Space is the Place: Staging the VR-Smart Phone Lifestyle Wars

Interview with VR artist Geoffrey Lillemon by Geert Lovink

(Exhibition website: https://miekegerritzen.com/space-is-the-place/. More images by Geoffrey Lillemon, based on the @droog installation, at Geoffrey's website: http://geoffreylillemon.com/spaceistheplace/. The images used in this posting merge the sloganism on the wall of the gallery and the mannequins. I have posted my own photos of the exhibit here, taken during the exhibit @droog in October 2019)

The idea for the Space is the Place exhibit started when Dutch designer and curator Mieke Gerritzen purchased around thirty second-hand mannequins for a show in the temporary `@droog exhibition space in downtown Amsterdam, which she was curating during 2019. The dummies are normally used in a shop to display the latest fashion items. Mieke started to dress them up like dystopian cyborgs, fusing VR headsets on the mannequins heads with clay so that the goggles became a part of the body. She then involved Geoffrey Lillemon because he is a VR expert. Soon the idea of two opposing armies was born: VR soldiers against the selfie-taking smartphone fashion mob, set the hyped-up context of commercial travels to Mars.

In the curatorial statement we read that "Elon Musk is building a Starhopper for 100 people that will fly to Mars 1000 times a year. A speculative project that will make our dreams come true. Because who doesn't want to go to Mars? Meanwhile, we are getting used to the idea of leaving the planet by living more and more in virtuality. Our body adapts to the use of smartphones. Infobesity is no longer a disease, but the default way of life. We live according to the systems, becoming robots without being aware of it." In this interview, recorded in February 2020 in the office of the Institute of Network Cultures, we look back at the ideas behind the exhibition design.

Geert Lovink: Before we dive into the exhibit, can you tell how you look at virtual reality and the body? The dystopian route seems so Cartesian, pushing further the mind-body split. How did this evolve?

Geoffrey Lillemon: In prehistory we walked on four feet but evolutionary changes made us walk upright. Walking upright has changed our body, body parts such as feet, head and face changed shape. Humans have also become longer and taller. The question is, when is the human being developed because evolution continues? What are the consequences for humans if

technology penetrates our body? We will no longer be needed for reproduction, nor will we have to work to keep the economy going or to provide our food. The robot is growing around us and technology is taking over our human tasks and functions. What is happening to us? We can often only notice evolutionary changes afterwards. At the moment, the smartphone determines our attitude. A few hours a day we bow our heads looking down at our smartphone. It probably does something to our spinal cord. We can expect the other adjustment because we started to eat differently over the past century. More, fatter and healthier, which means that there is massive overweight. The fat man will soon also represent an evolutionary image of a man in the 21st century.

Our body will change further. Cognitive properties develop through, may first become alienated from the body, but over time the body will adapt. Parts of the body that are used less often disappear. Our head becomes larger, the senses get more meaning. There are more room and attention to our state of mind. Our life becomes more dramatic, more feeling and less systematic. We can dream and fantasize, that is our strength. We communicate and inform, that is the most important task for people. We are the artists of our own, our body is the basic material for design. The human body transforms from a physical state to a conceptual platform.

Geert: How did you start working together on Space is the Place?

Geoffrey: Mieke was doing beautiful experiences, merging technology with mannequins, almost like a mutation of the organic and the tech form, a cohesive balance between technology and human behaviour of what's usually considered two separate worlds. There is the escapist world where we're leaving one world and go into a VR world. We're stepping into another space and then there is the argumentation of self to where we are in space but we're changing the perception of that space through selfie culture and look where I am physically. Trying to get people that fantasy. It was kind of

like the people that want to leave and the people that want to stay. It's going between those that celebrate the technology against those that feel they are victims. In this installation, we're showing the contrast on those two points of view with their respective worlds that they are inhabiting.

Geert: Both armies have merged with the technology quite literally; the one with VR glasses, the other with smartphones glued to their hand, so the integration on both sides has progressed quite far.

Geoffrey: Yes, we offer a speculative vision of the future of where we're going. It is related to where we're now, but it's showing if we're not aware of our condition within our relationship with this technology we're going to be melted into one and are going into one side or the other. It is quite dystopic, I don't think you're coming in there wanting to open up your smartphone after seeing it. It is a little bit of self-awareness.

