View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

keywords:

VR; control; body; experience; loss

abstract:

Critical commntary on the VR project Control Negative by Monika Masłoń.

Anna Ptak - Anna Ptak is a curator and researcher working with and along environmental and political aspects of cultural practices. Her recent work includes dramaturgy for VR and performance series landscapes and bodies (dir. Kötter/Israel/Limberg) and curatorial project Amplifying Nature at the XVI Architecture Biennale in Venice (with/by Centrala architecture collective). She works at the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw since 2009 and has been a PhD student at the Doctoral School of Humanities at the University of Warsaw since 2020 researching mechanisms of visibility of air in multiple scales. Edited books and journals: Amplifying Nature. The Planetary Imagination of Architecture in the Anthropocene (2018), Dust (https://obieg.pl/issue/7-kurz „Obieg, 7/2018), The Make Yourself at Home Guide to Warsaw (2015, with Rani Al Rajji and Monnik collective), Inicjatywy i galerie artystów (2014, eng. On Polish Artist Run Initiatives and Spaces, with Agnieszka Pindera and Wiktoria Szczupacka), Re-tooling Residencies. Notes on Mobility of Art Professionals (2011).

This is Major Tom to Ground Control: On Control Negative, a VR installation by Monika Masłoń

Acquiring the competence and ability to control the environment, followed by their subsequent loss, is the axis and puzzle of Monika Masłoń's VR work *Control Negative*. This dramatic arc creates the narrative structure for the experience and gives it the characteristics of an audiovisual essay, or rather – given the virtual reality medium in which it takes place – a practical speculation. The work relates to the boundary-control- and identity-based modern construction of subjectivity, as well as to the medium itself and its promise to transcend the limitations of individual corporeality.

It is also – and for me, above all – an elegiac, personal work on dying.

The problem of control

Years spent learning languages, images, and codes provides a sense of control and security. The body, thought, and experience are arranged in the shape of knowledge, inspiration, and possibilities of action: the mouth, the hands, only later the recognition that these are my hands, which can manipulate and change the world. And then finding out that the relationship is mutual: the world attracts, repels, offers, and takes away. Additionally, one needs to get used to the fact that falling on the buttocks is safer than falling on the face, until balancing the body becomes a habit – the child treats with surprise any object that gets in its way, completely disregarding weight, sharpness, and resilience. Eventually the body–world relationship stabilizes somewhere on the surface of the skin (this is a postcard from my situatedness as the mother of a young child).

We also learn images. Firstly, playing with the shadow – and

facing the fear that it will never detach itself. The first visits to the museum, the cinema – and distinguishing which images work with the logic of imagination, body, narrative, and emotion, an experience identical to life or radically different from it. From their confusion, the primal scene of the train entering La Ciotat station, we are separated by the ocean of images to which we have been accustomed from literally the beginning of life.

What if "something went wrong"? The world isn't for you, as it had been built for two-legged, physically strong individuals moving around. Stairs restrict you to home. The hum and silence from which you create a backdrop for the choreography of your hands and hugs with your mother ceases to serve its purpose when someone, with the movement of their mouth, wants to summon you to his world of senses and communication – and then you realize you are deaf, you lack something.

We have learned to call the set of competences that allows us to function smoothly in a world constituted in a certain way "control" – by forms of exercising power, permitted expressions, appropriate or inappropriate images. Controlling oneself is a means of the world exercising control. That which is out of control has a taste of defeat, lack, or subjugation (being controlled) by the logic of the market, heteronorm, the dominance of ableism or other ways of regulating bodies, desires, relationships, and presence.

Finally, there is death. On the one hand, the body is "dissected" by medical procedures; it is served calculated drug doses, expected to respond in a certain way, subjugated to life-sustaining activities. Such a body is given to medicine, to corporations, and is out of (our) control; it is the body which reacts not as it "should," becomes unresponsive, rebels. Dies.

