

Left to Our Own Devices

Cullen Pitney

It seems that every exhibition today is inaugurated by ephemeral performances or time-based participatory happenings within the space of the museum. The stock of the plastic arts has been devalued, and in its place, experience has become the preferred material for contemporary art, like some sort of intangible art world cryptocurrency. This shift has likely occurred not in response to but as a symptom of a concurrent shift in the economy: the shift from the exchange of goods and services to the transaction of experiences. Perhaps the appearance of an economy of presence in the museum indicates that our relationship to experience has changed altogether and that it is now an object as defunct as any other of the artifacts lining the galleries of the museum.

Lately I find myself going to museums *at* certain times, coordinating my visit to make sure I'm in attendance for the esoteric gyrations of... an edgy performance artist I met at the club last weekend? Or a literal Buddhist monk? Are these categories mutually exclusive? Most likely not, but regardless we find ourselves gathering in museums and galleries to periodically experience or participate in something. Now it seems like an exhibition is not complete until it is accompanied by some supplementary performance, or a workshop, or whatever other staged ephemeral gathering explores the same themes as the otherwise stationary materials of the exhibition with the added twist of a time-based medium. There's a growing imperative in the art world to be "present" in the exhibition, to address the calibration of its time and space. Through these experiences we are meant to become aware of some allegedly unspoken

dynamics at work, to contemplate the act of being a spectator, or our relationship to the other attendees, intimacy, bodies, spaces, bodies in spaces. At least, this is the curatorial language surrounding it.

Such is the shape of contemporary art these days: artists take up experience as their primary material, creating work that invites participation and interactivity, meanwhile curators busy themselves reconfiguring art institutions as stages for these experiences. Last time I checked the discourse, the museum was a...burial ground? A crypt? A cryogenic freezing chamber? Whichever metaphor you choose, the museum is generally where objects go to die, or to be indefinitely preserved and inaccessible. What are we to make of the fact that experience has joined these ranks, filed away among objects as anachronistic to us as tribal masks or Renaissance depictions of Biblical scenes in adjacent wings?

On Airbnb, there's a new tab called "Experiences" and an even newer tab for "Online Experiences," [Figure 1] meant to facilitate richer and more authentic brand of traveling, through such delights as mid-March cherry blossom picnics in Tokyo or a debaucherous romp through the streets of Manhattan under the auspices of a local drag queen. This is one of the most literal examples of how experience has taken on an objectliness, transacted with the same ease of buying a bunch of bananas or a cup of coffee. Economists James Gilmore and Joseph Pine theorise that this kind of channel of exchange is symptomatic of what they call the "experience economy," the last in a four-stage evolution of economic value from commodity, to goods, to services, and finally to experience. According to their article in the Harvard Business Review, this evolution begins with an economy based around the extraction of raw materials from the earth. Those commodities are then fashioned into goods, which take on a higher market value for the labor of their production. Once the goods reach an optimised level of production, the economy shifts towards the exchange of services, that is, intangible goods. Next and last is the experience economy, where marketplaces akin to Airbnb's become possible (Gilmore and Pine 1998).

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Figure 1. Screenshot of Airbnb Experience Marketplace. Photo by Cullen Pitney.

A similar four-step transformation of art has occurred in tandem with, or more likely, as a result of the evolution of the economy. We begin with the art object plain and simple: the utilitarian object before its symbolic or indexical use. Then the object was abstracted by one degree into goods, and the painting became a deposit of an economic exchange. The art object had become a byproduct of an interaction, a marker of social contract. Shortly thereafter the painting became the universe condensed into the picture plane, trusted in its capacity to render life in forms otherwise inexpressible under the constraints of physics, to show on the tableau how the world feels but does not appear. Art then leapt out of the canvas, from the picture plane into the world it once intended to depict. And finally, art leaps once more into experience: art became lived, enacted in 3D with bodies.



Figure 2. Baboo, *Corona Villa*, 2020, Installation, live streaming, interactive performance, mixed media. Photo by Cullen Pitney.

Over the summer of 2020, Jo Hsiao and Yi-Wei Kong curated an exhibition at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum called ‘Between Earth and the Sky, the Spiritual State of Our Times.’ As the introductory wall-text stated, “in the contemporary experience, when the participant [visitor] is both the subject of the work and its material, live exhibitions are not so much a new taste in art as they are a wide variety of things that have not been precisely described yet.” The works in the exhibition were almost exclusively immersive installations, ephemeral experiences, interactive happenings, mediums that require a “being-in.” Visitors could check into Baboo’s *Corona Villa* (2020), [Figure 2] an “anti-epidemic hotel” consisting of glass isolation chambers outfitted with beds, desks, and monitors through which artists periodically check in on the occupants. In Ching-Yueh Roan’s *Wavering on a Mountain Path—A Rescue Plan for My Novel* (2020), [Figure 3] the artist asks participants to sit at elementary school

desks and recite words appearing on screen into megaphones. These works create what the curators call a “live” exhibition, drawing on Heidegger’s idea that Being is about Being with Others, and staging this interaction in the museum.



