



Hsin-Chien Huang: The Data We Called Home

Curated by
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Pratt
Manhattan
Gallery

Pratt Exhibitions

Hsin-Chien Huang: The Data We Called Home

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Introduction

Taking Flight and Coming Home

Linda Lauro-Lazin

I first encountered Hsin-Chien Huang's work in 2017 on a trip to Mass MOCA in North Adams, Massachusetts, and it was an experience I would not soon forget. The piece, *Chalkroom*, was a virtual reality artwork the artist made in collaboration with legendary multimedia pioneer Laurie Anderson. (It is also on display here.) To be clear, *Chalkroom* actually begins as a physical art installation. Before donning our VR headsets, my fellow viewers and I first found ourselves in a UV-lit room covered from floor to ceiling with white drawings and words—a kind of giant, immersive blackboard. It was a pretty imaginative piece of artwork in its own right. Were we revisiting some repressed academic memory? We sat on swivel chairs. We put on the clunky VR headsets.

Then the real journey began.

Suddenly we saw ourselves (courtesy of the miracle of VR and Huang's amazing programming and artistry) inside an identical chalk-drawing room, only this one seemed to go on for infinity. We heard Laurie Anderson's dulcet voice inside our heads, guiding us, cajoling us, and (as is always her profound métier) telling us stories. I won't go into the specific stories here, but suffice it to say that the environment she coaxed me into was mesmerizing. There were eight different chalk rooms, and I found I could fly through them all. Shepherded by Anderson, I entered a kind of oneiric state of trust and weightlessness, one in which I was free to let the images (dancing figures, birds, disembodied faces) and words on the blackboards coalesce and collapse into my own personal memories. I could visit them and somehow decode them. I could see my Past, but now I could also choose my Path.

Chalkroom was nothing short of a vision of free will and destiny and trust in something...larger. A practicing Buddhist of many years, I would say that it aligned with everything I felt and believed. Once I returned to the physical room of the installation, and

slowly came back into my own body, I was left with a profound sense of transition. It was the closest representation of the Bardo I'd ever experienced.¹

When it was first created in the 1980s, virtual reality had the power to transform. It could expand our human imagination; it could encourage psychological breakthrough and personal growth. VR still does have this power (more than ever, given what we now know, technologically), yet the social Zeitgeist has since drifted towards surface and spectacle. Concurrent with the timeline of this exhibition at Pratt, thousands of visitors daily, from Vegas to Miami, from Grand Rapids to Philadelphia, are pouring into shows like the "The Klimt Experience" and "The Van Gogh Experience." These are gorgeous, state-of-the-art environments of light and color—yet their content is a century old. Clearly the public still craves the immersive, but to what end?

During the 1990s, the Banff Center for the Arts in Canada provided a rich environment for the fostering of a narrative, exploratory type of VR. It was there that two pioneering virtual reality artists, Brenda Laurel and Rachel Strickland, developed *PLACEHOLDER: Landscape and Narrative in a Virtual Environment* in 1993. With its dual-person interactivity, natural imagery, and sensitive use of folk narrative, *PLACEHOLDER* advocated for nothing less than a new humanism—a kind of tech-moral ethics. Charlotte Davies (another Canadian pioneer)'s 1995 *Osmose*, an intuitive yet futuristic mixture of nature and abstraction, micro and macro, likewise left participants moved to their core. What's more, artworks like these were popular as well as profound.² Davies documents in her essay, *Changing Space: Virtual Reality as an Arena of Embodied Being*, that some 25,000 people experienced *Osmose* between 1995 and 2007. At the end of the experience, almost all of them expressed extraordinary emotional responses from euphoria to tears of grief.³

Clearly Huang and Anderson embrace and seek to foster this kind of transformative experience. I would venture that they even take it a step further.

Let's not forget that virtual reality not only allows us to change the form of body we inhabit; within a single VR experience, we can change that form again and again. We can, in effect, *re-embodiment*. Take for example, one epic Huang-Anderson collaboration on display here: *To the Moon*. In this piece, we can climb a steep ice-mountain island that floats in space. We can inhabit the body of an astronaut, weightless. We can fall and see ourselves falling. We view ourselves through our own eyes (that of the astronaut) and then—suddenly, seamlessly, ready-or-not!—our point of view shifts and we *watch our own body* float away from us. We are now "the falling astronaut," drifting through space.

