

Alexandra Lazar

A Place To Hold You

"Pure form and pure colour can signify the world"
Victor Vasarely

Approaching the work of Ana Knezevic, *A Place To Hold You*, instigates some fundamental questions in the viewer that suggest a possibility that we're at the inception of something completely new. The work provokes considerations of the experience of the interiority/exteriority in the artwork; the realms of visible and invisible in art; the consciousness in art (as opposed to artwork realised within one's consciousness); as well as the forms of art that sought to transcend these categories. These are, essentially, some of the questions posed by the minimal and conceptual art of the twentieth century as well as others before them who attempted to define the relationship between the consciousness and creativity.

Let's start from the beginning. Ana Knežević is an artist that works with spatial installations of light and sound, which serve as a starting point for her exploration of the relationship between symmetry and harmony of a given space, the emptiness and the viewer. The key aspect of her work is the articulation of the void, which she considers to be "the dynamic basis of everything that exists within the visible or manifested world and the potential source of all other not yet activated possibilities".¹ In her previous minimalist interventions that used sound, light and geometry, the artist framed and emphasised the void, revealing its energetic fluctuations and involving the viewer in a dialogue between internal and external spaces.

Knežević's study of matter – through geometry, mathematics and physics, and documented through her drawings, paintings and installations involving light, laser projections and VR – aims to demonstrate, stimulate, correct or emit certain precisely modulated aspects of the energy within a given space. The core difference between her previous works and *A Place To Hold You* (2003-2017) is that all previous experiments were realised in real space, whereas now they move into the virtual and internal space.

The linear diagrams, which form the basis of the ongoing series *Fiat Lux* (2010-), represent two-dimensional rhythmic interventions positioned in a three-dimensional space. This series, as well as her previous work with light and sound (*Light Mirror, Inner Tuning, Light on void*), reflect the artist's aim to use spatial installations in order to initiate a specific energy and balance in real space, which is

¹ Mara Prohaska Marković, Interview with Ana Knežević, *Art FAMA Magazine for Contemporary Art Scene*, Decembar 2011, No. 59.

carried on to the viewer. These studies can be considered precursors of the work *A Place To Hold You*, which is fully realized in VR technology.

A Place To Hold You is the concept conceived in 2003 as an installation in real space where the object, which the artist calls 'light in light', would be realised with the zebra hologram.² Instead, the work was constructed as a space suspended inside the viewer, technologically projected directly on to our senses. *A Place To Hold You* was drawn in architectural software 3D Studio Max, developed in Unity VR and actualised through the HTC VIVE VR set. The virtual installation consists of three spaces filled with soft white light dominated by the diagonally positioned geometric objects rendered in a transparent red light. An unobtrusive electronic sinewave sound is also heard in the space, changing its pitch and volume in relation to the participant's movement through space.

The technology may have affected the parameters and the experience of the work, but its initial concept remains unchanged: a corporeal experience of presence of a geometric form defined by light and sound of specific pulsating frequency, with the intention to observe the feeling of disembodied harmonic assimilation with the artwork. The radical aspect of this experience (unlike most contemporary VR art) is the complete void of narrative and symbolism, which formally puts *A Place To Hold You* into the domain of geometric abstraction.

This is where we need to recall the works of the artists of the Light and Space movement (Doug Wheeler, Robert Irwin, James Turrell), who used light for the creation of a space with an enhanced sensory and psychological range. Especially relevant is Turrell whose "soft walls" dealt with perceptual psychology and mathematics, and Wheeler whose infinite spaces seem to evoke multidimensional worlds, striving for a similar harmonious and meditative experience.

This experience is also closely related to the concepts of modernist avant-garde, and in particular to the ideas of Kazimir Malevich, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee and Johannes Itten. The concept of the dynamic and systematic development of the form developed by Paul Klee in lectures *Contributions on the Morphology of Form* (Bauhaus, 1921-22) and further systematised by Kandinsky in *Point and Line to Plane* (1926), owed a lot to the theosophical ideas about the universal movement of the matter by Claude Fayette Bragdon (1866-1946), especially his theosophical concept about temporalisation of form in space, which served as a direct influence to Malevich's articulation of the Suprematist space, and as one of the guiding principles behind Johannes Itten's artistic and theoretical considerations.³

² Zebra hologram is a holographic visualisation tool that uses 3D model projected as a visual light information. Zebra holograms are autostereoscopic (the viewer does not need to use special goggles), has a full parallax (can be viewed fully from all angles) and is created from thousands of hogels (three dimensional pixels).

