delicate moment in a momentary place where and when intuition, reasoning,
speculation and understanding all get a chance to work on and into each other.

In his journal, Thoreau jotted this quick thought: “You cannot see anything until
you are clear of it”. He believed this even as he was convinced that nothing was
worth seeing and knowing unless it has been sensed during direct, immersed
engagement within the profuse dynamics of the world which holds and produces
everything perceptible. Hence the value of the clearing within the forest. Or, as
Frederick Garber summarises this riddle, “Thoreau … knows that a part of the self
must have a direct and immediate relationship with experience, or the observer will
have nothing at all to see”. The clearing must be within, not instead of the forest;
the clearing must be part of and not set apart from all the tumult that makes
dynamic experience. The clearing is useful because it is never completely clear
even as it affords instants of clarity.

So, Thoreau was convinced of the need for what he called “doubleness”, the need
to be always simultaneously immersed but also reflective whilst trying to know the
world and oneself, trying to know the world as oneself, trying to know the self in
the world. Which is not quite the same as trying to know the self as the world.
Quoting Garber again, we can see how the act of knowing is delicate and ephemeral
when it is at its most telling, for example when Thoreau is in his clearing,
simultaneously immersed and reflective:

The act [of knowing] is both a discovery about what the world is like (or
ought to be) and what he himself is like. In the same act he organises his
perception of himself and of his world. A clearing in the forest is not
only an instance of what consciousness can do, redeeming a piece of
nature; it is also an image of the redeeming consciousness itself, the
cleared space within which one stands and does one's relating to
experience. Furthermore, whatever consciousness gains through these
creative acts leads to an increase in the content of the mind.

For Thoreau, there must be an interplay between one’s own shaped (and shaping)
 mentality, in one plane of reality, and the dynamic liveliness of the world, in a
different but simultaneously active plane of reality. Only by interlacing these
cognitively separate modes of experience — the mode of one’s own self and the
mode of the world’s self — only by combining them whilst paradoxically also
discerning their distinctions, only then can we get to some valid notion of how the
world is arranged for us, in us, by us and despite us, in all the world’s complexity
and mutability. As Thoreau wrote in his account of A Week on the Concord and
Merrimack Rivers:

Observation is so wide awake, and facts are being so rapidly added to the
sum of human experience, that it appears as if the theorizer would always be
in arrears, and were doomed forever to arrive at imperfect conclusions; but
the power to perceive a law is equally rare in all ages of the world, and depends but little on the number of facts observed.

In other words, Thoreau understands the need to look for patterns within the flux of experience. By discerning such patterns, one might comprehend some principles that momentarily organise the world, even at the same time as one knows that change is always assailing every shape in the world, to the extent that patterns and principles must be understood to be temporary and contingent on more factors than any one human mentality will ever encompass.

**The Moral of the Stories**

Which brings us to the moral of the two forest stories, as we close in on our contemplation of the dynamic-immersive artwork called “Street X-Rays”.

For Quiros and Thoreau — the former in flight from new realizations, the latter wanting to see deeply into beckoning complexities — each sensed that he needed to be both inside and outside the experiences and objects that he was trying to understand. Each sensed the need for both a procedural (or heuristic) path to fresh knowledge and a principled (or didactic) reliance on what is already known. Each sensed that the more avidly he engaged in procedural knowing, the more elastic many of his given principles must become. And each sensed that to go into a scene with no principles prescribed would be to invite madness, incomprehension, panic.

Quiros felt the danger extremely and he recoiled from the prospect. Thoreau, on the other hand, figured how to conserve and alter himself as he absorbed the challenges of his immersive environment. And herein lies another moral, one that takes us to questions of art. Immersive, dynamic art-environments are phenomena designed like eco-systems, to put us in complexity but to put us there with sufficient care and personal security so that we stand a chance of comprehending some of the tendencies in the system. In other words, when we sense an instability or mutability in such an artwork, we can concentrate on the qualities of that instability rather than on personal dangers associated with unpredictability. The artwork is thus an investigative, contemplative, environment, closer to Thoreau’s rather than Quiros’ experience in the forest.

