

*Herding The Gaze Away  
From The Pasture*

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## ABSTRACT

Recent technological innovations in real-time computer simulation, namely Virtual Reality technology, have been met with enthusiasm and excitement by many who see the platforms' potential for altering our communicative-representational, educational and recreational environments. With the development of these new technologies, I have recognized one fundamental question that the technology poses: What will the nature of reality in virtual reality be, and how will it be determined? Extending on this line of thought - How will the development of Virtual Reality influence our perception of self, technology and of nature? How might these spaces become tokens of nostalgia of the reality left behind? This thesis paper aims to heuristically investigate and contextualize these inquiries in writing as to explicate their application in a virtual reality + multimedia video installation art project.

Firstly, the writing takes on the form of an informal journal entry that presents the artist's phenomenal research influencing the project. It is deduced that the artist-writer has become a student of the way electronic media is used to fabricate metaphorical-cultural 'virtual realities'. Some of their early works that explored such topics are contextualized as progression towards the ideation of the thesis. This introduction transitions into a loose dictionary-style form which defines the connotative frameworks of the terms used in the title of the piece. Elucidated through these definitions are some of the theoretical and philosophical frameworks that tie the conceptual sides of the piece together. Once the piece is defined arbitrarily (since the conclusions point towards the subjectivity of language) other terms central to the thesis are interpreted. The main body of the writing is contained within these definitions. Some images and section breaks guide the reading experience and add further detail.

The authors' consideration and exploration of diverse schools of thought synthesizes their overall thesis statement towards the latter end of the paper. Shortly put, it seems it is the choice of the subjective observer-participator in either reality-space (real or virtual) that makes reality 'real'. Through allowing the space for the reader to ponder their own assumptions about reality, it is suggested that humanity become more mindful to the way virtual realities and 'fake news' can become a distraction to our duties as custodians of the Earth's *very real* resources. Throughout the paper there are speculations on the nature of reality, phenomenology, virtual reality, and the nature of Nature. These speculations point towards the indisputable relationship-affect technology has on our lived, social and ecological actualities. The author also suggests several areas for further investigation. A pictorial documentation of the installation concludes the thesis along with a bibliography and suggested further readings.

There are a lot of parallels and similar themes to the works mentioned throughout the personal backstory and older projects into the direction this thesis project has taken. I would not have gone into that much detail if that were not the case. First, I would like to demystify the title of the thesis project and through this provide insight into some of the ways the project manifested: *Herding the Gaze Away from the Pasture*. It's partly poetic, partly nonsense - but all parts intended. Defining each term using a dictionary might not do it justice – I'd argue context is more important considering the dictionary is an agreed-upon source of truth for us, so why not circumvent the dictionary to push my point of questioning our agreed-upon notions of reality? With that I'll ask: What's in a gaze? Who's doing the gazing? Where is the gaze being herded away from? Where's the pasture? Who's doing the herding? How does the gaze become *herded*? How does VR play into all this? Perhaps most importantly, how might we regain our gaze if it's been herded away?

**The first term: The pasture.** A connotation to a pastoral way of life, but also a movement/motif in art history that tends to depict very serene and peaceful scenes of valleys, lakes, mountain ranges and natural landscapes. At first primarily produced with strokes of either blood or plant-pigments onto cave paintings, this slowly evolved into paint strokes onto a canvas as the early technologies of representation progressed. These scenes often depicted pristine lands untouched by man and were full of natural resources and foods. As our capacities of depiction evolved alongside the technologies used to illustrate what our gaze perceives of the pasture, humans slowly started appearing in these scenic landscapes. The perceiver becomes the perceived: a relationship between earth, medium/technology and human is born. These methods of representation continue to co-evolve with us into other forms and thus so has our perception of that which is being represented.

Notions of the human in relation to the elemental and archaic Earth through pastoral landscapes seem to be a reoccurring theme of these early arts, as writer and researcher Suzaan Boettger notes in the article *Within and Beyond the Art World* that "images of underdeveloped [natural] terrain became instead idealized spaces of primal refuge and harmonious respite alongside sheep. Nature becomes a prompt for withdrawal into the self and an emphasis on feeling". Boettger writes in hopes to place these scenes of antiquity and their modern counterparts in a position to influence political change past the limited institutions of the art gallery. She later comments towards the capitalist exhibition space as a necessary evil of sorts in being able to portray the Earth positively in ways that "...Nature [can] become a vehicle for experiencing both the overwhelming feeling of the sublime prompted by both its vast scale and violent ferocity and the felicitous 'beauty' of a pastoral meadow"<sup>1</sup> even in its canvas-bound form in a gallery space. At first these representations were restricted to cave paintings, landscape canvases, and eventually to the immediacy of the camera flash. Our depiction of the 'pastoral' has changed through time along with our technologies of relaying the mythology, history and our relations to the earth. These themes of the pastoral way of life are reflected in my piece in its nod towards the art historical-technological canons within the inner VR gallery

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<sup>1</sup> Boettger, Suzan. *Within the Beyond the Art World: Environmental Criticism of Visual Art*, pg. 666.

space. There are quite a few renditions in this pastoral style hanging on the walls, and even expanding into the outer hallway there are many different *renderings* of the earth. Though they exist in a VR space, they do reflect back to this pastoral reality in a signifier-signified relationship. A reminder for the spectator of the territory of which the map is drawn from.

The mythology and accessibility surrounding the dissemination of images of the earth has evolved as well. Now-a-days, we all carry some sort of internet-enabled device with us. To look up ‘pictures of the Earth’ is only a few clicks away. This was never the case in the past as either one had to travel to a serene spot to gaze with their own eyes, commission a painter, or later on visit a gallery space. There was a ritual to both the production and viewing of the art-object in this way since through its existence in a gallery space, in which there were only allowed a few people viewing the piece at once. In the same way people would gather around a statue in Greek or Roman times to marvel at the beauty. I’m not sure if the ritualized aspect of viewing art still exists considering our modern approach to infinitely reproducible NFTs (non-fungible tokens) or virtual galleries full of digital renderings of images. Their viewing has become a solitary experience mediated through technology. Past this, what can be said about our ways of depicting the earth past the traditional mediums of the landscape painting as we move toward a more digital, simulated and virtual reality? In my case, *rendering* the earth in this way through the use of plastics, modeling software, 3D prints or simulated versions of the Earth in a virtual reality space affects and questions our perception of the materiality and temporality of these objects as to question the physical equivalents of what they are signifying.

Could modeling the earth in this way notion towards its eventual collapse? Without having the “original model” to reference through the likes of global warming/similar events, we may one day become confused (or worse, forget) as to what the renderings were modeled after. Without the territory, how dare we produce the map that references the territory? Unless humanity become more aware of their relations to the earth and its resources, one day this will be the way in which we remember how the earth *used to look*. Media theorist and writer Neil Postman writes to the “old idea” of our necessity to want to reproduce images of Nature as to make it comprehensible and manageable to the populace and that we always want to depict nature in its platonic or ideal state: a reminder of the original model. My intended use of the term ‘pasture’ and its context with this installation is to challenge and remind the spectators gaze of the earth as the original model to all these simulated renderings in an attempt to restore the original earth; an *old idea* to which the gaze should be focused on.

