

## Article

# The Influencers: Van Gogh Immersive Experiences and the Attention-Experience Economy

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**Abstract:** Van Gogh immersive exhibitions—multi-sited, branded multimedia environments inspired by the artist’s life and paintings—are seemingly ubiquitous in 2022. These itinerant digital spectacles bundle reproductions of Vincent Van Gogh’s most recognizable artistic motifs with tropes of fin-de-siècle madness, bathing their visitors in an artistic wonderland of projected images and soundscapes spread throughout cavernous exhibition venues. The popularity of these commercial juggernauts is unmatched. At present, at least five different companies are staging competing versions of digital Van Gogh art exhibitions in dozens of cities worldwide, with a particular emphasis at present on sites throughout North America. How are we as art critics to make sense of these exhibitions as well as their influence within the institutional context of the visual arts? Taking the digital Van Gogh phenomenon as its central case study, this article investigates the emerging art-themed immersive exhibition model and explores the specific mode of spectatorship it promotes. Situating these projects within the broader framework of the contemporaneous attention and experience economies, and with an eye toward the crucial role of social media, I propose that art-themed immersive exhibitions such as the Van Gogh immersive experiences exemplify habits of digitally-mediated, 24/7 immersive attention and consumption in art and in everyday life.

**Keywords:** immersion; attention; social media; exhibitions; Vincent Van Gogh; media installation; digital art; art-themed immersive exhibition; reproductions; virtual art



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## 1. The Influencers

*Venture into an exciting new world; forego all preconceived ideas of traditional museum visits, dispel all notions of tiptoeing through silent art galleries to view masterpieces from afar, change how you engage with art. Vitalize your senses and challenge your beliefs in a completely unique, stimulating Vincent Van Gogh experience. (Van Gogh Alive Website 2022)*

*Have you ever dreamt of stepping into a painting? Now you can! Welcome to ‘Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience.’ (Van Gogh the Immersive Experience Website 2022)*

Van Gogh immersive exhibitions—multi-sited, branded multimedia environments inspired by the artist’s life and paintings—are seemingly ubiquitous in 2022. These itinerant digital spectacles bundle Vincent Van Gogh’s most recognizable artistic motifs with tropes of fin-de-siècle madness, bathing their visitors in an artistic wonderland of projected images and soundscapes spread throughout cavernous event spaces. Pricey, timed-entry tickets afford visitors access to one hour or so of agreeable Van Gogh-themed multisensory experience that is deliberately designed to promote social media sharing. The popularity of these undemanding art-themed immersive events is unmatched; Corey Ross, president of Toronto-based Lighthouse Immersive and one of the producers behind *Immersive Van Gogh*, enthuses: “We just passed 3.2 million tickets sold, which, as I understand it, makes it the most successful attraction in the world on Ticketmaster”. (Capps 2021) The overflowing gift shops that bookend these exhibits peddle the likes of Vincent Van Duck bath toys, ear-shaped erasers, and espresso cups adorned with swirling nightscapes. Other fee-based

extras run the gamut from various techno-gimmicks—a VR journey through some of the landscapes on which Van Gogh’s paintings were based; an AI component where you can “write Van Gogh a letter” on your phone and receive a response immediately—to special events featuring commercialized intimacy—the Los Angeles installation of *Immersive Van Gogh*, for example, markets “immersive” yoga, meditation, and date night packages prominently sponsored by Lifeway Kefir. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these influential commercial juggernauts have even spawned their own brand of Van Gogh-channeling satire:

*When I died in penury, I thought about the fifty smackers each person would pay to walk through that conference center, immersing themselves in three-dimensional paintings that witnessed my plunge into existential despair. And I smiled. Because when life brings rain, you can let a smile be your umbrella. And an umbrella will make that conference center’s gift shop \$39.99 richer if it’s shellacked with blurry reproductions of works I poured my heart and soul into. (Burgess 2022)*

How are we as art critics to make sense of all of this? How best to account for these profit-oriented, art-themed immersive exhibitions as well as their influence within the institutional context of the visual arts? To begin, let us revisit the article’s title. *The Influencers*. At first blush, the “influencers” are those we might expect: the professional influencers and individual visitors (or “micro-influencers”) upon whose social media publicity the financial success of the digital Van Gogh shows rely. If defining who is influencing whom seems fairly straightforward however, consider this curious mise-en-abyme. Many writers locate the viral success of the Van Gogh experiences with the cameo appearance of one such exhibition during an episode of the Netflix series *Emily in Paris*: a show which follows the exploits of a young American social media influencer working abroad.<sup>1</sup> In other words, people are flocking to see immersive Van Gogh exhibitions because a similar immersive experience was featured in a show about an influencer visiting a Van Gogh immersive experience.