In the VR experience, the tutorial serves the function of accelerated socialization. Each time, we master the rules of how to use – note – the controllers that allow us to take possession of the presented world. Right button, left button, grabbing, using

tools. Engaging one's own proprioception makes alien experiences "ours." And one can do anything.

Here is where the meta-level and brilliance of Monika Masłoń's – filmmaker, video artist, educator – project begins. It was created in cooperation with a team of specialists in VR techniques centered around the Laboratory of Interactive Narratives at the Visual Narratives Lab in *Łódź,* who worked for over a year on *Control Negative*. The prerequisite for experiencing the work is to tame the sense of the loss of control in the virtual world. Simply put, first we learn to act in this world (following the logic of the tutorial – which buttons are used for grasping, how one recognizes the area in which the game is played), and then we lose this control. Just a moment ago, the avatar's capable hands, which did a great job of sorting blocks, lose the ability to drop objects, and transform into a thicket of grotesque flesh – tree branches grasping one another.

I thought it would work better than telling a story, the Voice says at one point, guiding us through the VR without saying specifically what happened – for each user, the experience can be imbued with different shades of emotion: surprise, irritation, vulnerability, or frustration. What I find interesting about this procedure, and several others that follow, is that it does not produce a new norm: loss of control, to actually be such, has no rules; instead, it turns the acting person into an unstable, open-ended, changeable, and relational subject. The narrative and form of the project are consequences of adopting this perspective, a way of understanding subjectivity and establishing the experience of the immersants.

The problem of immersion

Control Negative points to the situatedness of the Voice guiding us through the experience: a woman experiencing loss, who is constituted – again – as a daughter-child by death

(presumably of her father); she is once again going through the stages of learning the world. Hence the recurring scenes of childhood in the project – sorting blocks in the "tutorial" or the playground in the next sequence. Instead of longing, nostalgia, or mourning fixated on the memory of the person who is gone, the protagonist of *Control Negative* touches on the possibility of life "without" – as well as the abstraction and concreteness of reconstructing oneself. Loss (of a loved one) creates us anew – or, shifting focus to the grief-stricken person experiencing the loss, we also die a little. Yet what would that mean? Does what one learned with the deceased remain the same in the face of his absence? Is what I remember changed by the absence? What is this new form of memory, of experience? And how to speak of the persistence of a memory in the face of the simultaneous presence and absence of the person concerned?

In experimental cinematic form, the visual abstraction of the project leads to a conceptual punchline: the fusion of the work and the thoughts or affects of the immersant. The VR environment allows us to play with the embodiment of memory, while the fact that the identification is never complete gives, in the case of *Control Negative* – unlike in other games or projects I know – the chance to tell the story individually, and does not indicate the failure or insufficiency of the medium itself. By reframing VR, Monika Masłoń's work touches on a sense of solitude and attempts to untangle it, despite, or perhaps precisely because of, the fact that it does not fit into the metaphysical order of any available narrative – religious, philosophical, or political.

Here is one of the micro-narratives presented by the Voice: at home, tea was poured into a glass until as full as possible, which developed in the speaker the habit of grasping the vessel extremely carefully and too firmly. This habit persists, regardless of how much tea is in the glass today. What's more, holding the vessel tightly and stepping too slowly causes spillage. In turn,

"him" spilling tea is associated – both in memory and with regard simply to spilling tea – with the beginning of illness and passing away. The practicality of memory at the moment of loss works within many orders simultaneously; I understand memory here in Bergsonian terms, as a bodily element, expressing itself through action rather than intellectual activity. Loss activates other memory resources and thus other mechanisms of action, in which it resembles art.[1] It is a leap into the unknown, a state of the loss of balance.

The difference between having a point of view – the perspective from which one looks at the world – and the state in which contemplation ceases to be possible, or simply loses its privileged status of explaining reality, is another turning point in *Control Negative*. The former state is experienced during a 360° shot in a playground: the movement of our body causes a change in the point of view from which we observe the collective scene of children's play: swinging, spinning, and motor experiments with balance and coordination. The latter state is felt when the principle ceases to work: remaining motionless, one stops the picture. In order for the action to continue, to – implicitly – move on to the next chapter of the story, we have to twirl ourselves, force ourselves to move, back and forth. What at first appears to be discovery and play soon turns out to be necessity, causing fatigue and doubt – how much longer?