As artist David Rokeby has observed, when he makes dynamic, immersive installations he aspires to create relationships rather than finished artworks and he yearns to participate in systems that “reflect the consequences of our actions back to us”. Such artworks help you get a feeling for the endless flux and the paradoxically patterned unpredictability that are always coursing through the world.

In *Complexity and Postmodernism*, the philosopher Paul Ciliers explains that “complexity is diverse but organized” and “descriptions of it cannot be reduced to simple, coherent and universally valid discourses”. To know a system, it’s best to describe it. And “to describe a system”, he observes, “you have … to repeat the
system” 8 You cannot reduce a complex circumstance to a simplified model or to stabilised schematics, because complexity is definitively dynamic, relationally intricate and always adjusting. You need to experience a complex circumstance, to be with its changes through time, to feel its shifts whilst also being attuned to the historically determined tendencies and the feedback patterns of stimuli and responses that are organising it at any particular moment. Or as Cilliers explains, “complex systems have to grapple with a changing environment. … To cope with these demands the system must have two capabilities: it must be able to store information concerning the environment for future use; and it must be able to adapt … when necessary.” 9

In traditional artforms, the artist often conjures an impression of complexity either by manipulating absences or inserting deliberate contradictions which goad the perceiver’s imagination. William Empson’s Seven Types of Ambiguity is the classic study of this aesthetic and semantic plenitude in literature. 10 More recently, Andrew Benjamin’s investigation of the phenomenon of “incompletion” in painting has added to our understanding of the importance of an organised kind of indeterminacy in an artwork. 11 In traditional artforms like literature and painting, the adaptability and complexity occur in a “space” between the perceiver’s self and the artwork, in the strummed intellect, memory and senses of the person engaging with the work at a particular instant. In more recent times, digital-computational systems have emerged that enable an artwork itself — not just the relationship between the work and the perceiver — to transmogrify in response to stimuli and at the behest of active and activating codes written into it. (For me the pre-eminent examples are environments such as Gary Hill’s “Tall Ships”, Char Davies’ “Osmose” or Toshio Iwai’s music generators.) In such artworks the adaptability and complexity are to be found in the work as well as in the imaginative “space” between the perceiver and the work. Rather than being implicit and always somewhat opaque inside the ruminations of each perceiver, the complex of relationships and repercussions activated by the perceiver’s engagement with an interactive-immersive environment can now also be made explicit in the work itself.

Regardless of whether the aesthetic rendition is analogue or digital, traditional or innovative, the drive to understand the dynamics of what Cilliers calls “constrained diversity” 12 appears to be strengthening in contemporary culture. Which brings us to the nub of Cilliers’ thesis about the most effective way to know complexity. Instead of producing a schematised blueprint or a snapshot of complexity, he asserts, you need to generate an interrelated set of narratives that help you speculate about the endless dynamics of the system. You have to propose “what if” scenarios, ways to sense the probabilities of the situation. You have to cross-reference these probabilities against your own history and against the history of action and reaction in the entire system. (Note how similar this is to Rokeby’s call for artworks which “reflect the consequences of our actions back to us”.) In other words, you have to get a feeling for the way the system is tending. As fuzzy as it sounds, this heuristic kind of attitude is true to the workings of complexity.
“Complex systems are open systems” writes Cilliers. Their constituent parts (including yourself, if you are amidst them) and their dominant actions all change from moment to moment, which means often “the very distinction between “inside” and “outside” the system becomes problematic”. Complexity is not especially tractable to analysis, therefore, because the “object” under analysis is altering from moment to moment. In Cilliers’ words, “a complex system is not constituted merely by the sum of its components, but also by the intricate relationships between those components.”

If we try to map those relationships as an active network, “any given narrative will form a path, or trajectory, through the network. … [and] as we trace various narrative paths through it, it changes”. If we were to “cut up” a complex system, we would find that our “analytical method destroys what it seeks to understand”. Thus we need to treat all discernible patterns as momentary, contingent sets of principles, then we have to take those principles into the meretricious environment, knowing that the principles will eventually fail or need adjustment. Once we sense those failures and adjustments registering in our analytical faculties, we are set apart again, organizing another batch of contingent principles which we then take back into the system. Inside but outside but inside but outside but inside. It’s a rhythm that’s restless but necessary, because the world of lived experience is not simple, static or stable.