³ An art historic insight into this topic is offered by Professor Christoph Wagner, Chair at the Department of Art History at the University of Regensburg, in his works

Bragdon's fundamental belief was that all forms are involved in a systematic process of dynamic shifting, in which the visual elements of point, line, surface and cube develop from a one-dimensional towards two-, three-, up to four- and multi-dimensional space: the line therefore is the result of a moving point, a surface arises from a moving line, the cube from a moving surface and finally, the "tetra-Hypercube" evolves from the dynamic shifting of three-dimensional cubes within a four-dimensional system. Bragdon speaks of the "universal flux of things - life, growth, organic being, the transition from simplicity to complexity" and he stresses the time factor as the moving force behind all these operations.⁴

One hundred years later, *A Place To Hold You* evokes and continues some of these concepts. Ana Knežević similarly deals with the question of the temporalisation of form and abandoning the classical Euclidean three-dimensional space which, in her work, expands in the fourth (time), measurable by the pace of individual movement marked by the sound. Her transparent geometric objects in space - light within light - are not only linear or two-dimensional forms, but also projections of multidimensional systems.

What has the use of the VR technology for the realisation of the work contributed or taken away from Ana's artistic concept? What are the ideological, ethical and theoretical implications of this process? Is VR (as some claim) the future of art or an escapist window dressing? How does this process physically and psychologically affect the participant? Can artists like Ana Knežević create relevant works that probe deeper into the materiality, rather than just provide an amusement for our senses? ⁵

HTC VIVE, the set used to create *A Place to Hold You*, is a virtual reality technology launched in 2016 and developed for gaming. It consists of a lightweight mobile headset that uses room scale tracking technology that allows free movement in real space. The headset has a 110 degree field of view, with two screens (one for each eye), each with a display resolution of 1080 x 1200 pixels. The VIVE VR system uses 70 infrared sensors: 32 in the headset, 24 in each controller, as well as a gyroscope,

Das Bauhaus und die Esoterik: Johannes Itten, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, 2005, *Esoterik am Bauhaus: Eine Revision der Moderne?*, 2009 and *Itten - Klee. Kosmos Farbe*, 2012. The above quote is from his essay 'Occultism and Abstract Art: Itten, Kandinsky, Malevich', *Hilma af Klint, the Art of Seeing the Invisible*, Eds. Kurt Almqvist and Louise Belfrage, Axel and Margaret Ax:son Foundation, Stockholm, 2015. p. 117.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "The power of virtual reality is that it goes beyond the conscious," says Philip Hausmeier, a contemporary VR artist from Berlin. "It really pushes your emotions, because it affects your body really heavily." *Is virtual reality the future of art?* Rachel Stewart, Deutsche Welle, 17 March 2017, retrieved 9 August 2017. Permalink: <http://p.dw.com/p/2ZCgv>

accelerometer and laser photosensors that monitor the positions and movements of the head, which are then sent to a computer that provides graphics. The two infrared cameras set in the corners of the physical space of the gallery the user's movements with motion tracking and feed the graphics in real time. The headset is light, tightly fixed over the eyes, and for someone who is not a gamer the first impression is a mild technophobia. The set's motorics simulate the situations in which the observer feels suspended in space ('a place to hold you'). Although the feeling of the elastic headband and the headset on the ears fades after a few minutes, the visual script imposes an experience that is not identical to nature. The experience undoubtedly (unintentionally) refers to the spatial-physical modifications and experiments of the corporeal-technical functionality of the artist Rebecca Horn.⁶

The experience of a virtual game - be it mini-golf or a futuristic dystopian battle - is the most common simulation of virtual sparring of partners. In *A Place To Hold You*, you are completely alone. The experience is emptied of all corporeality: you can move freely within the space but you are free of any avatar, so that each crossing or passing through the objects feels like an intrusion. At the brief moment of passing through the red triangle, one's "head" position is somewhere above the transparent object. It feels like being intercepted by a beam of strong headlights, or like that magic trick with a lady in the box sawn in half. The whole experience is significantly calmer and milder than the brutal sensations of the VR games, but neither is it close to the embodied feeling of meditative calm.