This kind of shift of observance, and the attendant healing power it holds, has not gone unnoticed by science. Over the course of the past forty years or so, researchers have been working with virtual reality in a wide range of fields with significant results, and in particular, breakthroughs have been made in the treatment of anxiety disorders. A 2019 study published in *Frontiers of Psychiatry* posits that VR offers clinicians a tool for "exposure therapy" heretofore unprecedented. "Exposure therapy involves gradual and repeated exposure to feared stimuli with resultant changes in cognitions, behaviors, and emotional and physical responses."⁴ Through the means of VR, patients suffering from anxiety are gradually and safely exposed to stimuli that cause them distress, and over time, can release those triggers.

So, could this show at Pratt offer you, the visitor, a healing experience? Well, only each gallery goer could say that for themselves; but I would venture, on balance, yes; and certainly, the potential for experiencing a greater sense of humanism and social empathy is in store.

It should be noted that Huang uses VR (and other technologies) to access difficult social memories (repression, even imprisonment) brought on by the political realities of his native Taiwan. In *Bodyless*, for instance, we see a political prisoner in his cell, only to watch him die and become a ghost who descends to the underworld. And to create his *Sculptures of Touch* series, Huang mapped (among other objects) a barricade and a bunker that were otherwise off limits during the rule of Taiwanese martial law from 1949 to 1987. He then printed them in 3D, in effect making new objects that can enable us to have new experiences, out of memories denied.

An interesting moment occurs in a 2018 video

interview conducted by the Louisiana Museum with Huang and Anderson. The interviewer (ostensibly off camera) asks Huang how he would define his work. Huang demurs calling it "new media," but rather opts for the term, "spiritual media." He then immediately qualifies that statement, calling it "the media from the soul." What an amazing antidote for this polarized moment in society, to create work that lets us step into "someone else's shoes," to feel what it is like to be them. To be other. To be different.

That this show is Huang's first VR solo offering in the US seems remarkable, given how very much this kind of work needs to be seen right now. As you wander through the exhibition, you will find a diversity of works, some of them sculptural and contemplative, some of them highly interactive. However, one more work needs to be mentioned here and it is *Samsara*. It is in this work that Huang most strongly explores the concept of "embodied cognition": the notion that all beings see their world from a certain, particular perspective—one that is inseparable from the bodily form they inhabit. In *Samsara*, the viewer/participant finds themselves in a future time when all of Earth's natural resources have been exhausted. The viewer ventures out into space, only to die. Soon, however, they are reincarnated, but (to their surprise) not always in human form, and, when human, not always in a desirable form. They eventually become whales, exploring three dimensions as a whale might, via vibrations and sounds.

Huang relates in a behind-the-scenes video interview that whales may have been able to communicate over great distances, using, in effect, 3D animation. He chuckles that we humans are so proud of technological accomplishments like cell phones, while our neighbors in the sea have had those communication capabilities for millions of years.⁵

He goes on to say, "What I aim to share in the story of *Samsara* is that over and over again, we humans seek to advance or to try to make progress, to leap, to transcend, or depart from Earth. Nevertheless, as we fail to resolve our Karma, we find ourselves jumping back to return to where we were, as it turns out. So, at the end of *Samsara*, we come to understand our very own existence so as to truly achieve greater transcendence...not to leave, however, but to appreciate and to embrace [our lives here on Earth]."⁶

VR, in Huang's hands, is not an escape from the rigors and gravity of this earth; it is not some diversion away from what we would rather not face. In fact, it is a more perfect, more beautiful, more empathetic form of art than we have seen in a long time. And it is showing us a way of more fully coming home.

Linda Lauro-Lazin is a New York-based artist. She has been at the forefront of developing a vernacular of digital mark-making and abstraction that bridges the gap to analog painting. Her studio practice fluidly blends fine art and technology. Her work has been exhibited in the US, Europe, and Asia.

Recognized as an expert in the field of digital art, Lauro-Lazin is a Fulbright Scholar, a professor of art, and the assistant chair of the Department of Digital Arts at Pratt Institute. She has organized and participated in many guest lectures and panel discussions. Recently, she was invited to teach advanced classes in art at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, PRC, and the University of Maribor in Slovenia. Lauro-Lazin has a great passion for building community and sharing her ideas about art.

She holds an MFA in painting and drawing from Pratt Institute, an MA in computer graphics from New York Institute of Technology, and a BFA in painting from SUNY New Paltz.