We wanted to fuse new immersive technology like VR headsets, wireless earbuds with consumerist advertising mannequins to show the grotesque nature of our mutation with our devices. Almost like a mutation of the organic and the tech form, a cohesive balance between technology and human behaviour of what's usually considered two separate souls. There is the escapist world where we are leaving one world and we arrive in a VR fantasy. So we're stepping into another entirely new space, usually an unexpected voyage. Then there is the argumentation of self to where we're in a physical space but were changing the perception of that space through selfie culture and "delusional lifestyle misconceptions".

So there are two different camps of thought, the people that want to leave and the people that want to stay. In this installation were showing the contrast on those two reality stances and how technology victimizes them. Both armies have merged with the technology quite literally; one side with organic VR glasses, the other with smartphones melted into their hands, so the integration on both sides has progressed to a dystopic realm.

We offer a speculative vision of the future of where we're going. It is related to where we're now, but it's showing if were not aware of our condition within our relationship with this technology were going to be melted into one monster and are going into one side or the other.

It is quite dystopic, I don't think you're coming in there wanting to open up your smartphone after seeing it. It is a little bit of self-awareness. Yet,

Instagram likes will prevail, and the photos will be taken.

Geert: Yet, the audience was still making selfies with the mannequins…

Geoffrey: That was quite ironic. The people were falling into irony. There was also the kind of the angle of the selfie group that was all about glamour and bling, highly aesthetic, with jewellery, glitter and yoga mats. Their posture was all about how do I look in the space., On the opposite VR side they were dressed in homeless apocalyptic apparel, which is the opposite of the selfie army where because they don't have to be aware of their self-image as you are existing in another space. The VR group does not even

need to have a home. You see that already today with people in VR they are looking quite absent-minded with their mouths open. They are not so concerned about that. When they take off their headsets they come back into their bodies. Nerds can totally submerge into their computer programs and software problems.

We as visitors to the show are falling into the irony whether we like it or not. There is the selfie groupies that are all about glamour and bling, the highly aesthetic, with jewellery, glitter and yoga mats, checking themselves in the cosmic black mirror

Then on the opposite VR side, they are dressed in homeless apocalyptic apparel, which is the opposite of the selfie tribe because they don't have to be aware of their self-image as you are existing in another space. This VR group doesn't even need to have a home. You see that already today with people in VR they are looking quite an absent-minded with their mouths open. They are not so concerned about that. When they take off their headsets they come back into their bodies.

We are seeing what Elon Musk is doing sort of glamorizing the sex appeal of the reality escapists. Let's flap down the headset and for a moment, dance with Grimes on mars, it's part of the hype having this utopian dream of leaving earth, being in the cosmos, with lipstick. It is my theory that VR is for those unable to deal with reality and augmentation is for those that are so consumed by showing their travels in magic optics they become immobilized and blind.

Young people identify with the selfie look even though they can't afford it. That's why you're getting lots of augmentation or selfie kind of scenarios, making you look like you're in a better place or have a higher status than you actually do. It even goes down to face filters that make you look prettier than you really are. Think of the iPhone default settings when you take a selfie with it: you're looking much better in that than you do.

Geert: Why was the selfie army wearing silver dresses?

Geoffrey: That's part of a robotic aesthetic. If you go into the kind of android approach of merging with technology. And the Mars thing it is almost like if you see what Elon Musk is doing the sort of glamorizing, let's go to the future and let us be kind of sexy with grimes on Mars. It's part of the hype, flying in a shiny rocket ship to Mars, having this utopian dream of leaving

earth, being in the cosmic. This is what privileged, rich people fantasize about. On the VR side of things they are not able to go there physically but they want to go there so they will travel there virtually. Young girls identify with the selfie look even though they can't afford it. That's why you're getting lots of augmentation or selfie kind of scenarios, making you look like you're in a better place or have a higher status than you actually do. It even goes down to face filters that make you look prettier than you really are. Think of the iPhone default settings when you take a selfie with it: you're looking much better in that than you do.

Geert: The installation thus presents two rivaling models for the poor. The glamorous parts are more appealing to females while the geeky neglect of the body incorporated in the VR army is more appealing to the male side?