As though a fictional influencer influencing the behavior of other prospective art experience customers-cum-influencers was not mind-boggling enough, it is important to recognize that the immersive art-branded exhibition model has emerged as an “influencer” in its own right. As we shall see in what follows, these immersive events not only impact visitor behavior, but also, and significantly, these exhibitions are influencing art exhibition models themselves. (Tellingly, the production companies sponsoring the Van Gogh exhibitions describe themselves as “global influencers,” plainly stating their undisguised ambitions.) The immersive Van Gogh-themed experiences’ prodigious success in attracting the attention of mass audiences has generated an outpouring of comparable shows. To name just a few, there exists *Immersive Frida* and *Immersive Klimt*. Meanwhile, in an apparent endorsement of the more-is-better model pioneered by the digital Van Gogh events, *Monet by the Water*, *Beyond Monet*, and *Claude Monet: The Immersive Experience* are also in the works.

The transformative “influences” of immersive art-themed exhibitions continue to advance alongside their proliferation. While the trend toward “edutainment” in arts institutions is by no means new, even the architecture for hosting art exhibitions is shifting under pressure from the immersive art-themed model.<sup>2</sup> Presumably responding to the latest viewer preference for immersive walk-through displays, Newfields (formerly the Indianapolis Museum of Art) recently removed the entire fourth floor of contemporary artworks from their building to create room for a permanent immersive exhibition space. Known as “The Lume”, the space comprises 150 digital projectors covering 30,000 square feet of former gallery space (Capps 2021). Its first show promises a “must-see cultural experience” featuring immersive galleries showcasing, fittingly, digital Van Gogh.<sup>3</sup>

As the collateral effects of these commercial immersive art reproduction exhibitions continue to unfold, it is imperative for art critics to theorize the understudied spectatorship patterns associated with these profit-oriented, art-themed exhibitions and examine their broader impact. This article explores the artistic and cultural consequences of the institutionalization and commercialization of art-themed immersive exhibitions through a case study of immersive Van Gogh shows, the largest and most popular example to date of

this evolving genre. I examine the specific mode of multisensory, spectacular, and social media-based spectatorship these multimedia exhibitions promote and propose that their significance is best understood in relation to the priorities of the contemporaneous experience and attention economies. First, however, an overview of the Van Gogh immersive experiences and their reception is in order.

## 2. Descriptive Overview of the Exhibitions and Their Critical and Popular Reception

The inspiration for these enormously popular shows began in Western Europe—the comparatively modest prototype, *Vincent Van Gogh, la nuit étoilée*, debuted in 2019 at L’Atelier des Lumières in Paris—but varied Van Gogh-inspired immersive exhibitions now reach across venues and cities worldwide, with a particular emphasis at present on sites throughout North America.<sup>4</sup> (See Figures 1–3). Currently, there are at least five different companies sponsoring competing digital Van Gogh experiences: *Immersive Van Gogh Exhibit* (by most accounts, the most similar to the “original” version in Paris); *Imagine Van Gogh: The Immersive Exhibition*; *Beyond Van Gogh*; *Van Gogh Alive*; and *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience*.<sup>5</sup> While each production company promotes its own distinct brand of digital Van Gogh, this article proposes that their broader cultural impacts are best identified by considering them jointly. Indeed, their confoundingly similar exhibition titles collectively advertise the main attraction: an immersive multisensory experience with Van Gogh’s work—an artistic encounter that is supposedly categorically distinct from so-called “traditional” art viewing—is the big selling point. This enticement to upend convention by eliminating any expectation of silence, seriousness, or “hands-off” viewing behaviors, while at the same time inviting nonstop social media consumption, is continually reinforced through the companies’ effusive marketing campaigns. “Step inside Van Gogh’s paintings!, enter *Bedroom in Arles*!, snap a selfie with sunflowers in an Insta-worthy mirrored room! Be prepared for a vibrant symphony of light, color, and sound!” ([Van Gogh Alive Website 2022](#)).