Notes

- 1

In classical schools of Buddhism, the Bardo is considered a place of transition between living and dying. In addition to the traditional interpretations, the Bardo can refer to any gap or in-between state. It is considered a profound place in which wisdom can dawn. Buddhist themes appear in Huang’s later works as well.
- 2

Paul, Christiane. *Digital Art*. Thames & Hudson, 2015. In her book *Digital Art*, Christiane Paul relates, “Only a few virtual reality environments that completely immerse a viewer into an alternate world have been developed within an art context, and Canadian artist Charlotte Davies’s *Osmose* (1995) and *Ephemere* (1998) are classics of the genre.”
- 3

The essay first appeared in: Beckmann, John. *The Virtual Dimension Architecture, Representation, and Crash Culture*. Princeton Architectural Press, 1998. When the essay was published, it documented the number of visitors as 5,000. Later, on her website, immersence.com, Davies reproduces the essay, and updates her original figure to 25,000.
- 4

Boeldt, Debra et al. “Using Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy to Enhance Treatment of Anxiety Disorders: Identifying Areas of Clinical Adoption and Potential Obstacles.” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* vol. 10 773. 25 Oct. 2019, doi:10.3389/fpsy.2019.00773.
- 5

Huang mapped them with his hands and body, using a bodysuit and gloves equipped with sensors. This generated the data to create the finished work.
- 6

The Louisiana Channel, director. *Laurie Anderson & Hsin-Chien Huang Interview: A Trip to the Moon*. YouTube, YouTube, 25 Dec. 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bnCSR45hxGU>. Accessed 23 Aug. 2022.
- 7

And so, it is true that, by extension, other beings with different bodies and organs of perception will have an entirely different world view. This is not an easy concept to define. For further reference see: Shapiro, Lawrence and Shannon Spaulding, “Embodied Cognition,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/embodied-cognition/>>.
- 8

VPAT & KAOHSIUNG FILM ARCHIVE* *Samsara behind the scene*. YouTube, YouTube, 30 Sept. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wDludBwhOvA>. Accessed 24 Aug. 2022. *Advised by Ministry of Culture, Taiwan & TAICCA.
- 9

Ibid.

Artist Biography

Hsin-Chien Huang

Hsin-Chien Huang is obsessed with stories.

The artist considers stories to be guides for reimagining his life. At the age of 4, Huang lost sight in his right eye. At 14, the cornea from a donor in Sri Lanka brought light back to the eye that had been veiled for a decade. Ever since then, the world he sees is in part through the eye of this unknown deceased person. This experience was extremely enlightening for the artist: life and flesh now seemed interchangeable. His corporeal flesh no longer belonged to him, instead, it transformed into a mysterious vessel where one rests temporarily. After he came of age, he registered as an organ donor and imagined how the cornea in his right eye might continue its journey to another one’s body, continuing its gaze upon the world after his death.

Huang brilliantly combines this sense of enlightenment to interpret stories through large-scale interactions between performance, mechanical apparatuses, algorithmic computations, and video installations that reference history, and point to a greater potential for humanity. He is committed to an interdisciplinary STEAM education as a distinguished professor at the Department of Design, National Taiwan Normal University.

He has exhibited in galleries, art museums, and art fairs throughout the world including the Venice Film Festival; Festival de Cannes; SXSW; Taipei Fine Art Museum; National Taiwan Museum of Fine Art;

Shanghai Biennale; Venice Biennale; MoMA, New York; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark; Ars Electronica Festival, Linz, Austria; 798 Art Zone, Beijing; Insaartplaza Gallery, South Korea; Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Ithica, NY; Bryce Wolkowitz Gallery, New York City; Transmediale, Berlin; 404 Festival of Electronic Art, Rosario, Argentina; and many others. He has also completed commissioned projects for the Digital Dunhuang VR Experience, Dunhuang Academy, China; Future Museum of the National Palace Museum, Taipei; Taipei Pavilion, Shanghai Expo; Pavilion of Dreams, Taipei Flora Expo; and a public art installation, Taipei 101 skyscraper.

In recent years, Huang’s revolutionary VR works have attracted international attention and won various awards. His VR feature film *Chalkroom*, made in collaboration with Laurie Anderson, the godmother of American avant-garde music, won the Best VR Experience Award at the 74th Venice Film Festival in 2017. *Bodyless* won an Honorable Mention at the 2020 Ars Electronica Festival and the Golden Mask, the highest honor, at the Newimages Festival in Paris. His outstanding international performance continued in 2021 when his new work *Samsara* won the Jury Award at the Texas SXSW Festival in the United States, Grand Prize for the Best VR Narrative in the XR category at the Cannes Film Market in France, and Honorary Mention in the Computer Animation category at Prix Ars Electronica.