This definition of ‘pasture’ and the context I’ve placed it into was also influenced by plant-friendly writer, artist and lecturer Natasha Myers. In her article *How to Grow Livable Worlds* she comments on the importance of “[making] art that keeps people in the game by staging intimate relations between plants and people [and to] activate the latent plant in you through incantations, hypnosis, meditation, yoga or letting the plants work directly on you”.<sup>2</sup> In this *planthroposcene* (her wonderful term) paradigm, this art piece intends to foster a similar experience by showing the spectator their non-dualist relations to themselves and the environment around them in hopes that we might not have to remind ourselves of what the Earth *used to look like* through artificial renderings. The production of which, sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard would call a *hyperreality* (the generation of models of a *real*

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<sup>2</sup> Myers, Natasha. *How to Grow Livable Worlds: Ten Not-So-Easy-Steps*, pg. 53-61.

without origin or reality). We will return to Baudrillard in a bit. By allowing the spectator to move through a real-world gallery space and to touch various fabricated plants, I'm helping to stage some of these intimate relations. Once the headset is on, this is explicit, as the entire gallery space is full of renderings of plant-life either growing in an Edenic state, or being placed on pedestals within the gallery as to borrow the systems of value inferred by the gallery space - in effect placing value on the plant-life that exists in both gallery spaces.

Part of this project and its emphasis towards 'activating your inner plant' through remembering the pastoral environment found me developing on my previous research into *Intelligence in Nature* as expanded on by anthropologist, writer and lecturer Jeremy Narby. In his book bearing the same name, he researches the practices and rituals of indigenous peoples surrounding the consumption of entheogenic plants and the shamanic culture that ensues from this lifestyle. He noticed similar meditative headspaces could be entered by allowing the plants to 'work' on those consuming them. In these ritualized ceremonies he theorized that by entering into conversation with the plants themselves and listening to what they have to tell us, this might better equip humans to tackle modern western ecological issues.<sup>3</sup> Most, if not all, of these issues are a result of capitalism's effect towards globalization. Narby's insights complimented my own and allowed me to deepen my initial interests of this inherent intelligence in nature through interviewing more plant-life. Always curious for new ways to communicate to plants past my early abstract videos, I came across a process and science known as bio-sonification. Essentially, it allows for the detection of electrical pulses travelling through various plant species and transforms these pulses into sound via a MIDI device. Some of these experiments I underwent interviewing plants can be heard throughout the VR aspect of the piece. Through this, the staged intimate relationships between plants and people are strengthened by the literal sounds of nature accompanying the spectator as they move through the inner VR space.

To accompany the context of the 'pasture' term, I'd like to supplement the philosophical framework of the choice through the likes of philosopher of the speculative-realist school of thought, writer-researcher and professor Levi Bryant. In his book *Onto-Cartography*, he proposes a "machine-oriented ontology" in which all objects including the Earth, its resources, animals, subatomic particles, the stomach, space-time, TVs, the electronic media, electricity itself, the *gaze*, art-objects, etc... and the humans that observe these objects are all 'machines' of varying levels of assemblage to him. Towards his later insights and arguments this lays out a framework for "the mapping of relations or interactions between machines, how they influence one another and how they're organized in a world".<sup>4</sup> A 'world' to Bryant more resembles a filter-mesh which mediates the way we view reality-in-itself, something he claims is not directly accessible, but only accessible through machinic mediations. These machines 'gravities' are also of interest to Bryant (how one is attracted to a 'screen-machine' for example). This is an intent I share in my piece through mapping/showing the relations of the self-machine to the environment-machine around the self through the self-reflective device-machines in the art-machine which allow the spectator-machine to see themselves in relation to their own relation-machines. In this way, the self and the body that it inhabits could be seen as a medium to the

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<sup>3</sup> Narby, Jeremy. *Intelligence in Nature: An Inquiry Into Knowledge*.

<sup>4</sup> Bryant, Levi. *Onto-Cartography: An Ontology of Machines and Media*, pg. 1-69.

‘world’ around it. This forms an ecological relationship with the pasture. Bryant and others would term this *transcorporeality*, a somewhat dense term that means just that: a relationship with the earth through the body-medium. ‘Geo-philosophy’ becomes a term used to bring to the mind-machine the idea that nature is all there really is and that “culture itself is a formation of nature... the concept of society must be thought ecologically as part of nature and as continuous with nature”.<sup>5</sup> This way of thinking ultimately questions anthropocentrism by proposing a *flat ontology* in which all object-machines exist in reality equally, even fake fruits.

Bryant’s terms and insights seem to point to another school of thought, that at the time of writing this paper, I had only recently come across known as *post-humanism*. This paradigm essentially would see VR and technology in general as a natural process of our evolution and view our evolution as being accompanied by the technology we produce. This ideology proposes that we are one in the same and have coevolved with the technology we produce, the pasture (and other distracting medias) it can depict and not separate from it. In my case this includes the technology we use to make representations of the earth both in plastics and in simulated spaces. In this way I decided to have variously aged TVs in the gallery space accompanied by ‘all organic’ vines, shrubs, and moss growing out of them. Letting nature grow out of the TVs is a reminder to the spectator that technology itself is a formation of nature, in the same way that we come from that very same nature. How might we use these media-technology-machines to portray positive images that remind us to be mindful in the way that we depict and view nature (as if it’s something separate from us)? One of the more peculiar terms relating the self to the pasture Bryant would utilize is *alien phenomenology* or *2<sup>nd</sup> order observations*. *Alien* signifying a point of view that is not of our own, or *2<sup>nd</sup> order*. It asks how might we adopt the perspective of the plants, animals, media and the culture-machines we consume to develop more empathetic ways of involving ourselves with them. Our relationship to the pasture (or a bowl of fruit for example) looks quite different when seen through the lens of these terms and paradigms. The bowl of fruit becomes you!

You, in turn, also become the bowl of fruit, the pasture, the rivers, the TV, and both the perceiver and the perceived. Post-humanism is a very modern philosophical term with modern connotations. It also carries with it the weight of western approaches to making observations on the nature of reality typically done with the tools of science. These modern approaches echo similar conceptions that come from more ancient teachings from the schools of Eastern mysticism (Buddhism, Jainism and Taoism in particular). Interestingly they reach similar conclusions as the modern physicists and philosophers on the nature of reality, though their tool set is different (particle colliders versus yoga mats). The original tool seems to be the mind-machine itself: their insights are reached empirically through first-person direct experience with reality in deep contemplative and self-reflective states. One of the reverberating themes of these Eastern styles is the notion of *non-duality*. In a comparison to these two approaches towards epistemology; author, physicist and researcher Fritjof Capra dedicates a chapter to the idea of “the unity and interconnectedness of all things” through explaining that these different approaches point towards the same insights in his book *The Tao of Physics*.<sup>6</sup> To gaze upon the

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<sup>5</sup> Bryant, Levi. Pg. 60-63, pg. 240-253.

<sup>6</sup> Capra, Fritjof. *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*, pg. 25-150.

world's point of view is to gaze upon ourselves in the world. Our gaze of the pasture can gaze back at us... if it's not herded away. My piece fosters a similar self-reflective, non-dualist and post-human experience for the spectator by showcasing their own non-duality to Nature, technology and themselves. Though viewers may not be aware of the sources of inspiration or the terms, I believe that similar ideas in their own words can come to mind for them in the final room of the VR space (where the spectator views their mediated self), throughout the piece where their own awareness (what they're looking at in the moment) is shown to them via various frames and billboards and in the sculptural TV-vine-turf elements of the real-world space. The spectator can become the pasture if they allow the mind to wander there.

Synthesizing the influences from these schools of thought that point towards the coevolution of man in relation to the technologies he has birthed brought me to a decision in my piece to include moving-image renderings produced by the use of artificially intelligent scripting/coding. Once the spectator steps out of the VR gallery space and into a long stretch of hallway, they are met with floating frames in a void-like setting. Tall renderings of trees tower over the viewer. Within these frames sit the animations which were made using neural network (colloquially known as "deep dreamed") Artificial Intelligence software. They show the very condensed history and formation of the natural environment chronologically as the spectator moves down the hallway. Eventually, they are met with frames of various species coming about, their own species (the human evolving from the environment) and the last frames contain representations of various machines evolving: A reminder that machines made this entire experience possible. This also parallels the evolution of an one-world consciousness ("all is mind") as now the perceiver becomes the perceived when looking at how they came from the earth and its evolution. Again, the pasture looks back at itself. Placing the spectator in this position would hopefully let them realize they are not separate from the pasture.