It’s a rhythm I’ve tried to encourage in “Street X-Rays”. The installation makes a clearing, I hope. It makes a clearing not in a forest necessarily, but in a kind of urban jungle, in a space and time where past and present desires and anxieties are forever shaping and altering existence in a city which we inhabit even as we reflect on it.
CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDEO FILE — wireframe of above animation. (mov format – size 3.5 MB)

CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDEO FILE — sample of the type of diptych appearing on each screen. (mov format – size 2.9 MB)
The Artwork – inside and outside “Street X-Rays”

Featuring a collection of crime-scene photographs from the 1950s, adding contemporary video cityscapes plus enigmatic texts composed as a response to police reports, “Street X-Rays” is a projection-and-sound environment that shows the past and the present living and moving in each other in much the same way that we live and move in our taken-for-granted habitats.

The visitor enters an 8 m x 8 m darkened vault and encounters a loose “labyrinth” of five projected screens floating in darkness. Each screen carries a diptych displaying the present alongside the past. The screens are translucent enough to allow a “palimpsest” of the imagery to get cast out through the diaphanous scrim to the walls of the gallery, thus making a faintly vertiginous impression as the washed out scenes careen around the room even as they also anchor the room with “stations” of crisp, bright imagery focused on each of the five screens.
These screens themselves are arranged so that the visitor never sees all the gallery’s imagery from any one vantage-point and the visitor’s silhouetted presence is always poised to enter one or more of the projected scenes. This spatial arrangement of the main features of the artwork is somewhat similar to the way the stones are placed in the magnificent zen garden of Ryoan-Ji in Kyoto: the viewer is always drawn on to a new perspective, to explore new stand-points without ever getting the impression that everything can be known in a single perception. There is always more meditation to anticipate; there is always a vital portion of experience which has to be part-imagined and part-remembered rather than directly apprehended. And one is always aware of one’s own presence in and impact on the delicate environment that gathers all around.

The combinative rhythms of the five-screen display and the minimal soundscape keep the entire installation emotionally “alive” and intriguing. The moods and meanings of the work evolve as the various combinations of sound, image and text play out. The viewer is meant to feel as if they have wandered into the restless “spirit history” of an unnamed but familiar city, as if its ordinary locations have come alive with historic traces and evocative charges that never go away but are usually below the limits of quick perception.

Gathering an eerie batch of locations photographed by forensic investigators in Sydney between 1945 and 1955, we re-visit the exact spots where the images were originally captured. Now a video and sound sequence has been recorded, thus providing the raw materials for the basic components of the project: five diptych screens with stereo sound, each one fed by a video projector. The left-hand side of each screen shows the original black & white police footage. The right-hand side shows the contemporary video footage.

For each video cityscape, the positioning of the camera, its static framing and its lens specifications mimic those in the original photograph. Sound is captured too, and the light, colour and décor of the present-day scene always set the video sequences in dialogue with the original. (The live location sound from the video mingles with an algorithmic music composition by Greg White and Chris Abrahams.)

After a while, a diptych fades to black. Then a caption-title fades up. Once this caption has been on screen for a short period, its associated next diptych appears on the screen as the caption fades away.

Out of phase with each other, all five screens go through an endless relational re-alignment of sound to image to text across the intricate spatial array of the installation.

The caption texts work as follows. Before the appearance of the relevant images, we see a short text detailing the original crime. Examples of caption-titles:
Death by Misadventure
Frequented a Disorderly House
Malafeasance with a Motor Vehicle
Expose, Harass & Defile
Loiter with Intent to Ravish & Abuse
Two Males — Indecent Assault of Each Other
Counterfeiting & Uttering

The texts turn to “mirror-writing” toward the end of the duration of their appearance; this allows the text to be readable on either side (back-projection or front-projection) of the floating screen; it also adds a kind of temporal urgency or “deadline” to the interpretation of each diptych sequence. Once the inter-title has faded away, a new image-diptych fades up. And so on.