Samsara

Virtual reality installation, 2021
28:00 minutes

Samsara takes the viewer on a dream-like journey to the not-too-distant future when resources on Earth have been depleted, resulting in wars over resources, and leading to catastrophic global destruction. The remaining humans are forced to leave Earth and embark on a long quest to find a new home. During their journey, their bodies evolve, devoid of any spiritual direction. They eventually find a new home that turns out to be their ancestral Earth, where ancestors are now predators. The journey repeats and the characters become caught in a Mobius-like time loop.

Samsara is an experiment based on the concept of “embodied cognition.” Only when we experience the world in different bodies may we truly appreciate the thoughts of others, empathize with them, and harmoniously comprehend our existence.

Samsara was selected for the 78th Venice VR Film Festival and won the Jury Award of SXSW and Best VR Story of the Cannes XR competition.

Images: Stills from *Samsara*



Cosmonaut of Emptiness

All stainless steel, 2020

In the three *Cosmonaut of Emptiness* sculptures, Hsin-Chien Huang references historical Buddha statues, symbols for the great spiritual potential of mankind, and reimagines them in a full space suit, turning them into faceless astronauts. Stripped of human flesh and spirit, what is left are robot-like creatures in high-tech armor, emptied of heart and soul, static or floating motionless in the dark of space. The space suits become superficial, shiny but empty technological shells, vacant of humanity and spirituality.



Wu-Se
13.38 × 21.65 × 21.65 inches
(34 × 55 × 55 cm)

Wu-Hsing
22.44 × 21.65 × 21.65 inches
(57 × 55 × 55 cm)



Wu-Shou
7.48 × 30.70 × 22.44 inches
(19 × 78 × 57 cm)



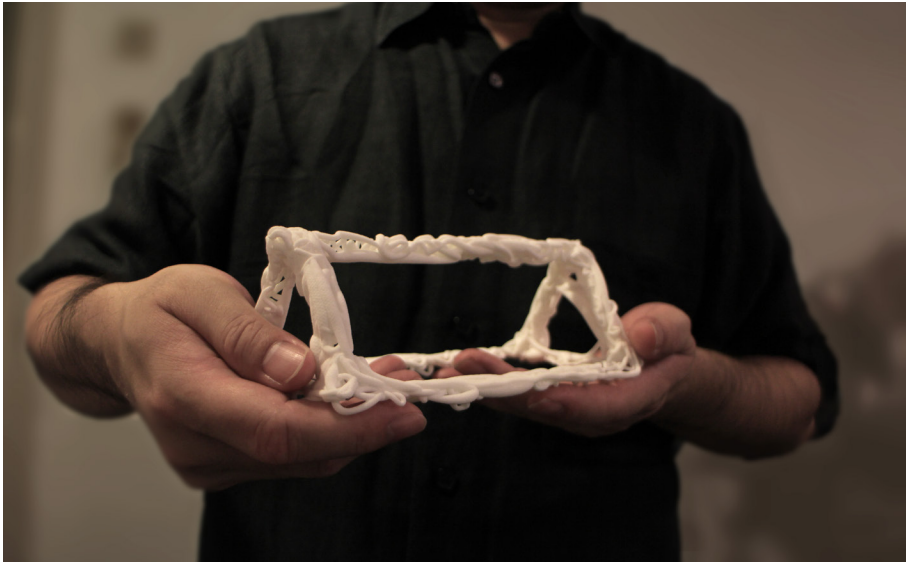
Sculptures of Touch

All 3D printed, 2020

Throughout his art career, “body memory” has been an element of Hsin-Chien Huang’s practice. The series *Sculptures of Touch* explores movements and memories in connection to physical remnants of the Taiwanese martial law era (1949–1987). The previous generation of citizens of Taiwan lived in a rigid system. However, very few memories of this era remain in the official history of the primarily unrecognized nation.

