Reading Response: Char Davies

Two things struck me, repeatedly, while reading Davies’ “Changing Space: Virtual Reality as an Arena of Embodied Being.”

The first was an overwhelming desire to stop reading the detailed descriptions of *Osmose* and Ephémère, and experience them firsthand. It felt counterproductive to devote an hour to a reading a written walkthrough of each when the actual experience would provide a more immediate and thorough understanding of the artist’s work, creative process, and personal impact.

Ten years back during undergraduate studies, I was an aspiring artist/filmmaker who had defected from a background strictly comprised of math and science. I had no formal education in fine arts. Around this time, a professor gave me the best advice I’ve ever received with regards to gauging the success of any artwork: “Look at what the artist intended to accomplish and if his goal was realized, then it is a success.”

In commendably thorough detail, Davies describes her intentions and goals behind the creation of *Osmose* and Ephémère, along with an equally thorough description of the technical and creative processes behind each. Despite this, it is impossible to judge or react to either without having experienced them firsthand.

The second recurring reaction while reading “Changing Space” came in the form of a question: *why not just take psychedelic drugs to achieve this experience?* Davies states that her goal with these works was to give individuals the opportunity to “slip through Aldous Huxley's ‘doors of perception’ and glimpse reality, as I have intuitively sensed it, and so deeply long to know it, beyond the Cartesian divide.”

After reading, one cannot help but be intrigued by Davies’ work, to want to experience *Osmose,* Ephémère, firsthand. At the same time, one cannot help but question whether the time, labor, and resources devoted to the creation of these seminal VR experiences is either productive or justifiable. In a time and place where a blotter sheet of LSD costs less than a song, psilocybic bliss a few dollars more, and an endless number of Shulgin-propagated substances are legally available to any individual residing in or outside of Santa Cruz county lines—so long as they possess an internet connection and a handful of cryptocurrency—it seems that there remain more powerful, ubiquitous/accessible, and less fleeting revelatory experiences to be had for a fraction of the cost of a VR experience such as Davies has created.

Again, my thoughts above reflect those of an individual who has never experienced Davies’ virtual creations, as well as one playing the role of devil’s advocate.

Conversely, in assuming a pro VR-as-mechanism-for-transcending/subverting-reality standpoint, there is unequivocal merit behind Davies’ work and writing; as a means of demonstrating the possibilities and potential for VR to convey “alternative sensibilities and worldviews;” to serve a higher purpose as a “perceptually and conceptually invigorating philosophical tool;” and perhaps most importantly, an empirical tool for evaluating the psychological effects of reality-subverting, sensory-altering virtual experiences amongst participants.

The most intriguing bit of Davies’ writing here arguably comes when reflecting on the implications of the technology in the [now present] near-future:

Not to be forgotten is the possibility of the medium's potency being used to replace bodily experiences of the "real" with phantasms of virtual utopias…

In view of the grim prospect of the twenty-first century, we are compelled to ask how critics of culture, philosophers, and artists will deal with technologies. How do they contend with expansionist ideology, and the accelerated elimination of diversity and of singularities? How do they resist or act?...Now, in a world where the notion of space has been completely changed through electronic simultaneity, where the computer appears to go faster than the human brain, or where "virtual reality" replaces "reality," how do philosophy, critical theory, or artistic practices deal with those shifts?[[10](http://www.immersence.com/publications/char/1998-CD-Virtual_Dimension.html#10)]

This question aptly applies to immersive virtual space, especially when one considers that it will one day likely be used for such (questionable) purposes as adapting individuals to psychological and biological survival in a less and less "user-friendly" living environment. Moreover, unlike Bachelard's desert or deep sea, Deikman's meditation cell, or even an isolation tank, VR is a communicative medium, which by default carries conventional cultural values of the Western technoscientific worldview from which that technology has sprung.