**The second term: The gaze.** In the context of the piece this term refers simply to the visual system: Our eyes. I speak of the gaze as the physiological system; not the culture-filter connotation of viewing such as the 'white male gaze'. Though there are 4 other senses, it seems the sense of sight is often the farthest-reaching considering to touch or taste something one would have to be quite close to the object being perceived; in that way the sense of sight might also be the most easily fooled and persuaded. When speaking to how our brain *controls the input* of the various stimuli presented to it (especially the eyes), a contextualized use of 'the gaze' from the likes of psychology researcher Robert Ornstein would read something like "the way in which stimuli are received, even on the retina itself, can be reprogrammed from moment to moment... the motor-output system of the brain (efference) has an effect on the input (afference): the brain *selects its input*".<sup>7</sup> Despite our eyes being structured universally the same for the most part, there is still a selectivity in the way things are interpreted. Through our own personal histories, careers, upbringings, schooling, special interests and in my case through the pervasiveness/influence of media imagery... we all approach our gazes with these biases towards our subjectively constructed worlds. Notwithstanding this, they all tend to respond to stimuli in similar ways. The stimuli of flashing lights, bright colors, faces in imagery, water, appealing fonts, catered compositions, etc... are the tactics used by design-marketers to herd

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<sup>7</sup> Ornstein, Robert. *The Psychology of Consciousness*, pg. 15-45.

our gazes through the same mechanisms that can be used to herd them towards more productive types of visual stimuli. As author Leonard Mlodinow points out in *Subliminal*, a lot of our brain and its visual systems are dedicated towards recognizing these sorts of patterns for evolutionary-productive purposes that stem from our hunter-gather days. The eyes “...have arranged it so that about a third of our brain is devoted to processing vision: to interpreting color, detecting edges, recognizing faces, and many other tasks”<sup>8</sup>. What’s important to me is how marketers exploit human physiology by using media images as gravity-attractors to fuel their promotions beyond the subjectivize gaze. Oh look, a billboard, a TV!

In the real-world space of the installation, the TV becomes a symbol of a place the gaze is instinctually gravitated towards, especially in modern times. Though it just displays static, people inevitably look there as if to expect something. We look towards the TV as a place of not only instruction, purpose, and information; but of reality. In a way, we identify with it. Naturally the gaze becomes attracted towards the VR headset perched upon a boulder. Once in the VR space, the work points to the example and tool of enacting a strong gravitational pull towards a billboard that advertises self-awareness with a fake company (1-555-MINDFUL). Once the spectator gazes upon the billboard, the slogan “Don’t look here! Look at yourself” and a mirror-reflection illustration-motif is analyzed by their gaze and goes through their various subjective filters of culture and self. Usually, billboards are designed to pull our attention away from ourselves. I’m eliciting some productive cognitive dissonance for the viewer in this way by subverting the tactics of advertising through productively reminding the viewer that their gaze was herded away from them.

**The third term: Herding.** As a verb, it stems from the noun ‘herd’, which loosely connotes a similar pastoral/countryside lifestyle often with farm sorts of animals. In general use, it means to guide into a particular direction, to show a path, or to help lead down a route. Historically, these animals were often left to graze the pasture in what ways they seemed fit through eating the field grass and being their best bovine selves. The fauna might have sensed that one day they would sacrifice their life for the sake of feeding the farmer and his kin, but it wasn’t implied and was never in an over-done manner. The farmer took that which he needed to survive, and left the rest to carry on the population. Fast forwarding through a few centuries of the industrial revolution, modernization, capitalist-agricultural intentions and the eventual marketing of the animal as an object-machine, I wonder if the same fauna have a greater sense of their impending doom than their historical-pastoral counterparts. The prison-like holding cells they are herded into is not pastoral by any means. ‘Herding’ has since lost its benevolent and shepherd-infused pastoral connotation. To my point, the term could even apply to us as humans in the way both our gaze and our bodies are herded away from ourselves. We have become as the sheep; being herded through life as if we are in a matrix-like cage magnetized to various screens slowly being led to our own sense of depersonalization. We might not lie down our lives to the slaughter literally, but there is a symbolic sacrificing of one’s life considering the massive amounts of distractions and notions towards the consumption of material wealth and symbols of status that forgo our awareness. We sacrifice our lives to further the system that herded us here in the first place.

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<sup>8</sup> Mlodinow, Leonard. *Subliminal: How Your Unconscious Mind Rules Your Behavior*, pg. 34-50.

Through always looking for the ‘next big thing’ to fill the nonexistent void we are told exists through the capitalistic and materialistic world of passive consumption and the billboards this world lives on, Guy Debord, French sociologist and structuralist philosopher, would argue that we have become a “society of the spectacle”. We are so constantly bombarded and herded away by distractions everywhere we turn in this modern attention-based economy, more so than ever in human history. Debord dully makes the observation of these bombardments through the physiological and existential feeling of depersonalization. This feeling leads to the social relations between people and the mediated experience of reality something questionable, to the point that “in a world that is really upside down, the true is a moment of the false”, this confusion on what’s actually real for each person leading to “the alienation of the spectator away from his own unconscious activity”.<sup>9</sup> The more that living our daily lives becomes the marketable product, the more we become separated from our meaning of life. Since we’re ‘herded’ into being told what’s most important, people don’t know *how* to live, or *what to live for* anymore. We’ve been herded away from our internal (and external) pastures.

These distractions that herd our gaze in modern society didn’t just appear out of nowhere, although recently their presence has become exponential with the advent of screens in our pockets and billboards installed in our face-time cameras/microphones (that track what we’re saying, what we’re consuming and who we’re seeing). Continuing into the art historical-technological discourse above pertaining to how our art forms and mediums changed over time, so has our human experience evolved along with the evolution of technology and has even crossed over to how we experience the art-object in the age of technological reproducibility of the art-object (more on that in a second). Starting from the cave paintings, to lithography, to the early canvases, into photography and even more recently into these forms of cinema and ‘expanded cinema’ such as VR - human-kind had never seen a moving image up until the invention of the video camera and its cinematic child. By being able to capture a moving image of a fruit tree for example, we were now being met with representations and simulations of the real things in which their images represented. Moreover, they were selectively represented in the way the photographer decided to frame the subject. Moremoreover, the individual that has been exposed to these moving images has been thrown into a training ground for living in the modern world. The ever-changing imagery of the cinema reflects the fast-paced and ever-changing scenery of the media-culture-machine around us, it’s life on billboard-machines and most currently the perpetual scroll through social media-machines. There’s never a moment for self-reflection in these forms of ‘expanded cinema’ since before you can even take a moment to reflect... The image has changed, the scene has progressed, the shepherd has herded the herd [[[This is even echoed in the form of this paper - by keeping the paper ‘single spaced’ I’m reflecting the massive amounts of information (sometimes distractingly so) that’s hurled at us relentlessly in today’s media-saturated and ‘single-spaced world’]]]. To me, it’s all distraction: it all herds our gaze away from ourselves and our pasture-selves. The TVs are static, and so are the minds of those that consume it. Despite this, it’s possible that a self-reflective VR environment can manifest a moment for the self to notice their own subconscious.

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<sup>9</sup> Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*, pg. 1-50.