If you have not attended one of these immersive events, you may be surprised to learn that none of these multimedia art experiences display original works of art by Van Gogh. Rather, the event sponsors promise intense art-inspired multimedia episodes brimming with emotional resonance and sensory reverberation: “You can’t react passively! . . . you will feel it! . . . it stirs the senses!” ([Immersive Van Gogh Exhibition San Francisco Website 2022](#)). Creatively animated digital images inspired by Van Gogh’s life and works are projected onto the exhibition spaces’ walls, ceilings, and floors, typically in large warehouse-like spaces. Digitized versions of the artist’s paintings are collaged, modified, and made mobile, albeit with sometimes puzzling results; for example, in one particularly memorable segment of *Immersive Van Gogh*, one can find an amped-up rendition of Van Gogh’s *Head of a Skeleton with a Burning Cigarette* appearing to literally puff on a cigarette ([Davis 2021](#)). While the rival shows differ somewhat by producer and venue, their moving image projections tend to be accompanied by a multimedia array of Van Gogh-related narrations, soundtracks, animations, dramatic props, and even fragrances. Of course, there are plenty of mirrored surfaces befitting our age of social media. (More on that later).

It is noteworthy that these immersive art-themed events are exceptionally cost-intensive to produce. *Bloomberg CityLab* estimates an average of about USD 1M for each Van Gogh pop-up venue in the US (excluding animation and other extra expenditures), with estimates soaring to anywhere between USD 4M and 15M for spaces customized to house permanent spectacles ([Capps 2021](#)). The technological outlays are equally astonishing. At the time of this article’s writing, the company that produces *Immersive Van Gogh* is the largest buyer of Panasonic projectors in the world. (Fun fact: *CityLab* points out that “[l]aid end-to-end, the fiberoptic cables for the New York show at Pier 36 would stretch from the Statue of Liberty to the top of Manhattan” ([Capps 2021](#))). Correspondingly, these self-described “family friendly” multimedia exhibits are also remarkably expensive to visit. The minimum entry fee is about USD 35, but prices range well beyond USD 100 depending on time, date, and experiential extras. Unburdened by fragile original artworks or a discernable



instructional mission, these are unapologetically for-profit enterprises. Each company runs multiple versions of their trademark immersive Van Gogh experience simultaneously, incorporating robust appeals to local corporate event planners and countless commercial tie-ins at each site.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 1.** Vincent Van Gogh, *la nuit étoilée* is considered to be an inspiration for many of the Van Gogh immersive exhibitions to follow. Photo by marc carpentier is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License, via Wikimedia.

These trendy exhibits, especially their North American renditions, have garnered considerable publicity and spawned analyses in venues from *Artforum* to *Forbes*, the *New York Times* to local TV affiliates. Predictably enough, reviews are mixed. While the fact that opinions differ is hardly surprising, one critical trend is worth emphasizing: art critics tend to be the only writers who insistently locate their critiques of the digital Van Gogh exhibitions in relation to actual material art objects. That is, arts writers, in contrast to other commentators, routinely draw comparisons between visiting the Van Gogh immersive experiences and experiencing original Van Gogh artworks first-hand. As one might expect,



the viewer's experience with the Van Gogh immersive exhibitions emerge as wanting (even reckless) when viewed in this light. Beyond the supposed indignity of seeing an animated version of the artist's *Skull of a Skeleton with Burning Cigarette* actually puffing on a cigarette, other moments of art historian negative affect abound: from the awkwardness of lounging on life-sized, 3D sculptural versions of the furniture tenderly depicted in *Bedroom in Arles* as if testing out an IKEA showroom (*Van Gogh Alive*), to the mortification at witnessing a re-interpretation of *Café Terrace at Night*, inexplicably "transformed into a curtain blowing in the wind, the image divided like one of those rubber curtains at a carwash."<sup>7</sup>



