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# Being-in-the-Gallery\*

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**ABSTRACT**

*Being-in-the-Gallery* is an immersive experience which explores the embodied nature of virtual reality and the implications this has on contemporary sculptural practice, and our encounters with both. This interactive artwork is experienced through the HTC Vive headset, with movement and touch key elements to the aesthetic of this work. It combines both a physical and a digital sculpture and in doing so creates a mixed reality that plays on a disconnect between what we can see and what we can feel.

**KEYWORDS**

Embodiment; Virtual Reality; Sculpture; Phenomenology; Philosophy; Movement; Touch; Passive Haptics; Aesthetics; Feminism.

**ACM CLASSIFICATION KEYWORDS**

Applied Computing – Arts and Humanities – Media Arts.

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**Figure 1: Participant wearing a HTC Vive Virtual Reality headset reaching out to enter *Being-in-the-Gallery* through a physical doorway.**

## INTRODUCTION

Virtual Reality (VR) has often been culturally associated with the idea of being somewhere else, of escaping to some other world. It serves to fuel the extropian dream [2]; that notion that we can someday leave our physical bodies behind. However, with the recent new wave of VR technology, there has been a move towards a more embodied approach to building immersive experiences.

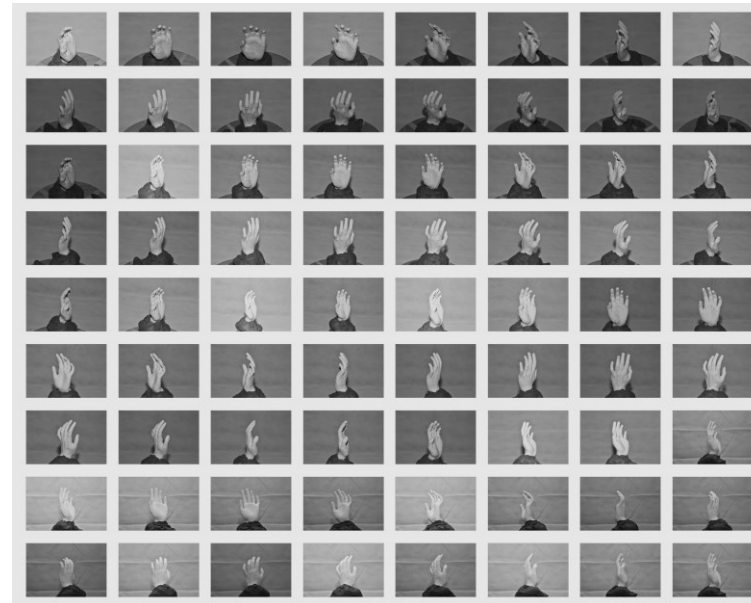
*Being-in-the-Gallery* was the result of a year-long practice-led research project exploring the changing nature of sculpture from the sculptural object to immersive experience, and the influence Phenomenology has had on this transition. In this interactive art installation, a physical sculpture – an object – is placed inside a virtual gallery. The experience of the viewer/participant hinges on the idea of an artwork as a site of transformation, that we can become more aware of ourselves and our Being through our encounter with an artwork.

## AN IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE

By utilizing the ‘room-scale’ capabilities of the HTC Vive it is possible to build an environment combining both physical and digital realities at a 1:1 scale, to create a ‘mixed reality’. Participants don the headset and enter through a physical doorway that they push open with their hands. Seeing a virtual door open before them, the understanding that they can touch and effect the virtual, is already self-evident. They enter the gallery in which only a single sculptural figure stands, inviting them to touch. They are free to move in and around the gallery. To touch the figure or not, the invitation is open to them but it is up to the participant themselves to engage.

What the participants see through the headset is a copy of the sculpture – a digitization constructed using photogrammetry, a technique that produces 3-dimensional digital objects with a form and texture derived from hundreds of photographs of the original. This copy has then been draped, like a veil, over the physical sculpture, both occupy the same space, the x, y and z coordinates. As the participant reaches out to touch, they cannot see their own hands, they gaze towards what they wish to touch and this guides them to where they know their hand should be. This disconnect between seen copy and original felt form, has elicited powerful responses from both an academic and a public audience, during a brief exhibition in 2017.

**Figure 2: Example of the photographs taken for photogrammetry in order to make a digital object from a physical sculptural.**



This is work fueled by philosophy, and made manifest in art. No philosophical essay I could have written on a page could have such a powerful impact on an audience. There is no line of argument to follow, no linear experience or performance to be played out before a passive audience. It is only through the active engagement of the participant that this Virtual Gallery becomes an artwork rather than just another venue to encounter an artwork in.

At its most fundamental the work seeks to remind us of our own embodiment [3], by creating a space to dwell and consider our engagement with what it means for something to be an artwork, and in turn, of our own Being-in-the-World. In that ‘disconnect’ between what we see and what we feel, between the original and the copy, we are more aware of our bodies, the perception of our senses and the transformative nature of experience. It brings in questions of the aura of the artwork [1] in a way that would not be possible without the mediation of the virtual reality headset. Many VR games and experiences keep us immersed using overwhelming levels of action and by playing on primitive emotions (such as fear and vertigo). Here, instead, a kind of radical boredom, similar to that described by Noë [4] is achieved thus creating an occasion for active engagement.

**Figure 3: Participant interacting with the immersive artwork. What they are seeing is a copy, while they are touching the original sculpture.**



## REFERENCES

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- [4] Noë, A. 2015. *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Hill and Wang.

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