German philosopher and media theorist from the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin, appropriately notes these modern technologies as forms of representation and as filters between us and the real reality as it is, much in the same way Bryant views his 'worlds'. Benjamin writes to how these newer forms of technology-representation can alter a person's sense of subjectivity dramatically and even affect the art-viewing experience. In *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility* he points to the idea that these mediums of representation and our experience of viewing them has become more mediated than ever and beyond that, these new forms of technology (for context he thrived in the age of cinema) relate to their commercial use as to place the human in this constant state of distraction (or being herded, in my case)<sup>10</sup>. Beyond the gazing of the art-object-machine, we rely on technology to be able to speak to how we perceive certain experiences (tweets and blog posts come to mind). Especially if we're feeling the gravity of the tv (or in modern times smart phones) we can no longer think for ourselves, we're told what to think. We're not watching the TV, the TV (and in turn the messages shown on it) are watching us. This is also a method for covert control of people. In the day and age of information tracking via GPS systems, cookies in browsers, and the 'you might also like' section on Amazon based off of search histories, it's almost as if our awareness itself is being displayed to us through these advertising devices. In this way, when one enters the VR space of my piece, what they are seeing on the billboards and in some frames is literally *what they are seeing* recursively displayed back to them (via a "rendered texture" effect that renders the gaze of the spectator to a surface). By providing the spectator the opportunity of a productive cognitive dissonance through regaining their herded awareness in the unlikely place of where it's usually lost (the billboard), the intent is to show them a path to contemplate this phenomenon of the herded gaze within the context of the virtual reality experience.

**The fourth term: Away.** Through these distractions, the gaze has become perpetually herded away from the self and its relations to the external world. We lose our sense of identification. 'Away' can function as a noun, an adverb and an adjective in my sense and supplements the 'herding' motif. It refers to a place led to that is not here in this present moment. Like this: "WOAH! Look over there! There's something shiny, colorful, reflective and pretty eye-catching a ways away over there!" In effect, by taking the awareness away from the moment and its current place; the spectator's self-awareness suffers. They become more drawn to the outward spectacle instead of considering the phenomenological spectacle of *how* they were drawn away - being distracted from distraction by distraction. The 'attention economy' that herds us away from ourselves and our environment has a financialized incentive to keep us in this state of distraction. Time itself becomes the commodity as the relationship between our attention span and the speed of information exchanges between our reality and the devices it's mediated through continues to alienate us.

Our own awareness has become the object of marketing, as if to place it on a billboard amongst a garden, when we should really be looking through the advertisements to see the garden behind it (the billboards in the last room of the VR space are transparent in my piece). Why would we want to ever leave the Edenic garden? For us the garden is a place of rest, a

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<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility*, pg. 20-45.

nostalgia towards the pastoral times and their importance as places to manifest moments of self-reflection. Attempting to lay down a framework for how we might take our gaze *back* from the attention economy: artist, lecturer, and writer Jenny Odell has similar worldviews to share on the gaze and how it's marketed away from the self. In her book *How to do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, she shares a passion in the reemergence of mindfulness practices in our modern age. In a very zazen way, she even terms the approach as "productivity through doing nothing". Things like deep listening to Nature and others, bird watching, not overindulging in technology, and essentially using our free time in non-capitalistic ways can enhance our granularity of perception as we become more aware of our ecological relationships. These practices also lean towards an inward awareness of self. She and I both see these moments of self-reflection on nothingness as particularly productive and help train our minds to realize "doing nothing can become a necessary part of meaningful thought and speech"<sup>11</sup> as to counteract living in the modern and marketable world. Moments like these, like the one I have made in my piece (although purposefully mediated through the VR headset as to point out the technology's capacities), allow us a chance of formulating things that *might* be worth saying instead of talking about the big-nothing (mindless and passive consumption) as to herd our gaze to the antonymic *away* place; to here, to now, to the self.

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So, the title of the piece now has some grounding and context. Yet, I think there's room for one more important definition to clarify my intentions... Let us return our gazes to the pasture of here and now through dissecting the next term: **Reality**. Maybe a more concrete definition of this term might fit here, since we're essentially dissecting reality itself throughout this paper. A quick google search returns a definition pointing towards "the world or the state of things as they actually exist", as opposed to an idealistic or notional idea of them. A study of which is known as an ontology or meta-physics. Meriam-Webster (arguably the most agreed-upon source for word-meaning-attachments and signifier-sign-signified relationships) alternatively defines reality as "television programming that features videos of actual occurrences (such as a police chase, stunt, or natural disaster) – often used attributively – *reality tv*"<sup>12</sup>. A fitting definition for the media commentary of this project.

Without being too existential, reality itself seems to be objectively hard to define. Considering the points made by Ornstein pertaining to our own sets of variables (our upbringing, our culture, our biases, the things in which we consume [media included], our knowledge-bases) one's interpretation of reality seems to be highly subjective and phenomenological. So, for us to all hold to one affixed meaning of reality would almost dismiss our human-ness. To this definition, I would like to extend it with my own: Reality is this material-immaterial spiritual-energetic plane of existence we're all a part of within the space in which we inhabit it in this third dimension of barely-physical space-time. This implies there are other insensible degrees of dimension that humans can not perceive. In our limited reducing valve of consciousness, reality consists of the opening of the eyelids in the morning, but also the closing of them at night to enter a dream state. Through spinning around really fast, rolling

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<sup>11</sup> Odell, Jenny. *How To Do Nothing: Resisting The Attention Economy*, pg. 1-50.

<sup>12</sup> "Reality." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Meriam-Webster.

down a hill to enter a dizzy state, holding the breath, fasting, or even entering meditative states through the use of a virtual reality headset; all these acts are connected to our shared sense of 'reality', and in a way we are *testing* the constraints of our physical existence by engaging in such acts. All these things dictate how each individual interprets and navigates through their own sense of reality. Ornstein has this to say about our subjective (yet shared) experience of reality:

Our 'ordinary' assumptions about the nature of the world are generally useful to us. As we attempt to achieve a stable consciousness, we continuously 'bet' about the nature of reality. Any community of people holds in common certain assumptions about reality. Our language itself is a set of common assumptions, shared for the convenience of easy discourse.<sup>13</sup>

Language forming reality? What a concept. It'd be a shame if someone were to question it. If it's all subjective, who's to say there's truly an objective reality beyond our eyelids? Like I said, I won't be getting too existential or solipsistic, I just personally believe these are truly fascinating things to ponder. Who knows, maybe we're already living in a virtual reality of sorts and the brain is the computer-machine processing the simulation. I'm not sure if I subscribe to that worldview, but it's fascinating for sure as others have written about it.

There's one more term to define central to the thesis of the paper: **Virtual Reality**. I'll let Jaron Lanier, essentially the 'father of VR' define it for us. Throughout his memoir-turned-book *The Dawn of the New Everything*, he offers about 50 different definitions for VR, some of which that help encapsulate the themes of the paper include<sup>14</sup>:

17<sup>th</sup> definition: Entertainment products that create illusions of another place, another body, or another logic for how the world works.

24<sup>th</sup>: A cybernetic construction that measures the probing aspect of human perception so that it is cancelled out.

33<sup>rd</sup>: A coarser, simulated reality fosters an appreciation of the depth of physical reality in comparison. As VR progresses in the future, human perception will be nurtured by it and will learn to find ever more depth in physical reality.

47<sup>th</sup>: The science of comprehensive illusion.

Virtual reality, as a recently emerging medium, holds roots in the military-industrial complex through simulations of real-life situations to train soldiers, astronauts, and doctors as well as to prototype other products in various industries. The term signifies a place of simulation for things to be tested; which can include reality itself. Beyond these original intentions, it has also expanded into the entertainment industry and may branch out into something greater once technology advances. My choice for VR was highly influenced by Gene

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<sup>13</sup> Ornstein, Robert. Pg. 40.

<sup>14</sup> Lanier, Jaron. *Dawn of the New Everything: Encounters with Reality and Virtual Reality*.