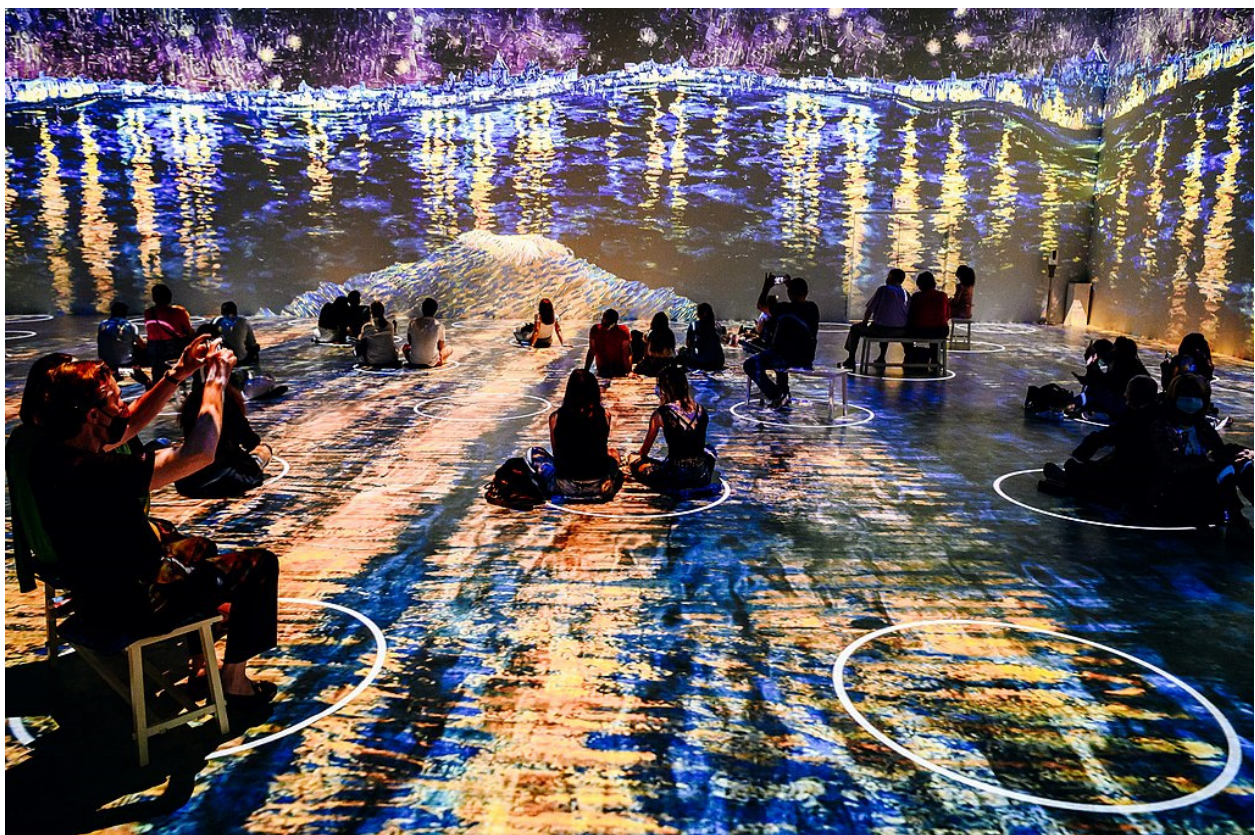
**Figure 2.** Installation view of *Immersive Van Gogh* in New York City. Photo by Nina Westervelt is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License, via Wikimedia.

Although my own initial reaction to these exhibits was perhaps less contemptuous than that of other art critics—I am a firm believer that if audiences are consistently seeking to engage with art outside the institutional context of art museums, we should at least be examining why—I too found myself to be fixated on making comparisons with viewing “real” art objects. Why would so many people queue and pay so much money to see a not-so-spectacular Van Gogh-inspired multimedia spectacle? Why choose to visit a digitized Van Gogh exhibition when, especially in the major cities which host these events, one could see any number of original paintings by Van Gogh or his contemporaries for much less money? In hindsight, I realize that authenticity is almost beside the point; instead, the lure of a digitally-mediated and multisensory encounter with the artist and his oeuvre is central.