From the perspective of an anthropologist (Tim Ingold), there are ways of life in which inhabitation and reciprocity are synonymous with knowledge:

> Thus, seeing, hearing and touching are not passive reactions of the body to external stimuli but processes of actively and intentionally attending to the world, of continuously adjusting the receptor organs so as to pick up, from the resulting modulations of the sensory array, information specifying significant features of the environment. Learning to perceive is a matter not of acquiring conventional schemata

for ordering sensory data, but of learning to attend to the world in certain ways through involvement with others in everyday contexts of practical action.[2]

This perhaps trivial observation – that there is no difference between knowledge of the world and the practice of living in the world – becomes powerful in limit situations, as *Control Negative* reminds us. Devoid of the illusion of omnipotence, the VR medium in the hands of the project's authors seems uniquely suitable for this purpose.

The problem of presence

I could stop writing here and leave the audience to the puzzles, intellectual pleasures, and stories present in Monica Masłoń's work; however, a different impulse makes me wonder about what happens as a result of this disentanglement and confusion. What hypotheses can be made in the course this experience?

One path is suggested by philosopher François Jullien, in a conversation on the cultural role of art:

> But there is a dimension, which seems fertile in this moment of dizziness when things become confused because they lose their equilibrium and because they find themselves suspended from the clearness, which allowed thinking them – this dimension is the dimension of ambiguity. [...] It's a stage where the opposites are not yet separated and it's fertile because it's a stage when thought can come up with new and different determinations. So, there is a moment [...] in transition when the already constituted oppositions dissolve themselves because they come back to their fundamental ambiguity, that is their non-separated state and only afterwards, is there a realisation of different determinations.[3]

The negative-like, black-and-white image in *Control Negative* is a world of constant metamorphosis, ambiguity, and obscurity.

From the very beginning of the experience, the visual "Guide" through the virtual world is a house. A house, a tiny toy-like house, a figure, a reminiscence. By the logic of digital simulation, a house can be anything: a block that we learn to manipulate, an object on which we test our proprioception in the virtual world (how far can you throw a virtual block in a virtual house?), a space for encountering the dying and being with the dead, a tumor growing and regenerating in subsequent metastases. The formal and simplified three-dimensional representation of the "house" is the frame of our VR experience, and narratively an afterimage of the shared space of the story's characters, marked by the uncanny. Finally, the house becomes a portal to the reality of recognizing something important. It is a spatial installation in which immersants in VR goggles make – if you look at them from the outside – a sequence of incomprehensible and abstract gestures, looking like ghosts in a haunted house.

As we gain further experience of the lack of control, we discover the increasingly real possibility that, on the dead–living axis, by virtue of our very ability to act in the virtual world, the assumption that we are on the side of the living is perhaps premature. Initially, only the palms – avatars of our presence in virtual reality – provide a clue to the "confusion of orders." They are our actors in the computer-generated reality, but they are the hands of a corpse: stiff like those of a mannequin, smooth, and in the process of decomposition at the same time. Subsequent events can also be seen as a metaphor for cognitive disorders in the course of illness and therapy. *There, I won't go with you* – the Voice of the Guide ends in the next sequence. We have the option to refuse to participate in the further course of the experience by removing the headset. At the next stage of the soundtrack, the sound resembling a heartbeat will cease. The meta-reflection on the medium (the problem of control, the problem of immersion) begins to resemble an attempt to reach

the perception of a sick and dying person:

> I have also never seen a sickbed scene from the point of view
> of the person in it. A problem with a sickbed scene as painted
> by the sick person herself is that it would have to be painted
> on a canvas with no edges, to be too small to measure, to be
> too large to contain. It would happen outside of time, happen
> inside of history, exempt the present from the linear,
> rearrange substance so that blankness is an element,
> rearrange aesthetics so that the negative is almost all.
> That kind of painting would be hard to make.[4]

Perhaps what painting cannot cope with adequately, as Anne Boyer states, is possible precisely in VR; perhaps this medium offers images that are almost impossible.