Youngblood's *Expanded Cinema* (a book written when VR was not yet around in the early 70's) in which he prophesizes VR with phrases such as 'synaesthetic cinemas' and 'intermedia arts'. His discussions on media and film of his time interestingly point towards their potential uses as catalysts towards human consciousness. Pointing towards the works of Les Levine, a video art pioneer in the 70's, who would "turn his viewers into information", Youngblood suggests that closed-circuit sorts of video arts that place the spectator as the art piece can aid in "...creating an emotionally real experience [through] turning the participant inward upon himself, providing a matrix for psychic exploration, perceptual, sensorial and intellectual awareness; the whole earth becomes the content of aesthetic activity"<sup>15</sup>. Considering that some of my previous work had to do with self-reflection and consumption, the VR medium spoke to me as fertile ground for its potential in manifesting self-reflective experiences in combination with traditional video art by placing a camera in the gallery space. My work, in effect showing man's ecological relationship to himself, the earth and the technology sitting on their face is in a similar conversation and would be considered an "intermedia installation" to Youngblood.

This is something I'd like to call *meta-VR*: VR about VR.

Using the medium in this way as to point back to the self and its awareness seems to be a theme amongst other speculative writers and artists. Recently, I came across a collection of *Electronic Culture* essays edited by past Photographic and Electronic Media director Timothy Druckrey. In one of the essays written by Peter Weibel titled *The World as Interface*, Weibel and Druckrey might agree that my piece would be questioning if the world we already live in is a "rainbow world" of sorts; the rainbow itself being both a metaphor of subjective perception and of natural phenomena. Similarly to Youngblood, Weibel proposes terms such as "endophysics" as to prophesize the effect of using technologies/VR as for the construction of mediated model-worlds as to mimic real-world environments. Weibel postulates "we do not interact with the world – only the interface to the world. Electronic art should help us better understand the nature of electronic culture and the foundations of our electronic world"<sup>16</sup>. Through constructing these simulated realities, I am similarly questioning the realities left behind. By allowing the "observer to see him/herself in the observation devices; feedback situations, where the machine watches itself; or virtual-reality environments, where the hand of the external observer is simulated as part of the internal observer within the image is in tune with the principle of endophysics." So, which is it... can we have a direct experience of the reality-in-itself as the Buddhists point towards, or is even the mind a medium between us and this reality as Bryant and Weibel point towards? Either way, VR seems to be able to function as a tool-extension of our minds and its probing nature.

What do pieces like the one I produced mean towards the future of the medium, and more importantly, towards the future of our relationship to perception? By being able to form an intermediary space for individuals to see themselves, a visible language can overcome the subject/object dualisms of our modern forms of communication. We can potentially inch closer to communication without words if multiple people could enter into these spaces at one time.

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<sup>15</sup> Youngblood, Gene. *Expanded Cinema*, pg. 320-350.

<sup>16</sup> Weibel, Peter. *The World as Interface: Towards the Construction of Context-Controlled Event Worlds*, pg. 340-45.

We can possibly construct worlds where we can meet together in these headsets to simulate possible solutions to our modern ecological problems. At least that's me doing my own philosophizing. They may say I'm a dreamer-machine, but I'm not the only one. In this way, we may even become 'trans-human' or 'cybernetic'. These terms, also used by Youngblood, alludes to our direct relationship with the technology, and connotes a cyborg-like future where wearing a headset to access 'truer' forms of reality may become the norm.

At what point does VR beget a new reality, and can it illicit even the ever-elusive sublime and mystical experiences of our concrete reality? MICA professor, writer and artist Mina Cheon might think so if constructed in a certain way; possibly similar to the self-reflective experience I designed. In her book *Shamanism and Cyberspace*, she describes the VR experience as a form of a shamanic experience between realities through fostering borderline liminal out-of-body experiences; a "shamanic-cyber metaphor" in her terms. These sorts of experiences become "neo-shamanism" through linking cyberspace new-world interactions to archaic shamanic culture. Visual VR experiences become transcendental, the experience of which becomes a rite of passage and could help humanity regain the tribal/archaic one-world-one-mind consciousness that indigenous cultures speak to<sup>17</sup>. VR can become a "moist media" in the way that we allow it to interact with our own internal circuits and in turn could affect the evolution of our circuits, expanding our perceptions of reality in the process if we positively invest enough of our efforts into the technology.

Shamanism is a cultural practice going back thousands of years and usually connotes altered states. In these states, both out-of-body experiences and self-reflective moments of non-duality are commonplace. I imagine there could be a lot of work of various capacities done if those gaps in the bridge were to be closed even more between VR and shamanism, and I'm not the only one. Terrence Mckenna (who has been mentioned and will come up again shortly as well) alludes to this "union of spirit and matter" in his speeches. He sees shamanic/entheogenic experiences as a precursor to this non-dualist and post-human way of thinking in the way that the experience anticipates a life lived entirely in the imagination and questions if all of reality of the future might be virtually-influenced as VR becomes a "tool for discovery and navigation in new aesthetic domains". As long as the medium doesn't become "the final trivializing of the drive to be mindlessly entertained"<sup>18</sup>, these spaces have hope. Sadly, not even VR is immune to corporate upheaval; where the imagination can become the commodity. I'd like to think we're better than this and continue to use VR productively in society. An ideal and optimistic ending would be that both the reemergence of psychedelic therapies and VR will enhance the culture. By utilizing VR as a tool to help us reimagine our environment through liminal simulations of the Earth in virtual spaces, we can remind ourselves of the Earth we are simulating in the first place (instead of being herded away by the technologies corporate-capitalist Hollywoodization tendencies)?

Another important term for context: **Self-reflection**. This one is pretty straight-forward. It's the reflection of self. Either by seeing yourself in a mirror, in a pool of water for the archaic pre-mirror man, or metaphorically in the sense of an artwork that makes you consider yourself;

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<sup>17</sup> Cheon, Mina. *Shamanism and Cyberspace*, pg. 140-200.

<sup>18</sup> Mckenna, Terrence. *The Archaic Revival*, pg. 228.

self-reflection is a very human thing to ponder and realize. Not many animals can do it as far as we know and humans are almost proud of the fact that we can realize our selves. Some, like the psychologist Carl Jung and his affinity towards the Gnostics, would call this process “individuation” - the process of the realization of self. In the piece, the self-reflective phenomenon comes up in a few different places. There’s a webcam that was installed in one of the artificial trees in the gallery space which allowed for the spectator to have a mediated view of themselves once the VR headset is on. There are also frames within the VR gallery space that take ‘the awareness’ of the spectator (what they are gazing upon literally) and places them into these places, creating a recursive and fractalizing feedback loop. There is also a moment in the piece where the embodied character gazes upon themselves in a mirror in the VR space, in which they embody a camera body in the work. Once the headset is off, the spectator also gazes upon themselves in the real-world with the use of self-reflective cubes hanging in the space. There are four instances of self-reflection happening in the work, possibly 5 if you count the simulated VR headset sitting on the boulder in the last room as a reality-check for the spectator. It seems there are different *ways* to realize your own self-awareness. In the piece, you see yourself literally in the real-world space’s reflective cubes, you see a mediated view of yourself in the VR space’s reflective cube, you then see ‘your awareness of self’ (not your actual self) in the various frames that capture your gaze, and the moment of the mirror in the VR space where the self is embodied as a camera-body. To this I’d simply ask, which form of self-reflection is the most ‘self’, or the most ‘genuine self’? Is it the cubed view in the real-world, or the mediated view in the VR world? Is one method of self-reflection more ‘real’ than the other? To the point of the paper and its context, I’m not sure if that’s up for me to answer. All I know is that it’s all self-reflective in nature. In this way, my use of VR becomes a mirror for the spectator; a tool for individuation. A place for self-reflection and contemplation of self. The self looks back at the self through a self-realizing technology.