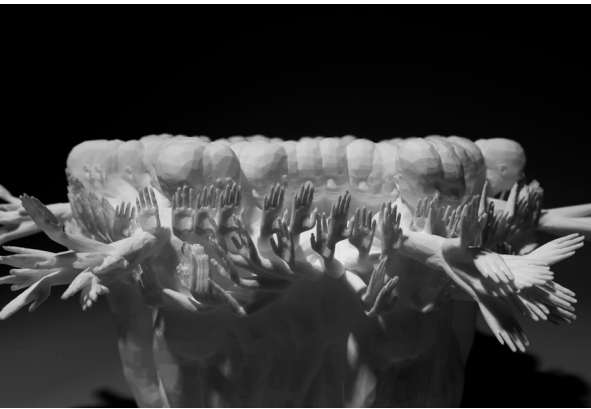
The artist performed field research for this project that combines history, art, and technology. Huang, as an empathic archeologist, devised a digital system that would record his touch upon the once untouchable martial law public objects such as barricades, bunkers, and monuments that remain in Taipei. He traced the objects with his hands and fingers while his equipment transformed his movements into a set of digital data. The results can be visualized as images and 3D printed objects. The form of a barricade is revisualized, transforming from rigid to wavering and soft touch. At the same time, the voids of bunkers are inverted into a solid form of overlapping, tracing human figures embodying the performative nature of the work.

What emerges with the new sculptures is a means to measure via the body and a new way of understanding memory. The tangled emotions embedded in the original objects emerge in their avatar-like stand-ins.

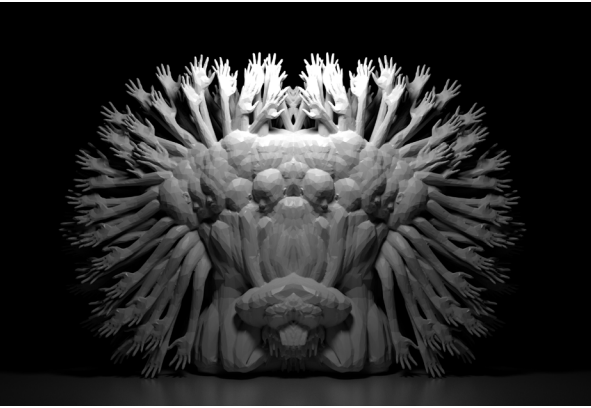


Barricade
2.75 × 7.08 × 3.14 inches
(7 × 18 × 8 cm)

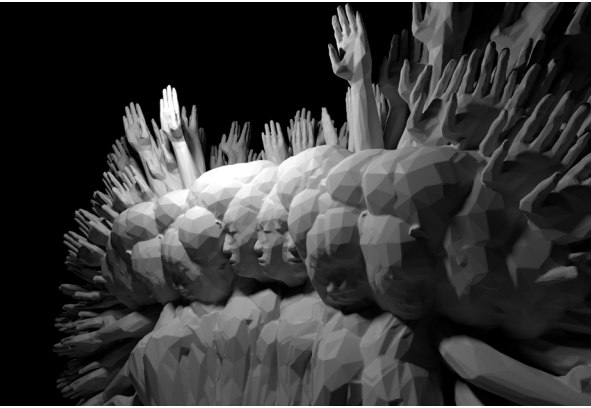
The Bunker
8.74 × 16.61 × 16.69 inches
(22.2 × 42.5 × 42.4 cm)



Handcuffs I
9.13 × 14.05 × 7.67 inches
(23.2 × 35.7 × 19.5 cm)



Handcuffs II
9.12 × 12.91 × 7.91 inches
(23.4 × 32.8 × 20.1 cm)



The Wall
5.90 × 5.15 × 17.04 inches
(15.0 × 13.1 × 43.3 cm)



Bodyless

Virtual reality installation, 2019
28:00 minutes

Bodyless, a surreal, interactive VR experience, addresses Hsin-Chien Huang's childhood during Taiwan's period of martial law (1970s), when individual characteristics were discouraged and human value quantified.

Although the era has long gone, governments continue to use digital surveillance to monitor and control people. Influential world leaders can manipulate large groups with tweets of less than 140 characters and set the course for an entire country. In military conflicts, drone pilots consider the fate of human beings by responding to a few pixels on a screen.

Bodyless explores these means of oppression through the eyes of an old man—a political prisoner in a secret government experiment. After his death, he becomes a ghost and descends to the underworld. In Taiwanese folklore, "Ghost Month" is a period when the gates of hell open for spirits to visit their families. The old man's ghost puts on his face and ascends to Earth. Through his eyes, folk culture appears as a rich, spiritual world, interwoven with nature. However, a mechanical force begins to deteriorate this spiritual world and eventually reduces human forms and memories into simple geometrical shapes efficiently processed by technology.

Bodyless was selected for the 77th Venice VR Film Festival and won the Golden Mask Award of NewImages Festival in Paris.