Also, every five or six diptyches, there is a lengthy text that holds on the screen for 30 seconds or more. The entire exhibit contains ten of these texts, which would be revealed over a period of 12 minutes or so. Examples:

The following facts that are true of this city:

It’s a place you know well. It’s larger than Valparaiso. Warmer than Vladivostok. More water than Cairo. With no distinctive accent, not like Boston or Cardiff. Less concerned about finance than Chicago or Brussels. Overrun by sailors at fortnightly intervals. Recovering from war.

The types of rain in this city:

Cutting — sandy — the size of a coin — smelling of sleep — with a rhythm that’s Cuban — like England — like Idaho — the contents of a saucepan flicked across a room — warm as the blood of a chicken — like a sentence in prison — helpful when moderate.

Found in the notebook of a mortician who died on a train:

Some by fire. Some by water. An electrical appliance. Opiates. Gunshot. The front of the hand. The back of the hand. A man in a rage. A man full of shame. Often metal is involved. Some are marked by speed. No breakage of skin. (But this is rare.) Or … slow and in night-time. (This is quite frequent.)

I have now detailed all the basic elements of the installation. To recap: a combination of the colourful moving images of today, the black & white still
images of yester-year, texts spurring enigmatic grabs of narratives, sounds interlacing to make symphony and occasional discord. All these elements combine so that the viewer can perceive the effects of time lingering in each scene and pulsing across the entire imaginative space of this half-historical / half-mythical city. The installation is a contemplative environment which highlights the endless patterned intricacy of urban history and metropolitan aesthetics.

Thus “Street X-rays” is designed to be not only a meditation on the passing of time. The installation is also an inquest into the forces that shape and surge through our contemporary civic environments, that push into the moods and sounds of our public spaces, the legacies, absences and persistent strengths lurking in our built environments. Whilst not strictly an interactive work, it is a deliberately immersive and investigative one, a dynamic model of urbanism, amnesia and custodial narrative, a dynamic model that encourages the forensic, skeptical and restless engagement of the visitor. It’s a clearing that affords visitors a chance to contemplate the effects of their own presence in an environment that’s replete with remnant momentum suffusing its present dynamics.

So, in the final analysis, I’ve tried to conjure a place that’s haunted by persistent little pulses of history, in the hope that visitors get a feeling that they’ve wandered into a vaguely familiar “otherworld” that’s being buffeted by a kind of “spirit weather”. It’s meant to be palpable, perceptible but somewhat ineffable, to be known through immersion but also and simultaneously through reflection. Like a clearing in a forest.

Technical Specifications of “Street X-Rays”
5 DVDs plus algorithmic, evolutionary soundtrack on two channels plus stereo location sounds.

Credits
Writing, Design, Direction — Ross Gibson.
Cinematography — Ben Speth.
Sound — Chris Abrahams and Greg White.
Fabrication — Lenny Bastiaans.
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Note
“Street X-Rays” is part of a larger suite of works (collectively known as “Life After Wartime”) which draws on the NSW Police Department’s photographic archive. “Life After Wartime” is a continuing collaboration with Kate Richards and an ensemble of artists, including Greg White, Aaron Seymour and Chris Abrahams. (See www.lifeafterwartime.com ) The work was first installed as part of the

Notes


3 “Unmapped” and “uncharted” are necessarily contentious terms. Indigenous sailors knew these seas well and although they never produced “charts”, they did carry twig assemblages that helped them remember wind patterns and currents and could validly be called “maps”. It was the incursive sailors, not the incumbent ones, who felt the seas were “unmapped”.


5 Garber, p. 2.

6 Garber, p. 11.


8 Cilliers, Complexity and Postmodernism, Routledge, 1998, p. 130 and p. 10 respectively.

9 Cilliers, p. 10.


12 Cilliers, p. 127.

13 Cilliers, p. 99.

14 Cilliers, p. 2.

15 Cilliers, p. 130.

16 Cilliers, p. 2.