Before VR and even before modern HDTVs there existed a rich history of video artists that have also made works that also utilize self-reflection through the installation of video cameras in gallery spaces. I’d like to take a second to pay homage to some of these artists as they were highly influential in my conceptualization and deployment of the device in the modern context of VR. We’ll call it the ‘pre-VR days’. In Michael Rush’s book *Video Art*, he writes biography-reviews of some key artists that utilized these early video technologies<sup>19</sup>. He starts with the “father of video art” coming out of the Fluxus movement: Nam June Paik. Paik in particular has always been a favorite of mine. His pieces such as *TV Buddha*, *TV Garden*, and *Electronic Superhighway* influenced the direction this piece took in their self-reflective aspects, their nods towards eastern mysticism and critiques on modernized culture. In a similar time frame to Paik, another key artist, also noted by Youngblood is Les Levine. Amongst his other works, his pieces *Contact* and *Present Continuous Past(s)* place the spectator in constructed environments where they are confronted with images of themselves; the latter in particular does this with the use of mirrors as well to create a cube-spaced recursive reflection chamber. An inspiration for the last room of my piece for sure as in my piece the spectator sees themselves both in reflective cubes and sees their awareness projected on all walled surfaces of the last room. Beyond these two, Rush goes on to highlight Bruce Nauman’s *Performance*

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<sup>19</sup> Rush, Michael. *Video Art*. Pg. 25-75.

*Corridor*, Peter Campus' *Interface*, and Julia Scher's *Security by Julia* series. Though they had different intentions, they all used a self-reflective tactic while using video in their practice as to comment towards how the mediums can affect our perception of self in relation to the environment the mediated-self is placed in. In modern times, Mongolian-German artist and philosopher-in-the-making, Timur Si-Qin, uses a similar approach in his piece *A Reflected Landscape*, in which he not only uses an installed video camera for the spectator to view themselves, but also places TV screens, artificial renderings of nature and branding imagery in his piece to form a juxtaposition between these different object-machines. Along with Olafur Eliasson's perceptual-ecological immersive installations, my approach and commentary are most parallel to Eliasson's and Si-Qin's, and I do acknowledge the influence gained by the pioneering video artists. Where my work differs from these other video artists in particular is my use of the VR medium in combination with the self-reflective video-installation aspects.

As I was conceptualizing the piece, I came across an experiment by researcher and lecturer Henrik Ehrsson titled *The Experiential Induction of Out of Body Experiences*. He uses a VR-like headset and live video feed mechanism as a way to induce an out-of-body experience for his test subjects. He does this by creating a "perceptual illusion in which the spectator experienced their 'center of awareness' or 'self' as it was located outside of their physical bodies and allowed the subject to look at their bodies from the perspective of another person"<sup>20</sup> by poking his subjects with a stick basically. However humorous this sounds, his subjects reported the experience of sitting behind their physical bodies and looking at themselves from this location. To my point, and possibly to answer the question proposed, it seems it doesn't matter if our view of self is mediated or not. We are able to know that we are looking at our bodies whether it's in a real-world space or a VR space. That still might not answer which level of self-reflection is more genuine than the other, though. An image of Ehrsson's experiment is below for context.

To the point of self-reflection and to speculate if our bodies could be thought of as cameras, what kind of framing would we have towards our own perception of reality and towards ourselves? In camera terms, a prime lens designates a fixed framing, a 50mm for example. A zoom lens allows one to choose their framing, a 24-70mm for example. The body and its perception could be thought of as a 'camera' towards the world, a fixed lens-body if we let it be that way. If we choose to free our boundaries of time and space by choosing the zoom lens over the prime lens, we can coordinate any and all points of the universe wherever we want them to be. Changing/challenging our framing of reality allows a way towards a fresh perception of the world; thus, the world can be experienced in a new way. In this metaphor, let us remember to choose the zoom lens over the prime lens so we can attempt to not become stagnant towards our framing of reality. As this relates to my piece, the spectator embodies a fixed-lens camera and confronts themselves eventually in a mirror within the VR space. In doing this, I'd like them to challenge their fixed framing of reality. The camera is the tool also used by the media in their selective framing of their news stories.

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<sup>20</sup> Ehrsson, Henrik, *The Experiential Induction of Out of Body Experiences*, pg. 1048.




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Using the medium-metaphor-machine of a self-reflective virtual reality video installation as a means to interrogate the definitions of the physical reality we're a part of - this project and the paper that it begets attempts to explain the installation's conversation-manifesting and reality-questioning aspects. As it existed in the Leidy Gallery of the Lazarus Center (for only a long weekend in mid-March due to COVID19), the installation allowed the spectator to examine their own perceptions of reality in both a real-world art gallery and an inner VR art gallery accompanied by a landscape. While moving through both that real-world and VR landscape, they eventually meet a mediated view of their real self – a fellow, but distracted, observer. In times of climate crises, 'fake news' and questionable sources of the 'real reality', the piece fosters a non-dualist self-reflective experience for social change, conversation, and contemplation by probing both the nature of reality and the reality of nature.

Essentially, some media technologies may be used to 'herd our gaze away' from the Earth and its pastures as to distract us from our duties as custodians to the natural world and its resources; the food resources in particular in my case. Through this thesis project/paper I'm suggesting that we restructure the way we think about the Earth and our time on it, as to make our time here more valuable to ourselves and to confront the notion of 'commodifiable time' through using that time for activities around reconnecting us to ourselves, each other, and the things that ties us all together - mother Earth herself.

As alluded to through both Ornstein and Lanier, language and the culture it helps form could be seen as the first 'virtual realities'. For example, before the invention of language, ala the caveman experience, water was simply that which was wet and had a reflective surface. To a baby, the world is one big mystery. Until we learn the language that dictates our reality, it's our oyster. Even the words I am typing and you, the reader, are in turn interpreting in this

sentence would just be arbitrary symbols if there were no one to define and understand them. When we attach a name or a definition to something, 'self-reflection' for example, it seems to take away from the awe and sense of sublime in that moment. This is alluded to both in the opening lines of the classic mystical text *Tao Te Ching* attributed to the sage Lao Tzu, and also suggested by the modern sage Terrence Mckenna in *The Archaic Revival*. The former states:

The Tao that can be told (or named) is not the eternal (or true) Tao. The name than can be named is not the eternal (or true) name. The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth. The named is the mother of 10,000 things. Ever desireless, one can see the mystery. Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations. <sup>21</sup>

The latter states:

As we learn our lines/roles and the blocking that goes from them, we move out of the inchoate realm of the preverbal child and in to the realm of the first virtual reality, the VR of culture. Many of us never realize that this domain is virtual, and instead we assume that we are discovering the true nature of the real world. <sup>22</sup>

In this line of thought, culture and the language used to construct it can be seen as a pair of bifocals that obscures the novelty of existence and the reality as it truly is; a medium in which we look through to share our interpretations of the world. This world seems to be an ever-flowing and changing energy that lives in nature. At least this is what the Tao and some modern physics speculates. Apart from the speculation, I'd like to lay out the connection between culture, language and the evolution of media as the growing-channels of both the language, the culture and most importantly 'the truth' about them and the 'truth' they portray.

Our last term for clarity and context: **Media**. Media is a plural of its 'medium' singular form. In its simplest sense, a medium is an extension of the human self or its abilities. The microphone is an extension of our ability to speak, the hearing aid an extension of our ability to hear, virtual reality could be thought of an extension of the extensions themselves: a multi-sensorial media experience. In the artistic context, a 'medium' is the substance, resources or material the artist uses. The artist in turn then *becomes* a medium between their thoughts and the physical world as they manifest their ideas. In another sense, it refers to the components of the mass media communications industry such as print media, news media, photography, cinema, and advertising medias. This last sense, which is a core theme of this project-paper is that the media is both a place we look to for our understanding of reality and the means to which it is presented to us. I utilize all uses of the signifier in my piece to signify the form the project took, it's content-commentary towards the news media and myself as the medium.