Figure 3. Ching-Yueh Roan, *Wavering on a Mountain Path — A Rescue Plan for My Novel*, 2020, Mixed media installation, film, text, performance. Photo by Cullen Pitney.

Artist Hito Steyerl calls this the “terror of total *Dasein*”, drawing from another of Heidegger’s concepts. She writes:

There are some rational reasons for an economy of physical human presence in the art field: the physical presence of people is, on average, cheaper than the presence of works that need to be shipped, insured, and/or installed. Presence puts so-called butts on seats and thus provides legitimacy to cultural institutions competing for scarce funding [...] But presence also means permanent

availability without any promise of compensation. In the age of the reproducibility of almost everything physical, human presence is one of the few things that cannot be multiplied indefinitely, an asset with some inbuilt scarcity (Steyerl 2017, 23).

As Steyerl identifies, the art world's growing fixation on presence is not a response to the experience economy, but a consequence of it. The 'Between Earth and the Sky' exhibition exemplifies that this is the spiritual state of our times, one in which experience, being-present and being-together, has become a commodity unto itself. More importantly, Steyerl narrows in on what exactly has caused a surge in experience's value on the spiritual stock market. In a culture overly reliant on technology, experience is one of the only things that remains irreproducible, and therefore scarce. For the art world then, intangible experience, more than photography, painting, or sculpture, becomes a highly valuable currency.

If art has undergone this shift into an economy of experience, then the nature of experience remains to be inquired further. To borrow again from Heidegger, human experience finds its foundation in our relationship with objects in our proximity, or "ready-to-hand," and those at a distance. The constitutive force behind experience is always a sort of thrusting forward, a catapulting of the mind into the distant realm of unknown objects. One's being is never in stasis with regards to the objects around it, but is instead always throwing itself into the future, into uncertainty, anticipating something. Being is constituted by a constant hum of fear and anxiety in the face of immense possibility, and one's movement forward in life is simply an attempt to fulfill any number of these possibilities in the face of the certainty of death. Along with this process is unveiling, discovering, coming to understand: these are the notches which demarcate experience (Heidegger 2013).

Combine this with Walter Benjamin's seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility*, where he writes: "Above all, [technological reproducibility] enables the

original to meet the recipient halfway, whether in the form of the photograph or in that of a gramophone record.” (Benjamin 2005, 103). For Benjamin, technological reproducibility severs the art object from its place. There is no longer the necessity to traverse distances in order to come into contact with the object. Consequently, the art object loses the tie to its ‘here and now.’ But if for Heidegger one’s being is constituted by moving towards distant objects, what happens when instead those objects approximate themselves to us? What atrocity does technological reproducibility commit upon experience? When everything is ready-to-hand and infinitely accessible in our proximity, there is no need to project oneself; all that we had been anticipating has approached us. But then, when the distance from these objects shrinks, so too does the stage for experience. The capacity for infinite accessibility of art objects that technological reproducibility affords us claims an equivalent sacrifice in return: it is the ability to experience. Heidegger characterises being as a constant state of anxiety, throwing itself forward in anticipation. Perhaps this is Benjamin’s concept of “aura” which he describes as “A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be” (Benjamin 2005, 104). Aura is an implicit awareness of an object’s unavailability, its un-ready-to-handedness as Heidegger might say. It is the gravitational pull objects exert on us when they are singular and lie at a distance, the force that for Heidegger prompts us to anticipate, to project our beings across great distances. But when these objects come within our grasp, their aura disappears, and as a result that fundamental anticipation subsides and the motivational force of experience dissolves.