For most non-art commentators, the differences between the immersive Van Gogh experiences and viewing genuine Van Gogh paintings in an art museum or elsewhere are so apparent as to go almost without mentioning. The exhibition creators, notably, never claim to exhibit original artworks: it is simply not part of the pitch. In recounting their goals and processes, their emphases lie in the alleged novelty of an immersive artistic experience. This experience, notably, is emphatically marketed as divergent from conventional (read: dusty and boring) art viewing. The *Van Gogh Alive* promotional materials, for example,



rally potential visitors to “Venture into an exciting new world; forego all preconceived ideas of traditional museum visits, dispel all notions of tiptoeing through silent art galleries to view masterpieces from afar, change how you engage with art. Vitalize your senses and challenge your beliefs in a completely unique, stimulating Vincent Van Gogh experience” ([Van Gogh Alive Website 2022](#)). Mario Iacampo, exhibition producer and artistic co-director of *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience*, puts it this way: “[W]e don’t look at it as ‘Come and see paintings of Van Gogh.’ We look at it [as] ‘Come and experience *Van Gogh*.’” ([Iacampo 2022](#)) Echoing Iacampo, the other Van Gogh exhibition organizers similarly bypass the issue of authenticity, trumpeting instead their efforts to promote accessibility and anti-elitism, to preserve the aging and “over-visited” Van Gogh originals, to offer a more comprehensive representation of Van Gogh’s vast oeuvre than any single museum could accomplish, and to provide “socially transformational” educational experiences.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 3.** Installation view of *Immersive Van Gogh* in New York City. Photo by Nina Westervelt is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License, via Wikimedia.

We will return to the promoters’ intriguing claims in what follows. For now, it is important to grasp the wider popular reception surrounding these shows. Local news publications, for their part, often describe the delightful escapism the Van Gogh immersive events facilitate (although not without some misgivings, especially as related to the price of admission). More to the point, and due to the events’ nearly indistinguishable titles, these site-specific publications tend to spend a large amount of time focusing on the thoroughgoing confusion over various competing Van Gogh experiences, often judiciously counseling their readers on how to choose the best experience for their particular needs and interests. (The title of Kevin Slane’s review in *Boston.com* says it all: “We Visited Boston’s 2 Van Gogh ‘Immersive Experiences.’ Here’s Which One You Should Choose”. ([Slane 2021](#))) Business journals, on the other hand, often do not discuss the artist or his paintings at all. They delve right to the heart of the issue in analyses of the market share, branding, and enormous investment opportunity of these massively popular and rapidly multiplying

immersive experiences. (A 2021 article in *Market Watch* gushes approvingly that the team at Lighthouse Immersive, presenter of *Immersive Van Gogh*, “collectively have sold about 4.5 million tickets, translating into roughly \$250 million in revenue, to all their *Immersive Van Gogh* presentations . . . And that’s not counting \$30 million in ancillary gift-shop revenue.” (Passy 2022).)

While arts writers’ over-emphasis on comparisons with viewing Van Gogh’s actual works of art arguably obscures other critical issues regarding the spectator’s experience, the non-art commentators, by focusing on attendance figures as the sole gauge of the immersive exhibition model’s success or failure, are similarly shortsighted in their analyses. Zeroing in on the different type of viewing experience and mode of attention these art reproduction immersive exhibitions solicit and promote allows us to bridge these perspectives. It is here where (media) art historical perspectives become invaluable. The discipline’s longstanding investment in the study of the viewer’s perceptual engagement with art and media objects makes it uniquely equipped to theorize these experiential art events within the context of the conquest of attention, particularly visual attention, which is always sorely limited.<sup>9</sup> Yves Citton makes this case thoughtfully in *The Ecology of Attention*: “art historians and researchers in aesthetics,” argues Citton, are “better placed than economists and specialists in marketing and management to understand what is at stake over the long term in the attention economy.” (Citton 2014)<sup>10</sup>.

Following Citton, and as savvy arts writers in fact have demonstrated, there are compelling cases to be made for locating the Van Gogh immersive media exhibitions in relation to earlier art exhibition models and their modes of spectatorship. Panoramas, world’s fairs, expanded cinema, blockbuster exhibitions, biennials, and, of course, large-scale multimedia installations immediately come to mind. Predictably, these are the precedents cited most frequently in the literature. Jason Farago’s trenchant review in the *New York Times*, for example, observes: “The shows hark back in particular to multi-projector attractions at the World’s Fair in Queens in 1964 and at Expo ’67 in Montreal, which cast humanist visions of the future in all directions.” (Farago 2021)<sup>11</sup> Christopher Knight of *The Los Angeles Times* takes a more recent point of comparison. His head-to-head appraisal of the Los Angeles variant of *Immersive Van Gogh* and Pipilotti Rist’s concurrent exhibition of media installations at the Museum of Contemporary Art is broadly representative of the defensive tone of many arts writers. “A bunch of high-resolution slides of famous, hundred-year-old paintings being projected on surrounding walls at an admission price of 55 bucks is simply no match for lounging on a floor pillow to be welcomed into Rist’s eye-popping video garden of electronic Eden. Actual art by a gifted artist is better than reproductions of art sold by a corporation any day—especially at one-third the price.” (Knight 2021)<sup>12</sup>.