This idea surrounding a medium as *The Extensions of Man* was first theorized by Canadian media theorist, social critic and writer Marshall McLuhan in the book by the same name. Most people are familiar with his famous adage "the medium is the message" in which he specifies that "the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or

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<sup>21</sup> Moeller, Hans-Georg (translator), *Dao de Jing (Laozi)*. Pg. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Mckenna, Terrence. "Virtual Reality and Electronic Highs", *The Archaic Revival*, pg. 233.

pattern that it introduces into human affairs”<sup>23</sup>. In this line of thinking it begs the question: What’s the *message* of VR? Does its content point back to another medium, much like the content of the writing medium points back to the oral tradition/speech culture medium? For context, McLuhan had his peak in the era of cinema and photography. Though he mentions the medium of games in his later chapters and computer simulations here and there, VR was only a dream at that point. Despite this, I think he’d still have some interesting things to say about VR as a medium. To me, the *message* of VR implies that there could be a separate reality from the concrete one we are a part (apart?) of. It signifies a separation from the real reality. To pull that string further, what does VR signify about our reality-culture-machine in the fact that we’d want to escape from this reality to enter into another one? This seems to point towards the field of psychology and their terms of both psychological escapism and physiological releases of desirable neurotransmitters. Humans desire to leave this reality to ‘take a break’: that’s escapism. Once there, they may not want to come back because staying in this space keeps us coming back with little hits of dopamine. As a medium, VR’s message seems to point towards the human propensities of escapism and simulation. I’d like to place my emphasis on the latter, as I do think these spaces can be used productively in simulating our relations to the natural world. To continue on with the paper with the ideas of mediums as extensions of man, and in turn as extensions of our relationship with reality, I’ll return to the discussion of how mediums came to be mediums in the literal sense. A medium is a ‘middle-man’ between us and our perceptions, or in McLuhan’s terms, an extension of our senses; in my terms it’s an extension of our story-telling and truth-sharing.

For a moment, I’d like to take us on a trip down memory lane. A trip to maybe... renaissance times, just for a moment... This will be a story about, well, stories. More so storytelling and the oral cultures they started in. Imagine you’re in the king’s court. Purple is everywhere, wine and madams for everyone. A criminal comes in after committing a crime. The king notices a need for change in the law only after his favorite line, “off with his head!”. The court jester abides with a silly dance. His scribes furiously scribble down the king’s words as he drunkenly babbles on. And so it was! Right? Afterwards the scribes compare their scribblings, and make a consolidated and *agreed-upon* version out of their two for the official decree. How would this new change to the law get dispersed to the kingdom? Before Guttenberg’s printing press came along in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the king’s word *was* the word-reality for the most part. There was no smaller dispersible version of what he said, and if there were it would take months, perhaps even years, for this ‘truth’ to reach the serfs and their herds living their pastoral lives. To the point that by the time the new law had reached them, it could have been overturned, or even more ironically a new king could have been crowned.

This form of sharing information was similar to the oral traditions of storytelling and mythology creating cultures before the industrial revolution. There were specialized storytellers, often with great memories and performance characteristics, that would gather the entire town together to disseminate the stories on how their cultures were formed, broadcast the norms of the town and probably transmit some political jokes in there too to keep them entertained (“Our king eats pig feet for breakfast!”). Fast-forwarding to the Gutenberg-era and the power of the written word, the means of spreading the ‘truth’ and cultural mythologies

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<sup>23</sup> McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, pg. 4-33.

began to rise exponentially. Literacy rates go up as people began to read things such as the bible. Media theorist, writer and art historian Neil Postman tells a similar story in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Starting from thy holiness up until modern discourses in the age of Hollywood, he alludes to how these various mediums have to an extent manufactured our interpretations of reality, how our mind became organized by them and most importantly how the idea of truth has evolved alongside the mediums. He goes on to say “[our mediums] are rather like metaphors [of mythologies], working by unobtrusive but powerful implication to enforce their special definitions of reality... our media-metaphors classify the world for us and argue a case for what the world is like”.<sup>24</sup> Since the printing press, we have now come to know and love the electronic age’s addition of the morse code, simple telecommunications, the radio and more recently the television. Now we can see the king (or president) televised live on the air and can have his decree as soon as he says it, everyone can. Even more so in the day and age of wireless communications and smart phones, ‘truth’ has evolved to be only a click or siri-request away. In this era of instantaneous ‘fake news’ we live in, can the evolutions of the extensions of man still hold true to the truth when “truth is a product of conversation man has with himself about and through the techniques of communication he has invented”?<sup>25</sup> In this way, a new medium comes along, and with it, it creates a new form of truth-telling and representation of reality through its use and societal implications.

Similar in insight and background is Noam Chomsky. At first, I only knew of him as a linguist that spoke to the common roots of all languages, yet recently I discovered, he is a media theorist too, and a little bit of a rebel in his approach! Chomsky and Postman are in direct conversation with one another when it comes to their observation of the ways media have evolved over time as carriers of the truth of reality. In Chomsky’s books *Manufacturing Consent* and *Media Control*, he doubles what Postman speculates and provides his own backing through statements surrounding the need for media corporations to meet a status quo to adhere to that which is ‘newsworthy’. Instead of concerning themselves with the more ‘inconvenient truths’ that would be contra to the network’s income and executive producers, they are forced to cover the stories which will continue to keep the news station on the air. To the point of this project, Chomsky also notices how living things such as humans, animal populations and the earth’s resources would often appear as quantifiable and statistical numbers; making them “seem more like virtual/digital objects than real things.”<sup>26</sup> These statistics are often placed next to modeled/ rendered depictions of the Earth thereby making the connection between the two even more virtual. Through the media’s methods of manufacturing consent towards pre-selected and catered topics, what exactly does the modern viewer of the news actually have access to? Through the selective style of reporting, it seems to be only a small window into the reality of a certain situation, or an even more narrow window into one of thousands of competing discourses about what appears to be going on in reality. This can be applied to news coverage of environmental awareness as well, through this media control, the status of the earth is presented as a simulation of what’s actually happening. In effect, the viewers experience is reduced to simple signs and symbols given by the media as it

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<sup>24</sup> Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Discourse in the Age of Showbusiness*, pg. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Postman, Neil. Pg. 12-15.

<sup>26</sup> Chomsky, Noam. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, pg. 10-25.

only *simulates* real world events by showing only certain cropped camera angles and certain perspectives of the news stories that are approved by the news director of the news studio. In his early career, Chomsky would riot in the streets over points like this. I choose the art gallery space, static TVs, and VR.

Their central premises seem to point towards one of the main themes of my intent in having static TVs in the gallery space. As if to question if the information coming from them is valid at all considering the layers of capitalistic intents used as distractions to fabricate our agreement into the things that *should* be worried about - like who's dating who in Hollywood, sports, game shows, elections, commercials - instead of looking towards ourselves and our relations as an important matter. In other words, unless you're seeing your own reflection in the glass of the TV or a reflective cube floating close by, the images coming from the TV are all statically irrelevant. I am questioning the TV as a source of truth-reality, and have been for most of my adult life at this point: especially in this 'fake news' era. In our modern society, we struggle to make distinctions between representations of reality and reality itself. The representation *becomes* the real. Through having TVs from different eras in the gallery space manifests a commentary on the coevolution of the medium beside the earth and us as we have invented these truth-machines. This ultimately amounts to the VR headset as the culmination of human technological ingenuities to this point. Naturally, this begs the question if VR also carries this truth-wielding connotation or if in the future there might be an even more immersive medium that will allow us to question the truth-mediums that have come before it.

