Schwellen [Thresholds]: How Real Are Digital and Virtual Worlds?

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The artistic experiment *Schwellen* questions the definitions of digitality, virtuality and reality and approaches various aspects of spatial theories of the last 200 years in a tangible way. Virtuality may not be a counterpart to reality. *Schwellen* [Thresholds] deals with the unclassifiability of temporal and material qualities as well as the aesthetics of unnoticed places. Digital and physical spatiality interplay here, with the place assuming and taking on multiple identities. The work only emerges with the interaction of the viewer, revealing – literally and figuratively – the different angles of observation, examining the threshold from the unnoticed and familiar to the peculiar. The installation addresses the visual, tactile and olfactory senses. It is interactive and uses the spatial cognition of the observer.

Description

The installation and artistic experiment consist of multiple objects, each working with different forms of virtuality. One object uses tracking and off-axis-projection to display a digital patch of grass. The tracked person can perceive the digital object in a three-dimensionally correct manner. The data bodies and their tracking states with additional digital cameras can be seen on an optional screen. Additionally, scent is used to use olfactory sensations and their virtual qualities.

Schwellen [Thresholds] focuses on making virtuality approachable. Often XR-Applications in exhibitions need the visitor to prepare. Instead

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305

of using an external device or a specified setup, this installation shows a three-dimensional digital object over a simple OLED-Display using an asymmetrical projection of the digital object. The head-position of the visitor is tracked, and the virtual camera then renders the image from this position.

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The artistic activity itself, analysing and reflecting on the encounters, awakens the need to engage further with the question of space in both practical and abstract theoretical terms. Some spatial theories are so fundamental, so micro and macrocosmic, so abstractly constructed, that they stand on their own, and interrelationships with other aspects are hardly possible. These theories range from Husserl to Uexküll, from Virilio to Lévinas, from DeLanda to Krämer and Flusser, from phenomenology to quantum-theories, from natural to sociological sciences. But this is precisely where the potential of artistic experimentation lies. Theory can be combined, and the experiment makes it possible to approach the abstract content in a tangible way.

Body, space and partial aspects of different abstract approaches can interact experimentally in art. It is the ability of art – and perhaps also its task – to open-up new spaces. It is an incubator for new forms of reality, including a new understanding of virtuality. Virtuality is not clearly separated; it permeates every space. Virtual spaces may be immaterial but – like dreams, fantasy, longing and fear – they are real.

The rather intuitively chosen title *Schwellen* [Thresholds] proved to be more and more appropriate. Thresholds are transitional spaces, whereas a border signifies a clear separation. Where the border closes, the threshold opens an entrance. Used as a noun, the term symbolises that it is time to cross a threshold, because our present selves are already shaped by the future. Used as a verb, the term symbolises the constant accumulation – the *swelling* of knowledge and experience via digital, virtual and imaginary spaces.

Is that which can be placed virtually still a body? And does the space in which it is placed remain a space? Must the definitions of *body* and *space* change, if we also refer to data bodies as *bodies* and virtual spaces as *spaces*? On the one hand, the changes in the understanding of these terms are related to the changed relationship between space and time, whereby space, in this context, is regarded as three-dimensional physical space. On the other hand, these changes in conceptual understanding are linked to the relationship between space and the individual, whereby space is understood here as social space.

The question of space is followed by the question of reality, not least when we focus on our mental inner worlds. Is there one objective reality or does it consist of many subjective experiences of reality? Does reality manifest itself in the physical outside or in the metaphysical inside?

Through our physiological perception and sensory abilities, both worlds merge into one experiential space. The more clearly all sensory impressions interact, the more real the overall experience becomes. Reality is therefore a totality of many individual impressions, an emergent phenomenon in our head. Should we still regard virtuality as a counterpart to reality?