In a sense, VR continues the explorative path of the twentieth-century abstraction that dealt not only with the topology of the painting, but also its inner world: an art that emits its own energy and reality through a geometric form, gesture and colour, deepening the connection with the authentic experience. Light artists and more recently VR artists try to explore the same challenge in the "empty" space of the immaterial and to reach or represent the images of pure cerebrality.

An immersion into the VR experience flushes out certain messianic and dystopian elements. "VR removes all barriers between you and the artwork," claims the VR artist Liz Edwards; "when the world outside looks frightful, you might be tempted to put on the blinders", quips artist Jason Farago.⁷ The technology is used not to liberate but to direct our experiences, as our biological senses continue to transmit imperfect informations and lies about the apparent world.

⁶ Rebecca Horn also works with the kinetic and magnetic energy, as well as the light (*Spiriti di Madreperla*, 2002, *Light Imprisoned in the Belly of the Whale*, 2002) and the objects freed from corporeality.

⁷ Jason Farago, *Virtual Reality Has Arrived in the Art World. Now What?*, New York Times, 3 February 2017, retrieved 8 August 2017.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/03/arts/design/virtual-reality-has-arrived-in-the-art-world-now-what.html>

The main ethical ambivalence of dystopian reality lies in cancelling out the point of view: the boundaries between fiction and truth, protagonists and avatars, participants and the artwork are being erased.⁸ It doesn't surprise that the pioneering VR works in art are dominated by the visions of astral projection and models of different worlds: the artist Jeremy Couillard creates a portal for the afterlife; Jayson Musson projects an elegiac piece dedicated to victims of violence; Rachel Rosin envisions a bland world that disintegrates itself as a female voice recites the mantra "happiness, peace and cheerfulness" (Man Mask, 2016). The Gardens of Anthropocene, the VR of the Seattle Art Museum Olympic Sculpture Park, offers a future in which native aquatic and terrestrial plants have mutated to cope with increasing unpredictable and erratic climate change.⁹

There is a clear tendency to fill the VR space with trans-dimensional talismans of peace and joy in hope to overcome the fear of death and disappearance. In a world in which modern science shifts the definitions and experiences of humanity, gender, artificiality, and in which the viewer is defined by a unique and fragile balance between the real experience of the outside world that equips them with a spectrum of empathic responses, and the inner world in which they seek transcendence, how will VR affect that balance, therefore shaping that what we "see"? The amplification of the modified inner echo chamber in relation to the external space is clearly set to redress the way in which we experience the world as species.

A Place To Hold You represents a shift in research of our understanding of energy, relative space and the temporalisation of form in art. But the question of participatory conscience remains. Will VR with its aspiration to create new worlds - of the aesthetic, artistic, conceptual and critical kind - be permitted to define its own language and to maintain criticality so crucial in art? Will the nature of a medium created to mask our sensory experience and paper it over with the illusion

⁸ I am reminded of the episode "Playtest" of the British sci-fiction series *Black Mirror* (2016), in which the main protagonist ends up in a similar white room used for testing the VR technology which causes hallucinations and fear, and leaving us wondering if he ever left the VR space or not.

⁹ "Gardens of the Anthropocene" is the augmented reality of the Seattle Art Museum Olympic Sculpture Park commissioned in summer 2016 and placed in an indeterminate dystopian future affected with climate change. The plants are all derived from the native plants in and around the park that are thought to be tolerant to drought or to warming of the sea, and are therefore expected to adapt to the increasing temperatures. The artwork combines scientific findings with the artistic vision of such a world in which mutating species breach their natural boundaries to survive, from using mobile devices' radiation for photosynthesis, extracting nutrients from man-made structures, etc. See the whole project on vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/177393844> See also Molly Gottschalk, "Virtual reality is the most powerful artistic medium of our time", *Artsy Magazine*, 15 March 2016, retrieved August 2017. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-virtual-reality-is-the-most-powerful-artistic-medium-of-our-time>

regarding our point of view, drive and agency be able to further expand our perception, or lure it with the new decoys of itself and others? As for Ana Knežević, perhaps the most important question is whether further research in this direction has the ability to present artistic work that is not palpably technology-led, but is able to reflect our current "total experience" of emotions, thoughts, consciousness and senses.

As Claude Bragdon might have said, *time will tell*.