Keeping these previous exhibition models in the forefront, Citton’s caution about presentism is appropriate: “While the digitalization of our attention of course opens unprecedented perspectives—for the better and for the worse—often, it only leads to the reinvention of modes of interaction that have already been experimented with in earlier contexts.” (Citton 2014) After all, and as these exhibition model precedents demonstrate, catering to mass audiences is not new; putting “experience” on display is not new; mining emotions is not new; profit-making populist ventures are not new; multimedia immersion is not new. At the same time, however, we should be careful not to elide important distinctions. Examining the mode of spectatorship associated with these works—*how* we see and experience these exhibitions and their effects—enables us to appreciate the truly novel aspects of these immersive art-themed experiences. As we will see in the following section, the digital Van Gogh shows exemplify habits of digitally-mediated and profit-driven 24/7 immersive attention in art and in everyday life. This is important because this emergent exhibition model associated with these commercialized, art-themed exhibitions, far from being an insignificant fad, enables us to recognize and assess an evolving form of art spectatorship in our era of social media and ubiquitous digital devices, one with an outsized yet underappreciated influence upon art institutions and their audiences.



### 3. Immersive Experience, Social Media Sharing, and the Attention-Experience Economy

While written in a different context, Peter Osborne deftly articulates the urgency of defining changing patterns of media art spectatorship, such as those inaugurated by art-themed immersive exhibitions. He explains: “As the economic logic of the cultural industries imposes itself on art institutions, subsuming them into its cycles of reproduction (as the research and development sector of advertising and design), the question of what modes of attention and experience are specific to art, at any particular historical moment, finds itself enlivened once again by technology.” (Osborne 2004)<sup>13</sup> What is important to emphasize is this: due in large part to changing media technologies, exhibitions such as the immersive Van Gogh experiences are no longer seen as a place to go to passively look at the materials on display, but rather to offer “a place to document experiences and share those adventures with followers through social media accounts.” (Carlsson 2020).

It is no exaggeration to say that the omnipresence of digital devices and the pervasiveness of social media sharing have transformed how we see and experience the world.<sup>14</sup> Art-themed immersive exhibition experiences are no exception. Indeed, I will go so far as to propose that 21st-century art and spectatorship are now invariably informed by our 24/7 habitual attention, distraction, and sharing across various screens and social media platforms. What’s more, this is true irrespective of the work’s form and whether or not any particular viewer actually engages with a digital device during their visit. Phone-reliant viewing now verges on being normative even in “traditional” art museums such as the Van Gogh Museum and the Museum of Modern Art; the Van Gogh immersive experiences, however, take these phone-mediated experiences to a new level, deliberately designing a screen-based, social media-centric environment.<sup>15</sup> Farago’s review of the multiple digital Van Gogh exhibitions in Manhattan pinpoints what is at stake: “Individual absorption, rather than shared wonder, is the order of the day now. From every vantage point you will fill your phone’s backlit screen with glowing imagery.” He adds, foreshadowing our discussion of selfies, “and there’s more than enough space to crop out other visitors and frame only yourself.” (Farago 2021).

Exhibition models such as these correspond to the demands of the so-called experience economy, in which companies are in the business of selling consumers memorable experiences, transcending the exchange of material goods. Rachel Monroe’s assessment of how new technologies enter this equation is apt: “The ideal experience-economy offerings are engaging enough to distract us from our devices but also optimized to be shared on those devices.” (Monroe 2019)<sup>16</sup> One may be dazzled by what appear to be teeming fields of sunflowers in a mirrored room, but the invitation to see oneself as the star of the screen-based show is unmistakable. Again, this is true even if one is not personally taking selfies or posting to social media, since the experience is dominated by those who are (and, indeed, the entire exhibition is designed around those interests).

