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# Voidopolis

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*Voidopolis* is a hybrid digital artistic and literary project in the form of an augmented reality (AR) book made to disappear, which retells Dante's *Inferno* as if it were set in pandemic-ravaged New York City. Every detail of the story is crafted to evoke loss: the stock photographs of New York City with humans wiped away, the lipogrammatic AI-generative text missing the letter e. The book's pages are garbled and can only be deciphered through an AR app published alongside the book—but over a period of a year, its digital components decay the way memory might, leaving behind foggy imagery and half-remembered bits of language. Each July 1, the book resets, beginning anew the cycle of its own vanishing. The work's enactment of its own disappearance across all copies of the book worldwide turns the private act of reading into a collective experience of loss. *Voidopolis* has been recognized as both a work of literature and as a work of new media art, and has been exhibited internationally in a variety of digital and physical formats.

## Description

*Voidopolis* is a digital performance about loss and memory presented as an augmented reality book with a limited lifespan. The narrative loosely retells the story of Dante's *Inferno* as if it were the dystopic experience of wandering through New York City during a pandemic; instead of Virgil, however, the narrator is guided through this modern hellscape by a caustic hobo named Nikita. The project was published by The MIT Press

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Leonardo Series in 2023 alongside a bespoke AR app, with afterwords by Charlotte Kent and Arielle Saiber (Mustatea 2023).

*Voidopolis* began as a screen-based work, in a series of Instagram posts unfolding in 2020-21 — and from the very beginning was meant to have the concept of loss embedded in every detail of its formal presentation. It features images that are created by digitally "wiping" humans from stock photography and text that is generated without the letter "e" — in homage to Oulipo author Georges Perec's *La Disparition*, a 300-page novel written in 1969 entirely without the letter "e" — by using a modified GPT-2 text generator. The book, adapted from a series of Instagram posts that were ultimately deleted, is likewise designed to disappear: its garbled pages can only be deciphered with an AR app, but these decay over a period of one year. The images and texts inside the app become garbled until they match the garbled images and texts that are printed in the pages of the book. Because the app gradually cannot decipher the story, the book eventually becomes unintelligible. Each July 1, the date the project first started on Instagram, the book resets again, beginning anew this cycle of its own vanishing.

The work's enactment of its own disappearance across all copies of the book worldwide turns the private act of reading into a collective experience of loss. Indeed, the book is not so much a book as a "performative object:" rather than depict loss, it effectively *enacts* loss (The MIT Press 2023). The affordances of augmented reality are here enlisted and re-configured in a performative disappearance, and with the reader posited as audience to that durational performance. The resulting experience is one of contingency and fracture; as the as the writer Danielle Ezzo notes: "By hovering the device's screen over the page, a digital image juts from the surface and jitters as it tries, struggling all the while, to ground itself to the printed image" (Ezzo 2024). She goes on to link this jittery experience to the larger project's meaning, as embedded both in its form and its narrative thematics: "The fragility of the wobbly, self--conscious technology is tangled up in how we see and what we remember, making loss both metaphor and medium" (Ezzo 2024).

## Thematics and Technical Details

The initial presentation of *Voidopolis* was as a diaristic narrative on Instagram that began on July 1st, 2020. At the time, New York City was among the first epicenters of coronavirus infections in what would become a worldwide crisis. The grim reality of life in the city during those months was one of sudden collapse of everyday rhythms and social norms, as the city shut down, the streets emptied of people, and the ever-present wail of ambulance sirens signaled a staggering death toll that grew daily. The impetus for beginning *Voidopolis* at that moment was one of portraying, in a visceral way, the reality of fragility, loss, and contingency that became an ever-present aspect of life in the city. Charlotte Kent notes in her afterword essay to the MIT Press publication: "Dante made the extraordinary move of writing in the vernacular of his time. Mustatea confirms that social media is undoubtedly ours" (Kent 2023).

The project's use of modified algorithmic and digital tools is at the core of its embedded themes of loss and memory. To create the text, I enlisted GPT-2, the generative language model available in 2020 when the narrative initially unfolded on Instagram. However, instead of using

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such a tool out-of-the-box, I augmented it with additional software so its generated text would conform to a specific lipogrammatic constraint: no words containing "e" were allowed, so the model discarded words with "e" from its probabilistic outputs, resulting in sentences entirely without the letter. The choice of removing "e" was one of poetics: in English, most past tense verbs end in "ed," so the removal of this particular vowel had the effect of warping time in peculiar ways in the narrative, which seemed bound in the eerie experience of being in suspended animation during the lockdown. The accompanying images were made from stock imagery of New York City in which people had been algorithmically "wiped."