The second dramatic arc – besides control and its loss – is the ambiguity of absence that organizes the work, the uncertainty, or rather the interchangeability, of perspectives: is the actant the deceased or the person the deceased has left? Which side are we on? Who summons and establishes whom? Us – by the deceased person, or the deceased – by us, as those marked by the absence of the deceased?

The problem of multitude

Ghouls, spooks, vampires, and zombies – the line between the living and the dead is sometimes more fluid than assumed by modern rationality. But to think this through, as the example of *Control Negative* shows, one does not need to turn to symbolism, esotericism, or demonology. I am alive, but I am also in the field of the dead, experiencing their absence. Constituting the deceased begins by indicating their place, writes Vinciane Despret. Following Bruno Latour, the author points to the reciprocity in the relationship between the living and the dead, and by analogy also to the relationship between the work and the author. Just as the author's job is to put all their talent, responsibility, and skill

into bringing out the work in such a shape that it can exist (as opposed to the logic of creation), the person who remains responds to the call of the deceased.[5]

For lack of a better word, let me say this: I read *Control Negative* as a statement about multitude in the midst of a secular worldview, an expression of concern for an individual relationship with the deceased in a world saturated with violence and mass death.[6] For a VR project, there is indeed unexpectedly much room left for imagination, as well as the embrace of constant ambiguity in place of control. This is shown in the boldness of the metaphor of art (VR) as dying, with a neo-avant-garde origin going back to Bruce Nauman or Dan Graham, and, at the same time, sincerity in the face of the event.

The "multitude" that emerges from this work is not political, as Anne Boyer, Audre Lorde, or Susan Sontag conceptualized it in the context of their own cancers – they all encountered the other (women) in illness and dying, whose suffering had been a function of reality control by medical systems and corporations deciding on their investment strategies, and thus on who suffers more (women, non-whites, single people) and who suffers less. There is no perspective of pain or care work in *Control Negative* – though there is undoubtedly a place for them in the abstraction of form and obscurity[7] that permeates the immersive experience. And while it is an elegiac, personal project, it does not determine what pain or care work is or how to experience loss. This is the great value of the project. Instead, it leads us toward a metaphor for the place of death in our imaginaries, and encourages us to map our own mortality.

The multitude in the structure of the subject of experience is outlined thanks to stretching the narrative and the logic of continuity (the relationship between the immersant acting in the virtual world and the generated image) in the spectrum of (the loss of) control and suspension of the dead–living binary, in the obscurity and openness to logic other than individualism

(transcended precisely in the condition of mortality). At the same time, the form of the project – quite accessible, communicative, containing a sense of excitement of entering the "other" perceptual reality, which is still elementary for VR, has the potential of introducing and familiarizing the issue of death and the affective constellation of the one who is dead, the one who is bereaved, and the compassionate one. Monika Masłoń, like Oreet Ashery, author of the online series *Revisiting Genesis*, does not avoid popular culture, seeing it as a field populated by contemporary digital presences, the characters of posthumous digital avatars, holograms, digital wills, and cemeteries. The problem of digital presence is also a real challenge, generating new sources and areas for capitalism. The logic of continuity in its scientific version in turn serves to domesticate phobias and train social skills for non-neurotypical people or those with disorders of a neurophysiological nature.[8] Perhaps VR, as made by the team working on *Control Negative*, can provide a new genre form – meta-VR, critical or self-reflective VR, which paves the way to welcome thoughts about the decentralized self.