Geoffrey: We tried to make turn both types into an androgynous form. We started with the mannequins who were all females we cut off all their breasts to show that they are not men or woman. They are quite genderless. It just wasn't part of the consideration of the piece, the consideration was just genderless. I just finish watching Ted Bundy documentary about the Unabomber, Ted Kazinsky, his whole kind of angle was against new tech and new technology kind of things he was forecasting that fear so from like a past reference point.

Changing having personal opinions on how we want to change the reality around us but we're all the same in that regard. If you can augment yourself to anything and escape anywhere, we actually clone back to the same worlds and same kinds of representations of self, it is almost like we're losing, when we have unlimited possibilities we become more limited, and become kind of clones of each other. And there is something about that and the two sides of being representatives replicants of each other. If we could use artificial intelligence to look at Instagram, and it could show you how unoriginal you are… In this way everything that you make can be seen as a kind of the same as a lot of other people's thinking from an evolutionary standpoint we could start moving to unexplored areas, becoming self-aware in our image production. In this way, we could become more original by growing our awareness of how unoriginal we are—which would be a great tool.

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personal art. In this way everything that you make can be seen as a kind of the same as a lot of other people's thinking from an evolutionary standpoint we could start moving to unexplored areas, becoming self-aware in our image production. We could become more original by growing our awareness of how unoriginal we are which would be a great tool.

The installation thus presents two rivaling models for a future lifestyle. The glamorous parts are more appealing to those with insecurity while the geeky neglect of the body incorporated in the VR tribe is more appealing to the dissatisfied.

We all have personal opinions on how we want to change the reality around us but we're all the same in that regard. If you can augment yourself to anything and escape anywhere, we actually clone back to the same worlds and same kinds of representations of self, it is almost like we're losing ourselves, when we have unlimited possibilities we become more limited, and become kind of clones of each other.

Geert: This will be confronting, to look at one's ignorance.

Geoffrey: Exactly, learn from our own mistakes but now we can learn from comparison to a huge AI library. It is more on the side of why they all look the same because there is a sort of duplication of self, a mimic culture. We even had somebody from of LA come by when we're working on it and she told us about trends that people are doing that are specifically related to Instagram selfie culture to produce the best-looking image for Instagram but you look like a freak in real life. That's when you raise your cheeks higher and you built up the cheeks here It looks great in a square format. You look monstrous in the real world. It is almost like beauty standards are constraint to new media formats. Looking wealthy better is than being wealthy. You have to look wealthy to be wealthy. That's why they wear like glamorous gold and silver earbuds. There is a certain kind of luxury in the choices of what they are wearing.

It is confronting to look at one's ignorance and learn from our own mistakes but now we can learn from comparison to a huge AI library. That's why they all look the same because there is a sort of duplication of self, a mimic culture. We even had somebody from of LA come by when we're working on it and she told us about trends that people are doing that are specifically related to Instagram selfie optimal hotness and to produce the best-looking image for Instagram. This comes with compromise as you look like a freak in