Benjamin also argues that when aura disappears, authenticity goes along with it; at a time when the object is infinitely available, the value of the singular original dissolves (Benjamin 2005, 105). Curiously, authenticity is a concern of Heidegger as well. If being is propelled by an array of forces — towards others, towards death, towards distant objects — how can being be authentic? Heidegger locates the answer in what he calls “resoluteness,” or the process by which being hushes these forces

and recedes back into itself, heeding the call of the conscience. It is when one attends to this inner voice that one brings oneself into authenticity: “Resoluteness brings the Self right into its current concerned Being-alongside what is ready-to-hand, and pushes it into solicitous Being with Others.” (Heidegger 2013, 344). In being resolute one evaluates one’s environment, deeply assessing only that which is ready-to-hand, available, and therein lies the authentic being: “the resolution is precisely the discursive projection of what is factually possible at the time.” (Heidegger 2013, 345). We see then how when objects previously at a distance come into proximity that this process of finding authenticity can be troubled. With technological reproducibility, everything is always ready-to-hand, and so those factual possibilities multiply beyond the point of comprehensibility. Technological reproducibility forecloses not only the possibility of the authentic original, but also the prospect of authentic being.

Since the time that Benjamin wrote, not only art objects but objects of any nature have become infinitely accessible and therefore endlessly ready-to-hand. The entire world becomes proximal, but there is of course a trade-off. The distances across which being catapults itself shrink. There is no violence, uncertainty, unknowing in our being and consequently no catalyst for authentic experience. In Heidegger’s work, the call that brings being back into the authentic self comes from within, but it is as if this call beckons from the heights of a distant mountain; present and loud yet its origin is unknown. The instructions of this call are not able to be articulated into language, but rather they are felt in the body (Heidegger 2013, 340). Understanding this, the need for contemporary art to reaffirm experience within the museum comes into clarity. The works in the ‘Between Earth and the Sky’ exhibition call out to us in much the same way as the call from within, reminding us of what it feels like to be authentically within an environment that is ready-to-hand. They allow us to remember the sensations of meeting, interacting, and feeling one’s instincts guide the body.

But in the same way that in the museum we gaze upon

Renaissance paintings as deposits from the past, we can look to this new contemporary art to confirm that experience is a relic of a bygone era. Experience has been subsumed into the historical. It is an artifact to be filed away in an archive. Has the role of the museum changed? No. It still performs the same function. It is just that the nature of life has changed and we can see evidence of this within the wings of the museum. Whereas we once went to the museum to understand our 3D lives upon the 2D tableau, we now visit the museum to understand our lives on a stage that is 3D. This indicates that we now occur in 4D or something beyond, in the aether and inhabiting flows of data. That authentic experience now resides within the museum tells us that it is henceforth forbidden and unknowable. Our relationship towards experience can be nothing but the mourner's gaze falling upon a tombstone: remember what it felt like to know the body's relationship to space? To each other? Remember what intimacy felt like? Is this sad? Perhaps.

Art is one of the few domains that still holds sway over the spiritual, just as 'Between Earth and the Sky' shows. And what it asks of us is to come face-to-face with the truth of our spiritual state, and recognise that experience is under siege. But the growing aversion of a public towards the arts, and the waning importance of an aesthetic education, one that gives the vocabulary with which to find art's relevance, perhaps indicates a general reluctance to confront the fact that the spiritual state of our times is one without spirit altogether, one in which we have already alienated our rights to experience over to a set of surveillance and image circulation technologies. In an increasingly secular age with a shrinking moral fabric and widespread proliferation of personal electronic devices, technological reproducibility entices with such lustrous promises as knowledge, proximity, and intimacy, but only for a Faustian exchange. Left to our own devices, there's not much stopping us anymore from reaching into our pockets and overindulging in our Mephistophelean polyhedrons, all the while becoming estranged from experience. In the end this is why it remains important to take up art as an object of study. Not in the research of beauty,

nor to refine taste, but to understand human experience as rendered on flat surface, from cave marking to screen with detour through canvas.



Figure 4. Yu Cheng-ta, *Durian Pharmaceutical MST Product Briefing*, performance, 2020, Taipei Fine Arts Museum. Photo courtesy of the artist © FAMEME 2020.

I am at the museum at 2:30 pm on a Saturday, waiting for the performance to begin inside the ‘Between Earth and the Sky’ exhibition. Eccentric artist Yu Cheng-ta takes the stage as his alter-ego FAMEME, pseudo-pharmaceutical snake-oil salesman and self-proclaimed social media magnate [Figure 4]. He is an extremely contemporary character. FAMEME is here to give the product briefing for MST, a new pill that his company, Durian Pharmaceutical, has developed using the heretofore untapped wealth of nutrition found in durian extract, aka MISOHTHORNII. He promises the audience that just one pill of MST can deliver 24 hours of pure happiness, eliminating the need for all other antidepressants on the market, and exercise. This pill, he insists, is the only thing people need to become truly, irreversibly happy. “People always ask me, FAMEME, why are you always so happy? But I think you should look in the mirror and ask yourselves this question: why are you so *unhappy*?” He holds the microphone towards the audience: “Are you happy?” Silence.

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