<div align="center">***</div>

As I was writing this text, my thoughts kept returning to Alina Popa's artistic activities, her work with death. Alina died in 2019, at the age of 36. The last two years of her life passed in the shadow of the diagnosis of a rare cancer, a disease of a terminal nature; it is impossible not to abstract from it when analyzing Popa's oeuvre. The artist's last text, "Disease as an Aesthetic Project,"[9] and her artistic activity *The Clinic*, were created from the depths of this experience. Her collaborations with Irina Gheorghe at the Bureau of Melodramatic Research and Florin Flueras at Unsorcery and others responded to a similar set of issues as those Monika Masłoń addresses in *Control Negative*: the control of women's performativity by the neoliberal order of productivity, the imposition of controlled and morally evaluative melodramatic forms on untamed emotions, the definition of the

locally specific political experience of Eastern Europeanness in terms of an excess left outside the boundaries of civilized Europeanness.

I do not intend to compare *Control Negative* with Alina Popa's work, but their encounter opens up the possibility of giving voice to multiple perspectives that influence one another – as can happen when we exchange glances with a jaguar, an animal from Amazonian cosmology, close to Popa, which we can become if we do not turn our gaze away while facing it. Alina writes, draws, and creates with death, seeking full integration of thought and practice to overcome the control of technology over life, deriving her power and agency from transcending the dichotomy. Dying, at the peak of being alive. *Control Negative*, on the other hand, is an expression of this community in dying from another angle: the living person who makes room for the possibility of nonliving.

1   See: Simon O'Sullivan, "THE AESTHETICS OF AFFECT: Thinking art beyond representation," *Angelaki* vol. 6, no. 3 (December 2001), 127: "Accessing of the event might involve what Henri Bergson calls attention: a suspension of normal motor activity which in itself allows other 'planes' of reality to be perceivable (an opening of the world beyond utilitarian interests). [...] Following Bergson we might say that as beings in the world we are caught on a certain spatio-temporal register: we see only what we have already seen (we see only what we are interested in). At stake with art, then, might be an altering, a switching, of this register."

2   Tim Ingold, "The art of translation in a continuous world," in: *Beyond Boundaries: Understanding, Translation and Anthropological Discourse*, ed. Gísli Pálsson (New York: Routledge, 1993), 220.

3   "Karoline Feyertag in Conversation with François Jullien: Making Ambiguity Fertile is the Present Mission of Thought," Paris, May 26, 2015, https://www.on-dizziness.com/resources-overview/francois-jullien (accessed June 2, 2022).

4   Anne Boyer, *The Undying: Pain, Vulnerability, Mortality, Medicine, Art, Time, Dreams, Data, Exhaustion, Cancer, and Care* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

5   Vinciane Despret, *Our Grateful Dead: Stories of Those Left Behind*, trans. Stephen

Muecke (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

6   Iryna Tsilyk, "Nowa obrączka," trans. Joanna Majewska-Grabowska, *Dwutygodnik* 337
       (July 2022), https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/10178-nowa-obraczka.html.
       A wonderful, moving essay by a film director, wrapped around an intimate moment
       between spouses meeting while a soldier husband is on leave from the front and his
       wife worries about him smoking too much. Essay published five months after the onset
       of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

7   I have devoted more space in this review to questions of imagery than of temporality.
       But if one were to look at the latter, there are clues in *Control Negative* that inspire one
       to think about a time beyond linearity, a "chronic time" that does not flow – discussed,
       for example, by Lisa Baraitser in her book *Enduring Time* (London & New York:
       Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), in the context of illness, care work, and bereavement.

8   See: Caitlín Hastings, *VR and Anxiety Disorders*, *Animorph Co-op*, December 23, 2020,
       https://animorphcoop.medium.com/vr-and-anxiety-disorders-21198b501ab1
       (accessed June 3, 2022).

9   Alina Popa, "Disease as an Aesthetic Project," in: idem, *Square of Will in Square of Love:
       Texts, Notes, Drawings by Alina Popa*, ed. Florin Flueras (Bucharest, PUNCH, 2019).