With this conduct in mind, we might describe the mode of spectatorship engendered by the immersive Van Gogh exhibitions as a merger of the well-known experience economy mentioned by Monroe, in which businesses orchestrate and sell noteworthy experiences to their customers, and the more recent attention economy, in which, revenue is a function of continuous consumer attention.<sup>17</sup> In the attention economy, “the new scarcity is no longer to be situated on the side of material goods to be produced, but on the attention necessary to consume them.” (Citton 2014) Simply put, from the perspective of an attention-based economy, the more time a consumer spends with a product, service, idea, or any other simulacrum of a brand, the better.<sup>18</sup> The digital Van Gogh shows exemplify an attention-experience economy partnership not only because they sell experiences in order to try to capture attention *within* each exhibition (by way of selfie spots, grand scale, visual and auditory effects, the development of a story that leads to a climax, and so on), but also because they need to compete among each other for consumer attention within the crowded marketplace of Van Gogh experiences and art-themed immersive exhibitions elsewhere.<sup>19</sup>



The attention-experience economy is a helpful rubric to understand the logic of these immersive events, especially because the commercial success of these relentlessly for-profit enterprises hinges upon inspiring consumer behavior with their digital devices. Armed with smart phones and habituated to constant sharing, audiences are enthusiastic to become part of the exhibition by documenting themselves within it, sometimes sharing their photos or videos online with others in conveniently interconnected digital content. In this way, visitors become micro-influencers and brand ambassadors. In practice, this means that any user-generated digital content considered strategically more valid can be selected by the immersive Van Gogh promotional media teams and made visible on their websites, which in turn co-creates value for the event sponsors.<sup>20</sup> While the dynamic of co-creating value via social media engagement is by no means unique to the immersive Van Gogh experiences, these shows in many ways typify institutional ambitions to generate digital engagement.<sup>21</sup>

The principal attraction of the immersive Van Gogh exhibitions for viewers, then, is hybrid and complex. It is a desire to engage in an immersive, embodied artistic encounter: a desire to be physically “in” the work, creating one’s customized experience, as opposed to merely observing from afar. Moreover, and crucially, it is a desire underwritten by a 21st century interest in how that individualized experience might be represented or circulated online (whether or not one chooses to document it through social media). Having visited three versions of these exhibitions in person—*Van Gogh Alive* in London, *Beyond Van Gogh* in Portland, and *Immersive Van Gogh* in Los Angeles—I can confirm, at least anecdotally, that nearly everyone was using their phone camera at some point, and especially to take video footage of themselves and their friends within the event space. Judging from the phone panning motion, the favoring of video over still photography, and my informal interviews with visitors and employees, it seemed very clear that audience members understood the Van Gogh “experience” to involve their personalized involvement within a process-based total media environment, as opposed to a discrete or static work. User-generated images posted online further confirm this interpretation: they routinely foreground their individualized experiences within the multimedia environment over and above the Van Gogh-themed imagery or objects themselves.<sup>22</sup>

While some writers consistently decry the use of social media within art exhibition contexts, the tide seems to be shifting, and in ways significant to understanding the attraction of these immersive exhibitions. Selfies tend to receive the most attention in these debates. Scholars who champion the use of selfies typically deem it to be an empowering and democratizing practice that productively disrupts the alleged disciplinary function of art institutions. Chiara Piancatelli, Marta Massi, and Andrea Vocino, for example, contend that selfies empower “art consumers” to develop narratives and identity projects; this is especially significant, they argue, because “traditionally the development of the narrative is apanage of an elite.” (Piancatelli et al. 2021)<sup>23</sup> E.B. Hunter’s article in *Text and Performance Quarterly* makes a similar argument. “Museums perform institutional control over displayed objects through guards, vitrines, and motion sensing alarms that beep if visitors get too close, but museum selfie takers steal a little control back, using the presence of their bodies in the frame to commandeer the viewer’s attention.” (Hunter 2018) Hunter further theorizes the use of selfies as a means to satisfy viewers’ desires to physically engage with works of art. He makes a convincing case that “Museum selfies are the twenty-first century version of touching the art—an outlet for museum visitors whose sensory access has been restricted to the visual by multiple protective barriers, but who still crave embodied engagement with artworks.” (Hunter 2018)<sup>24</sup> As for Piancatelli, Massi, and Vocino, agency, haptic engagement, and embodied experience are central to Hunter’s affirmative conception of interactive meaning making via selfies.