Images: Stills from *Bodyless*



Omni Channels

Video installation, 2018
Algorithmic synthesizing video

Hsin-Chien Huang witnessed a broadcasting revolution beginning in the 1970s when only three totalitarian regime-controlled television stations were available in Taiwan. They soon grew decentralized to over 200 selections. We all now experience an endless number of “networks” through TikTok, YouTube, and other outlets. Surveillance systems also shifted from centralized to decentralized and grew in numbers with inexpensive closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras available to monitor and broadcast.

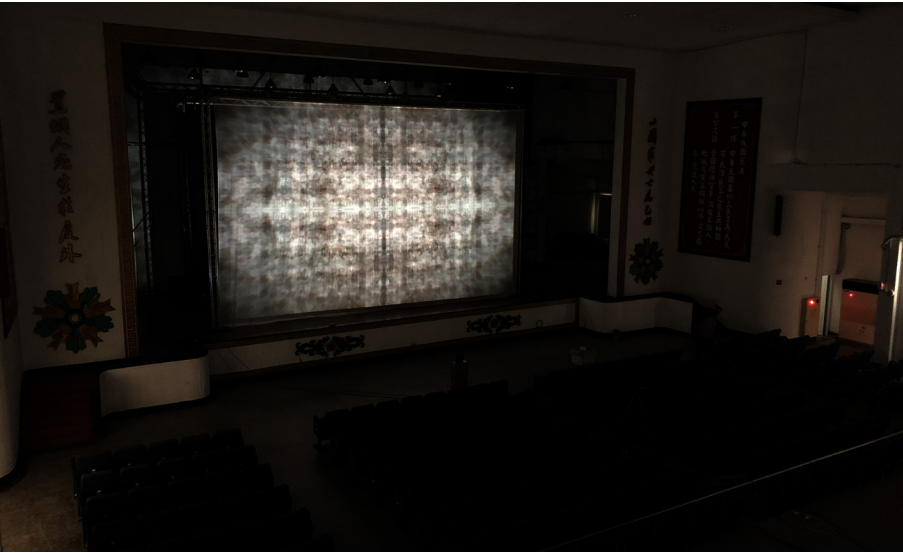
In 2012, Huang accidentally discovered he could pick up signals from the CCTV cameras in his apartment building. Using an RF detector, which can be purchased online or from an electronics store, he could pick up the signals leaked from wireless surveillance cameras.

Utilizing this technique, Huang fabricated a portable device that automatically records footage for ten to fifteen seconds as soon as it detects a signal from a nearby wireless camera. He began a video-collecting project in 2012, scanning for signals on the main streets of Taipei and recording them with his laptop and a video capture device. Using a program he wrote, the footage was then selected randomly from his 500 anonymously-collected clips, and layered into a single video. The result is a mostly gray field with details not easily identifiable. Even though images of people and cars occasionally emerge, the resulting image represents a city and time reduced to generic references.

Left: Image still from video

Right top: Installation view

Right middle and bottom: Surveillance footage photographs of the artist on the street of Taipei with a portable device to record the signals of wireless surveillance cameras