The Instagram presentation was from the beginning meant to be a performative event culminating in loss. After about nine months in which the narrative unfolded, it was subsequently deleted once the story was complete. The decision to translate the story into the format of an augmented reality book was informed by the notion of trace-making, of creating a record that the initial performance had happened at all. Because augmented reality is by definition additive—literally, a layering on of reality—the poetics of creating this particular book lay in working out a way for its AR digital elements to somehow also become subtractive. As such, the MIT Press publication of *Voidopolis* might best be thought of as a "re-staging" of a durational, digital performance inside the pages of a book.

For the book, the algorithms used to decay both images and text over the course of each year inside the AR app are bespoke generative algorithms (one for texts, one for images), that were developed in collaboration with Vienna-based Studio Process.[1] Both modes of decay were meant to evoke the way memory works, leaving behind foggy remembrance of an image and bits of language. Each instance of decaying an image or text is entirely unique—resulting in the poetic paradox of a "generative decay" process at work here. Of the image decay, Danielle Ezzo has written: "Through a process of Gaussian blurring the bounds of the image bleed onto the white page making space for amorphous topologies of color to emerge, where focus narrows to create depth to lead the eye, the blurred image obstructs vision and redirects attention back toward the photographic apparatus itself" (Ezzo 2024).

## Modes of Public Presentation

*Voidopolis* has been recognized as both a work of literature (Arts and Letters 'Unclassifiable' Prize, European Literature Night, etc) and as a work of new media art (2023 Lumen Prize shortlist, Ars Electronica, New Images Festival Paris Official Selection).[2] A hybrid literary and artistic project, *Voidopolis* has been exhibited internationally as a work of new media installation in a variety of digital and physical formats beyond its initial presentation on Instagram. A prototype augmented reality book premiered at Ars Electronica in 2021 and was an official selection at New Images Festival Paris, and the project has since been exhibited in various formats including video, wall-based AR experience, and book form, in venues and festivals in London (UK), Bergen (NO), Leipzig (AT), Brooklyn (US), among others. In each instance of exhibition, some form of enacted disappearance and loss is present; for example, in the installation at Ars Electronica, the displayed AR books

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decayed during the five days of the festival. The animating principle for any of these staging is:

1) that text and images be given equal weight;
2) that this be treated as a narrative work, and therefore the viewer has access to the narrative from beginning to end;
3) that in order for the narrative to retain its contingent and fragmentary essence, not all of the episodes are accessible all at once at any particular moment;
4) that any permanent publication/installation make only part of the narrative accessible at any given time.

Voidopolis Website: https://www.voidopolisbook.com/

**Fig. 1.** *Voidopolis* Cover, image courtesy of Studio Process.
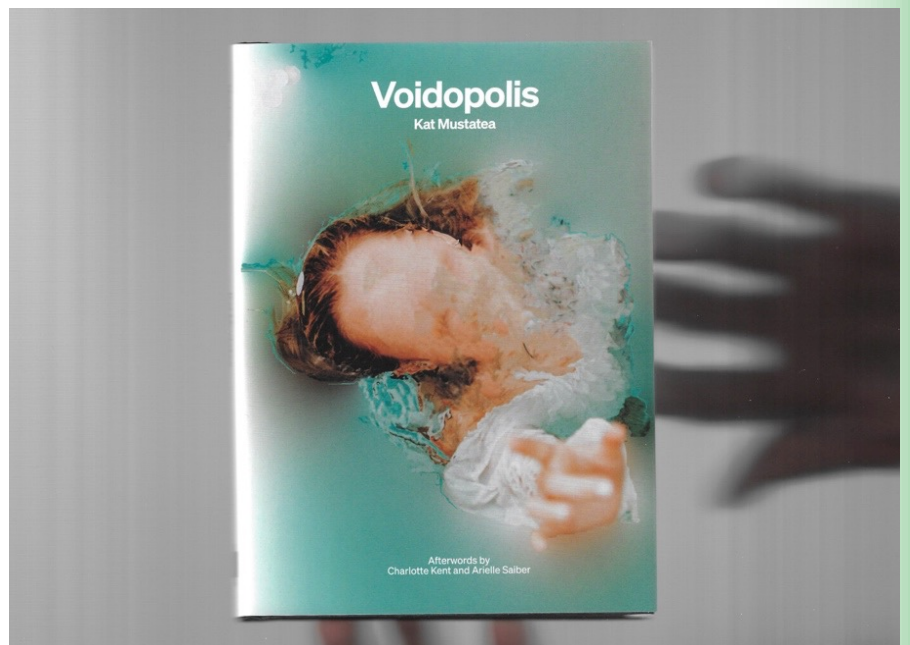


**Fig. 2.** *Voidopolis* trailer: https://vimeo.com/863380992.

**Fig. 3.** *Voidopolis*, example
algorithmic decay.



**Fig. 4.** *Voidopolis* installation
view at Ars Electronica 2021.



**Fig. 5.** *Voidopolis* part 25 –
decayed image.

**Fig. 6.** *Voidopolis*, part 25 –
decayed text.

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