real life. That's when you have plastic surgery to raise your cheeks higher it
looks beautiful in square format. Yet you look monstrous in the real world.
"Beauty standards are constrained to new media formats."
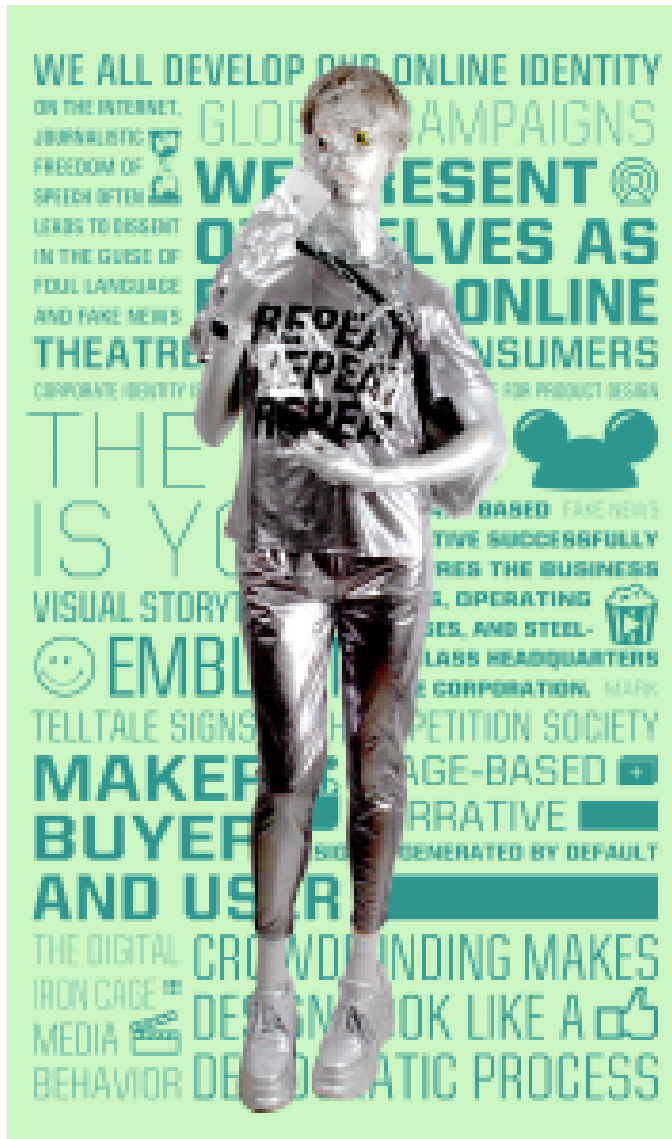
Geert: Let's into the politics of astrology and talk about Venus (smartphone)
and Mars (VR), the two competing planets in your installation.

Geoffrey: Mars specifically is screwed, so we need to go to Mars, there is no
real reason to go to Mars if you come to think about it, besides perhaps a
plan B., Of course, we want to explore space, but it is not far, it is giving us a
little bit of a different perspective. It is an uninhabitable hell hole, mars is a
giant cat litter box. It is also something better than here, it is that fear we
destroyed earth, where else can we go, It is a little bit an anxiety release

planet, so the grass is greener, on the land where there is no grass. Maybe something is appealing about the one way trip like something about the fact that you can't come back, and what that means in terms of leaving everything behind, it is like a one way trip in VR. If you look at the growth of the VR headsets, it is really growing around them and they become that kind of thing, so there is no taking that headset off, it is part of a permanent mutation, it is a one-way street, in terms of the VR side of the army. From astronomy and cosmology, there is no sureness of what is out there, there is sort of speculation of what is out there, in terms of, it is almost the appeal of the unknown and the unknown can be way worse or way better, so it is the risk of uncertainty.

Geert: Do you agree that G-Star Raw's *The Uniform of the Free* slogan is the ultimate paradox?

Geoffrey: You're free by conforming to everybody else, you scape your internal prison by becoming free with everyone else. I think there is a growing fear among people. Wed like to express the idea that there is a unique individuality and that we want to express the ultimate form of difference, and you now, you are kind of a unique and authentic self. But the reality is different.

The great fantasy of where do we go when we have to get out, as is the case of the VR tribe when our lifestyle is an uninhabitable hell hole, there is something better than here, where else can we go. The anxiety release anywhere but here planet is the answer, so the grass is greener, on the land where there is no grass. And that's why we use the metaphor of Mars as the example escapist realm.

Maybe something is appealing about the one way trip like something about the fact that you can't come back, and what that means in terms of leaving everything behind, it is like a one way trip in VR. If you look at the growth of the VR headsets, it is really growing around them and they become that kind of thing, so there is no taking that headset off, it is part of a permanent mutation, it is a one-way street, in terms of the VR side of the tribe. From astronomy and cosmology, there is no sureness of what is out there, there is sort of speculation of what is out there, in terms of, it is almost the appeal of the unknown and the unknown can be way worse or way better, so it is the risk and appeal of uncertainty. In that way, you're free by conforming to everybody else, and you escape your internal prison by becoming free with everyone else.

Geert: The work took place a gallery, usually you make animations, design work, VR pieces. This time you stepped out of the screen?

