



Digital Oceans

Thesis Progress Archive

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Concept

My project seeks to explore disconnection and longing for nature in a world increasingly removed from our natural environment. As nature interactions and access to nature decreases with urbanization and digitization – now more than ever – we have become increasingly nature deprived as individuals and a society, harming our own as well as our environment's health. With my work, I am looking to create greater general awareness of this issue and present potential solutions in extremely nature-deprived situations by expressing my own desperate need for nature contact. My current work is especially inspired and was created during my lock-down experience in Paris, where almost my entire life took place in one and the same room for several weeks. During this time, I attempted to transform this room into the environments I longed for with the limited means available to me, using digital and artificial tools as a means to reconnect to nature out of necessity.

Research

My research is focused on the effects of digital nature experiences on connectedness to nature and pro-environmental behavior. Connectedness to nature, a term mainly used in environmental psychology, has been proven to have countless mental and physical health benefits; at the same time, it is also deemed essential in for our efforts to fight climate change and other environmental issues. I conducted a study with two different documentary scenes, testing their effect on the participants. My research showed that digital experiences can act as a supplement to real nature interactions, increasing connectedness along with some of the same benefits. Younger and urban participants also showed considerably lower connectedness and weekly nature interactions, showing that this demographic is especially nature deprived. These nature-deprived participants also showed the highest increase in connectedness when watching the nature documentaries – showing that my target audience is highly receptive and even in need for what I am proposing with my work. Both the scene showing the beauty of nature as well as human destruction had similar effects, despite functioning on very different cognitive levels and leading to different reactions. This research will help me better understand the psychological effects on viewers of my work and make more informed decisions in selecting the content for my work, while also providing a conceptual base for it.

Precedents

Several artists and designers have influenced my work. The work of artists like Olafur Eliasson (e.g. The Weather Project, Riverbed), Pierre Huyghe (e.g. After A Life Ahead), Walter de Maria and Joseph Beuys served as an inspiration in bringing nature into the exhibition space and their work's ecological messages. Especially Olafur Eliasson's ability to create natural environment within a human-made space with a combination of artificial and organic materials and means inspired my project. I looked at some of the techniques he uses for his installations, for example projecting through fog to create organic shapes on walls, to find applications in my own home installations. Inside the Parsons community, I was inspired by Evan Roth's "Red Lines with Landscapes" both on a conceptual basis in the discussion of the physicality of the digital and in its form, using the digital as sculptural elements of the piece. I also see a strong connection

to the work of many of my classmates, especially in the exploration of the effects of digitization and urbanization on mental physical health. Nasia's work on rest proposes a solution to these problems, and I think contact with nature could be seen as one aspect or an addition to the idea of what should make a Sabbath; at least, nature is certainly a great solution to find true rest. Sacha's visualization of the overwhelming experience of social media reveals the world many young, urban people find themselves in, therefore illustrating one of the main factors leading to disconnectedness.

Exploration

I started prototyping with a large gallery space in mind and had two major directions and prototypes for my midterm critique, both being large immersive video installations. With my first idea, I wanted to explore media representations of nature, sourcing footage from social media to create a busy multi-screen installation. Here, I wanted to explore the paradoxical relationship between the natural and the digital; in some situations, the digital becomes a necessity to be able to enjoy nature, while being completely unnatural at the same time. My second idea was to create a 360 degree live-stream projection of a natural environment that would come from a natural space, transporting it into the exhibition by digital means. It should act both as a space for "nature therapy" within an urban environment and at the same time question our relationship to nature and its own existence: why do we go to a human-made space to enjoy nature rather than going outside? Is the digital causing our disconnection from nature or is it the solution for reconnection? Can it be both at the same time?

As Paris went into a full lock-down, I was faced with many restrictions both on my life and my ability to continue with my work. I also experience the negative effects of disconnection more than ever before, as I was unable to have any proper contact to real nature for weeks, which made the topic even more relevant for my personal wellbeing. I therefore decided to focus more on this feeling of desperate longing for nature in such an extreme situation. My prototyping was not only an experiment to bring my work further but also the attempt of a solution for my own personal problems. I therefore tried to embrace the limitations and tried to make the best simulation of a natural elements possible with the resources I had. Compared to my ideas before, practicality and limitations therefore became an essential part of my work. The idea was no longer to create a great simulation of nature within a city but to create the greatest *possible* simulation. This does not only express the desperation I found myself in but also makes it much more real and practical for people to copy in their own homes. Throughout my prototyping in this phase, I tried to put increasing emphasis on this homemade element as well as the immersiveness of the installations. While the first one started with 3 screens on my desk, my last ones used five screens and a projector with lights that turned my full living room into a natural environment. They all shared some commonalities – playing a 360 degree nature video found online – but varied in form and setup. I first experimented with different kinds of nature (forests, river, underwater), but strongly leaned towards underwater ocean scenes by the end, as they had the greatest effect on me. I also tried to use light in my apartment to add to the immersiveness of the installation, putting a blue bedsheet on a lamp and shining through a blue glass of water with my camera flashlight to create wave-like patterns on the walls.

Outlook

While I am very happy with my progress and just looking at the installations on their own, there are still many considerations to be made to present this in a gallery space. First, I have to decide how I want to show my work: while I am leaning towards making an installation, I could also present it as a documentation of my own home installations. It could also develop towards a more practical or scalable approach, turning into more of a guide or tool for people to copy this at home. While I want to include elements of all 3 directions, I am currently leaning towards prioritizing the first, as I think it would best communicate my idea in a gallery space. For this installation, it would be important to keep the low-resource DIY approach within the exhibition, I could therefore see myself recreating a living room like space where I do one my digital nature installations with the same approach found in my prototypes. For the guides, I would also consider creating a brochure or website that links to video material and provides instructions and ideas for people to create different nature installations in their own homes. Here, it would also be great to create some kind of community where people can share and show their own setups and inspire others. For my installation, I also have to decide on the content I want to show: while I am fairly locked on underwater environments and the use of found footage is important for my concept, I still have to put a lot thought on what video I chose. Here, I also have to consider copyright law and edit or present the video accordingly.

Production Plan

This production plan assumes I mainly focus on an installation in the gallery and could therefore still change dramatically.

Phase I – Final Experimentation (until Mid February)

Experimentation and selection of video and audio footage (with recordings of different prototypes), ideation / testing of other DIY immersive tools, recording of prototypes, try to make installations in other people's homes (maybe with instructions)

Phase II – Planning and Editing (until end of March)

Edit video and Audio for the final installation, test and iterate accordingly
Plan installation setup according to gallery space, with furniture and screen sizes etc.
Decide on scope, form and content for guide component.

Phase III (until mid April)

Figure out where / how to get all materials for the installation setup and other technical aspects
Design guide component (website or brochure) and start creation (printing or publishing)

Phase IV (until mid May)

Buy and if necessary modify/assemble all materials (e.g. furniture)
Finalize print or publishing process

Prototype I



Prototype II



Prototype III



Prototype II