Postman and Chomsky together along with the postmodernist French philosopher Jean Baudrillard form the trifecta of media theorists that stabilize the backbone of my paper/project in its media-oriented conversations. Baudrillard and his 'hyperrealities' mentioned earlier had his hay-day in the 1980's. He was prophetic of VR 'holograms' before its inception and even conceptualized and spoke to very similar points of Postman and Chomsky pertaining to the fabrication of a simulated realities through the media. He writes in his book *Simulation and Simulacra* to the point of the media perpetuating the simulation, or 'manufacturing the consent' in Chomsky's terms, that "everywhere we live in an universe strangely similar to the original...through multiplying the *signs* [of the real] and accelerating the play of simulation...you no longer watch the TV, it is the TV that watches you live."<sup>27</sup> In order to prove *the real* through the use of the simulated, I wonder what Baudrillard would have to say about the effect my piece would have on the viewer. My choice to place static TVs and rendered versions of nature in a real-world gallery space and bringing these objects over into a simulated gallery space would point towards his use of the term a 'desert of the real'. In my piece I'm playing with the perception of the spectator to make them wonder which reality is more 'real' than the other by placing them in a similar 'desert'; similar to the desert made through the news media's choices of only showing stories in which seem important to the lined pockets of the oligarchy. Later in the chapter, Baudrillard comments on the gallery space itself as both a capitalized centralization of value systems and as a place for us to "stockpile the past in plain view" (his example was the mummy of Rameses). In line with my choice to place fake fruits in the gallery space, he goes on to say that humans "require a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth

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<sup>27</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulation and Simulacra*, pg. 1-40.

of origin, which reassures us about our end.”<sup>28</sup> I’m trying to remind my viewers of both their origins that stem from the earth and what could be our end if we are not able to reevaluate our relations to the real fruits in which the fake ones are simulations of.

Baudrillard is not the only one that plays with the notion of systems of value when it comes to the art gallery institution. When one thinks of ready-made objects making their way to the pedestals of white-walled gallery spaces, one art movement in particular comes to mind; that of the Dada movement and its most prolific jokester-messiah, Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp was making deserts for his spectators in his approaches to using his chosen ready-made objects (stools, bicycle wheels and toilets) to question similar things that Baudrillard continued to question 50+ years later. Contextually, the Dada movement was influenced by the colossal loss of human life that surrounded World War I, the rise of industrialization and the general absurdity of reality fueled by modernization. In a memoir written by one of the Dadaists, Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, their motivations were described as “we devoted ourselves to the arts... while the guns rumbled in the distance...to cure the madness of the age, and a new order of things that would balance heaven and hell.”<sup>29</sup> Other members spoke about humanity being beside itself with the rage and grief felt of the destruction of humanity. Paralleling my own mindset of questioning this absurd reality in which we find ourselves in these days, the Dadaists operated under a similar state of mind when making art that questioned its own existence in this reality. Often called ‘anti-art’ considering its emphasis of going against the norms surrounding ‘what’s allowed’ in art, its plays with language and the recontextualization of logic itself through questioning the gallery space as a space of intrinsic value. I acknowledge the dada way of thinking has had on me as a person and as an artist. I placed ready-made fake fruits in the real-world gallery space with all-organic stickers on them, AstroTurf on the walls and empty frames. Most of these objects are carried over into the VR gallery space. In the same way the Dadaists questioned both the time period they lived through and the reality in which they were shown through their art, I’m doing something similar - just recontextualizing the pun. Most importantly, Dadaism showed that the spectator of the art holds the power that places it into a gallery space, not the artist. Let us continue to question the system to question the reality in which it exists as to allow for new mediums of story-telling and truth-sharing.

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Sometimes synonymous with medium; ‘technology’, in its original Greek root, *techne*, translates to ‘the revealing’ or the means of ‘bringing forth’. Technology, if used correctly, can reveal to us the truth of ourselves and bring forth to us our relations. Most importantly our relations to the environment in which all these machines evolved from; a ‘bringing forth’ of the reminder of the unity of all things. It can reveal to us that ‘being’ can be both a noun and a verb in this ‘being-world’ relationship. ‘Techne’ can be productive for humanity. It can ‘reveal’ to us our modernized issues and bring forth new ways us think critically about the ‘real’ reality.

Sadly, *techne* has a malicious potential. The art of technological influence is everywhere in our daily lives, so how might artists take back their place in the world as questioners and

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<sup>28</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. Pg. 15.

<sup>29</sup> Richter, Hans. *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*. Pg. 1-50

challengers of the culture surrounding them using the same tools that the markets use to herd our gaze away from the pasture? Can we use art and its technologies as a tool for questioning reality? Can reality be used as a tool for questioning art? Maybe I've placed the self in a position between the art-medium and reality to make the observation.

By viscerally forcing the spectator's self-awareness to come back to the forefront, *Herding the Gaze Away from the Pasture* aims to toy with many of these mindful questions in an attempt to steer the gaze back to what's *really* most important, the subjective self-experience of reality. So sure, *Herding* is about self-awareness, mindfulness, media-communication theories, language-culture, representations, ecologies, simulations, art historical-technological canons and virtual realities... but it's about a lot of other things too. For those that are patient enough to try to understand - a moment of introspective growth awaits.

In hindsight of writing this thesis, as is acknowledged through the paper in various ways, I'd like to highlight the existence of the limitations and miscommunications within written and visual language. Each spectator will walk away from this piece with a different interpretation of the intended effect through considering that reality itself is personal; and to this piece of writing, it is the same idea. Who am I to say that anyone other than myself even has an inkling of an idea of what I'm talking about or if my words left different interpretations to be deduced? Maybe I've been rambling for 30 pages now, maybe I'm onto something, maybe this is an extended entry from a dream journal/diary from when I was a child, who knows... I got herded away along the way. The best I can do through acknowledging these shortcomings is to promote patience and to build a space for misunderstanding in the process of understanding as to normalize the chance for a mutual growth.

If you ever find yourself questioning your own place in reality, **I'd like to place your gaze on THIS sentence**, this **word** (((((these parentheses))))), *this unnecessary italicization*, THESE WORDS TOO... **Your eyes reading this text**, **your breath**, your hands scrolling through this document, the place you find yourself - **these things are real**. I (maybe) am real... but that's still up for debate. Remember to give time to your own awareness in a world that tries to pull it away from you, that awareness of self... that's real, really real,  
**||| the realest one could say |||**.

To end this thesis paper, as also to reflect the audio that is heard by the spectator in the 'reflection chamber' (final room of the piece), it seems only fitting to include this speech by the late and great psychonaut, intellectual sage and fungi Terrence Mckenna.

“...and what’s really important is, I call it, the felt presence of direct experience, which is a fancy term which just simply means we have to stop consuming our culture. We have to create culture. Don't watch TV, don't read magazines, don't even listen to NPR. Create your own roadshow. The nexus of space and time, where you are now, is the most immediate sector of your universe and if you're worrying about Michael Jackson or Bill Clinton or somebody else, you are disempowered. You are giving it all away to icons, icons which are maintained by an electronic media, so that you want to dress like X or have lips like Y or something. This is shit-brained, this kind of thinking. That is all cultural diversion and what is real is you and your friends and your associations, your highs, your orgasms, your hopes, your plans, and your fears... and we are told no, we're unimportant, we're peripheral, "get a degree", "get a job", get a this, get a that, and then you're a player. You don't even want to play in that game. You want to reclaim your mind and get it out of the hands of the cultural engineers who want to turn you into a half-baked moron consuming all this trash that's being manufactured out of the bones of a dying world.”

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