

Architectures of Immersivity

Helsinki Photomedia Submission

The Photographers' Gallery Digital Programme

Our paper responds to the rise of 'immersive' environments as places of display of image and post-image practices in the public space, from the position of a site-specific digital programme within a photography institution. We look at how these 'architectures of immersivity' shift a relationship with the viewer – and go as far as constructing an altered form of viewership – as well as affecting the operational function of street-facing images and the types of images that are displayed. Finally, we consider how the 'immersive' viewer relationship and a disparity in technological investment affects the position of the institution showing critical digital image practices, and the knock-on effect on exhibition practices that are seemingly more traditional.

Our objectives are to account for and to make sense of the rise of spaces who offer 'immersive' experiences, including those in very close proximity to The Photographers' Gallery such as [Outernet London](#) and [W1 Curates](#).

According to the immersive model, it is only when images surround the viewer, or in their gigantism, that a sense-based relation is maximalised. Seemingly, the viewer only fully experiences the image as the image becomes environment. This becoming-environment of the image notably affects the architectural formation of such spaces: the prohibitions on the showing of screens on the outside of buildings in central London has led, for example, to the creation of shell-like structures where screens technically comprise interior walls.

Despite being turned into pure sense, the viewer's position is more accurately that of disseminator, positioned behind the primary distributed viewers, as photos of people surrounded by screens pass through social networks. The multiplication of photography is not only encouraged, but [ordered](#). Often, through partnerships between art institutions and tech companies, images act as onboarding tools for web3 and blockchains. A further consequence of these partnerships is that viewership metrics, which have become essential to institutional reporting, surpass numbers that could realistically be achieved by institutions themselves.

By working through these developments, we highlight how the forms that image creation takes adjusts in response to a newly developing viewership model. With critical image practices subsumed into being another kind of immersive aesthetic programmed between adverts, we ask how a digital programme in a public space can question, subvert or even remain present.

Further, we consider how the immersive display of image has affected recent exhibition practice. This is noticeable in the upsurge of full wall prints and collages that take over exhibition walls, and either surround smaller recognised artworks, or are considered artworks themselves. By taking examples from major exhibitions in public institutions across London, from the [Tate](#) to [Serpentine](#) to [The Photographers' Gallery](#) itself, we argue that while not new, this recent form of display is a response to the immersive argument that the viewer is not truly engaged with the image unless they are engulfed by it.

We go on to draw a comparison with hybrid approaches to immersivity, such as the Augmented Reality (AR) initiative *Open Space* which took place at Soho Photography Quarter – “an outdoor cultural space for all to enjoy in Ramillies Place, W1, on the doorstep of The Photographers' Gallery” in 2021. *Open Space* included three site specific AR commissions – these were shown on the streets surrounding the Gallery, with AR artworks appearing in response to target images pasted on windows or in response to a GPS location. The artists Joséfa Ntjam, Keiken x Gabriel Massan and Hyphen-Labs each took a different approach, from custom built apps via Unity to browser-based AR, to using Meta’s templates. Here, AR is a hybrid medium that involves both the physicality of surrounding architecture and the ‘immersion’ of the smartphone. It gives the physically printed image the utility of a digital trigger.

AR and VR are not necessarily separate from the immersive model but can be shaped as an alternative expression of it. Outside of open-source AR builds, they tend to be related (via software) to the corporate sector, to ideas of making the metaverse real, and in its extremity, to structures like the proposed giant cube in Riyadh and Sphere in Las Vegas.

Situating this paper within The Photographers’ Gallery Digital Programme, our methodology aligns with our online platform [unthinking.photography](#), for which we map and respond to photography’s role in contemporary culture, looking at developments across the photography worlds, computer science, and other disciplines in which photography practices are engaged. The programme, which began in 2012, has mapped a shift in digital image practices from Flickr to Instagram and from the dataset to AI, all while the proliferation of screen (across smartphones and architecture) has led to the enormous expansion of photography.

Further, our methodology is formed by wider institutional strategies. Our extension of the Gallery into Soho Photography Quarter features a large-scale photography frieze and projections. It positions our thinking around the possibilities of the public image and the viewer across curatorial and artistic ideas, city legislation and corporatisation of the public space, and increasing engagement from passers-by. Though operating with a different scale and budget, we draw parallels with the means and resulting direction of immersive spaces.

Keywords:

immersivity, technology, architecture, viewership, institutions