To the Moon

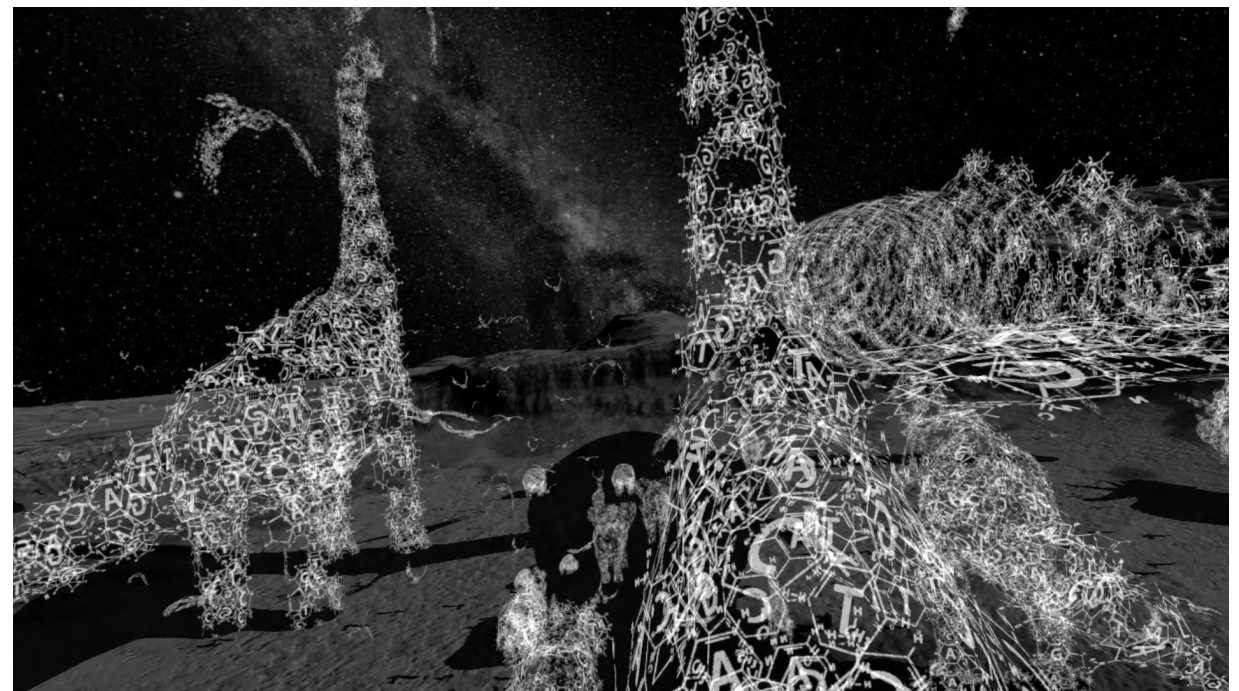
Virtual reality installation, 2018
15:00 minutes
This project is a collaboration between
Hsin-Chien Huang and Laurie Anderson.

To the Moon VR is the third collaboration of Hsin-Chien Huang and American artist Laurie Anderson. Commissioned by the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark, its US premiere at the Museum of Natural History marked the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing. The artist duo reimagines the moon, which historically symbolized fertility, Earth cycles, and the unattainable, using images and tropes from Greek mythology, literature, science, and sci-fi space movies and politics to create an imaginary and extraordinary new moon. Through six segments, the viewer is shot out from Earth, walks on the moon's surface, glides through space debris, and flies through DNA skeletons of dinosaurs. Finally, the viewer is lifted and tossed off a lunar mountain while an image of an astronaut falling face down comes into view. The astronaut references *Fallen Astronaut*, a small sculpture installed on the moon by the crew of Apollo 15 that memorializes those who died in the development of space exploration.

Left: Still from *To the Moon*
(Stone Rose segment)

Right top: Still from *To the Moon*
(Snow Mountain segment)

Right bottom: Still from *To the Moon*
(DNA Museum segment)



Chalkroom

Virtual reality installation, 2017
15:00 minutes
This project is a collaboration between
Hsin-Chien Huang and Laurie Anderson.

What is it like to travel through stories? In *Chalkroom*, viewers are guided by co-creator Laurie Anderson’s voice through a dream-like world where one can freely fly about in virtual reality to explore words, drawings, symbols, sounds, and memories. In eight unique rooms, countless giant chalkboards emerge as a vast labyrinth. The Cloud Room features a nebula of spinning text; in the Sound Room, voices talk and sing and morph into sculptures. Abstract symbols are converted into concrete and interactive physical presences, allowing the audience to explore within themselves the connections between written words and memories. The giant chalkboards can be erased and written on repeatedly, and the old memories fade but do not disappear.