Geoffrey: There's the medium of being a physical thing and I have been like personal really struggling with where the digital, where the artwork fits, what medium should it go to. Do we need more physical things in the world? We have space as an issue, do we want to be making more material things, like those kinds of things, or do we work just in a digital capacity, just life in an online capacity. So I have been really struggling. In terms of the actual, like the feeling of the piece and everything, there is something about when dealing with topics of technology whether you're working in the technology medium and producing something digital or producing something physically that is about technology, there is a certain like, it needs to feel less cold in a way and feel quite, whether it is with absurdity or with drama, or with sadness all of these extremes kinds of feelings and expressions, that is why it is important, to make the characters, almost like you want to sit down and have a wine with them.

They have a real expression and that helps like, drives the contrast between the super cold, and the super kind of like lively, vital kind of presence. That was important just to extract it from a clinical design approach and give it a certain roughness, a certain kind of sturdiness and a certain kind of feeling and I do that across the board with all of my work. I am not necessarily so interested in hyper-sexualized work or hyper like absurdism, but I like that it accomplices giving the coldness of digital and technology a real and relatable feeling and whether you want to relate to that to that kind of personality or not, making it feel real, making coldness feel warm. I don't know if that is really the correct answer for that kind of thing.

Geert: After the show, all puppets eventually ended up the bin. That's an interesting statement regarding the artwork as an object.

Geoffrey: The production quality was low. Look, you're touching on something I have a huge dilemma about, like the topic of what preservation is in this context. The closest I come to an answer is that 3 dimensional, becomes 4 dimensional, becomes just time-based media, in the end, becomes an image or becomes a video or becomes distributed through a cloud. When you try to preserve it, 3 dimensional becomes 4 dimensional eventually. The starting point would be 3D then 2D.

Geert: The puppets, including the slogans on walls, the whole environment disappeared. No trace is left, apart from the digital information. What do you think of that irony?

Geoffrey: I like materiality, the pragmatic approach, this is how I start thinking about architecture mixed with digital art. That's the job I am doing right now, working for an interactive architectural company. I like the physicality, the merger of the two, the physical mixed with the digital, in a smart way. The combination of the two is where we're going, it is stupid to think that were are not going to need to incorporated technology into every aspect of everything, it is going to be incorporated into to self, it is going to incorporate into the environment, into the home. It is already. With that in

mind. How far can it go, pushing the extremities of those ideas, that's what this is then in terms of the body and when seeing it in space than you have, of course.

In terms of the output, you can argue that in terms of making it, it says you are fabricating something physically, and there's a lot of variables in raw you have to produce, you have to go shopping, you have to buy materials, there's a lot of things that are depended upon other resources and other kinds of timelines like when places are open and those things, you can argue that you suddenly get into a design headspace when doing that as in to suppose to a real self-expression headspace, and that is kind of what I like about digital work, especially if I make something just on my own, not directing, not designing but just being like trying to feel the movement, personally I feel I can get a better expression of feeling in that environment. Then spending ninety per cent of the time executing the production. That's the dilemma. Because the value of the medium is more valuable when it becomes like that kind of production approach. But then are you actually making something that is true to yourself or are you making something true to strategy.

Geert: Do you want to make art that is valuable, or make more self-expressive art? It is just to make self-expressive work, then you could argue, what is the point?

Geoffrey: The question is whether a man will survive in the ongoing battle between the technological future and our ordinary human life. Elon Musk is building a 100-hop Starhopper that will fly to Mars 1,000 times a year. A speculative project that will make our dreams come true. Because who wouldn't want to go to Mars? Meanwhile, we are getting used to the idea of leaving the planet by living more and more in virtual reality. Our body adapts through the use of the smartphone, and infobesity is no longer a disease, but a standard form of life. We live as systemic creatures, we become robots without realizing it. Human conditions change, the evolution continues.

The point is to be here while expressing visions of tomorrow.

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Geoffrey Lillemon (1981 USA/Netherlands) works with digital media on various platforms and projects which connects technical innovation with romantic tragedy, visual demagoguery and hyper sensationalism. His art

environments are aesthetic and communicatively too dark for the mainstream digital domain yet he has managed to infiltrate the commercial world with a personal expression of commerce as an art medium. This recurring theme in his work is clearly visible: Geoffrey combines high tech with the macabre side of romance and criticizes its aesthetic reference pool with our constant debate about taste and bad taste, decency and indecency, high culture and mainstream superficiality. His website: http://www.geoffreylillemon.com/website/.