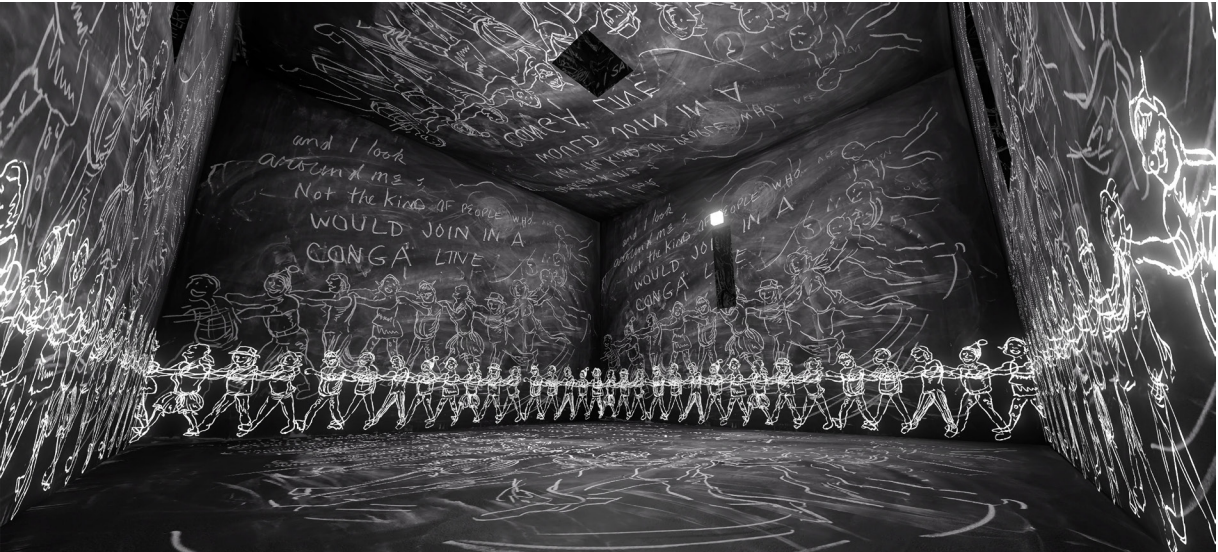
Chalkroom (Italian, *La Camera Insabbiata*) was awarded Best VR Experience at the 74th Venice Film Festival and was the first of several VR works that Huang and Anderson made together.

Left: Still from *Chalkroom*
(The Tree Room)

Right top: Still from
Chalkroom (The Hall)

Right middle:
Still from *Chalkroom*
(The Anagram Room)

Right bottom:
Still from *Chalkroom*
(The Dance Room)



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Nick Battis
Director of Exhibitions

Additional credits for virtual reality projects

Samsara

Director: Hsin-Chien Huang
Presenters: VPAT and Kaohsiung Film Archive
Producers: VPAT
Advisors: Ministry of Culture, Taiwan; and Taiwan Creative Content Agency (TAICCA)
Producer: Saiau-Yue Tsau
Screenplay: Hsin-Chien Huang
Music: Jason Binnick
Project Manager: Chung-Hsien Chen
Programming: Wei-Chieh Chiu and Chun-Yen Yu
Dialog: Ya-Jyue Lien
Voice Actors: Francesca Lo Russo, Jason Binnick, Sheng-Fang Syu, Yan-Ling Lin, and Pin-Hui Fu
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3D Art: Warren Wu and Fig Creative Studio, Pei-Yang Ye, Guan-Yu Lin, and Ying-Li Lin
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Kaohsiung Film Archive VR FILM LAB Credit List
Director: Meng-Yin Yang
Deputy Director: Hao-Jie Huang
Head of Production Planning Department: Grace Huai-Chin Lee
Production Coordinator: Sebox Wu Hung
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Bodyless

Director, Visual Design, Story: Hsin-Chien Huang
Producer: Saiau Yue Tsau
Art Management: IF Plus
Music: Lim Giong and Matt Battle
Programmer: Hsin-Chien Huang, Wei-Chieh Chiu, and Jiun-Yan Yu
3D Modeler: Hsin-Chien Huang, Fig Creative Co. Ltd, and Warren Wu
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Voice Actor: Peng-Ying Wu
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Film Footage Licensing: Taiwan Film Institute and 1961 National Day Military Parade

To the Moon

Director: Laurie Anderson and Hsin-Chien Huang
Producer: Saiau Yue Tsau, Shaun Macdonald
Music and Voice Actor: Laurie Anderson
Programmer: Hsin-Chien Huang, Wei-Chieh Chiu, Tom Chen, and Jiun-Yan Yu
3D Modeler: Hsin-Chien Huang
Illustrator: Mu-Wei Lee
System Engineer: Jason Stern
Hardware Design: Xian-Qing Chen
Sponsors: National Culture and Arts Foundation of Taiwan, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art

Chalkroom

Director: Laurie Anderson and Hsin-Chien Huang
Producer: Saiau Yue Tsau, Shaun Macdonald
Art Manager: Natalie Chang, Zhao-Xuan Hong
Music and Voice Actor: Laurie Anderson
Programmer: Hsin-Chien Huang, Yun-Xuan Chen and Xin Huang
3D Modeler: Hsin-Chien Huang
Performance Capture: AXIS3D Technology Inc and Ching-Tang Lai
Illustrator: Shu-Ya Lu
System Engineer: Jason Stern
Assistant: Yin-Jun Li
Sponsors: Ministry of Culture, Taiwan and National Chengchi University, Taiwan