Although these critics focus on the role of selfies specifically in relation to art museums, their claims are equally persuasive in understanding the place of selfies and other forms of media documentation in the context of the immersive Van Gogh art experiences. As affirmed at this article’s outset, getting as close as possible to the art-based images and

objects on display seems to be a large part of the appeal. Crucially, however, it is also a key part of the promoters' sales pitches: we're prompted to "change how [we] engage with art" ([Van Gogh Alive Website 2022](#)), and we're roused to make our fantasies come true: "Have you ever dreamt of stepping into a painting? Now you can!" ([Van Gogh the Immersive Experience Website 2022](#)). By rewarding social media habits and explicitly rejecting "elitist" art museum protocols, these immersive exhibitions allow viewers to literally see themselves within Van Gogh's art. While this is not necessarily problematic in its own right, it is important to dig deeper in understanding what this model of multisensory and highly emotional form of digital attention with Van Gogh-inspired media might reveal. As we will see in what follows, by facilitating multisensory immersion and digital documentation in straightforward, approachable, art-based environments, today's various digital Van Gogh shows seamlessly answer the demands of nonstop digital consumption in our attention-experience economy.

#### 4. Mining Emotions and Hyper Attention

Given the exhibition organizers' objective of ensuring audience attention and engagement, the decision to showcase Vincent Van Gogh among all possible artists is far from coincidental. "We had an interest in Van Gogh's paintings because it's [*sic*] full of emotions . . . when you look at his tableaux, they're already immersive", explains Orphee Cataldo, artistic co-director of *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience* ([Iacampo 2022](#)). He goes on to consider how this impacts the exhibition's overall design, reflecting that "[h]e's done the work for you. You just have to expand it." ([Iacampo 2022](#)) The choice of Van Gogh is plainly linked not only to the immediate sensory appeal of the paintings' highly emotional form and content accentuated by Cataldo, but also to the heart-wrenching elements of the artist's well-known biography. Tellingly, the artist's severe depression and lamentably romanticized psychosis features conspicuously in each of the competing exhibitions. (*Immersive Van Gogh's* San Francisco presentation cheerfully invites: "Experience the organic landscapes of Van Gogh's imagination, and journey through his brilliance and madness." ([Immersive Van Gogh Exhibition San Francisco Website 2022](#))) Van Gogh's status as a tragic spiritual visionary neatly guarantees the exhibitions' visitors emotional response, as advertised.

The commercial advantages of securing viewers' attention through their emotional connections to Van Gogh's life and work are many. A thought-provoking study in the *International Journal of Market Research* describes direct correlations among experience, emotion, and social media sharing. Their data suggest that the more participatory and emotional the art environment, the more people tend to share their feelings with others ([Piancatelli et al. 2021](#)). The study's authors explain it this way: "Emotions induced in the museum context lead to increased levels of engagement that, in turn, affect visitor behaviors. *The emotions–engagement–behavior relationship is particularly evident in contexts characterized by spectacular consumption*" ([Piancatelli et al. 2021](#)).<sup>25</sup> The relevance of their assessment for understanding the case of the Van Gogh immersive experiences, particularly the research team's clear-headed assessment of the commercial implications, is apparent. "The creation of a playful and engaging environment . . . encourages visitors to interact with the exhibition itself, pushing them to share their experience online and activating a co-creation of value" ([Piancatelli et al. 2021](#)). In other words, the more prominent the emotions, the higher the engagement; the higher the engagement, the higher the interaction on social media; the higher the interaction on social media; the higher the marketing value. None of this is lost on the event producers. "The cool thing about the immersive world in general is that we are able to play with smell, taste, sight and all these other things that are sort of built in natural emotional triggers", remarks one of the exhibition designers ([Baltin 2021](#)). (And, a skeptic might point out that these "natural emotional triggers" make bank.)

That the Van Gogh immersive exhibitions are in the business of vending highly emotional, affective, art-based experiences is indisputable. That the exhibition organizers profit handsomely from viewers' earnest desires to get as close as possible to the art and



emotions on display is equally evident. Even so, it is imperative not to lose sight of what they're *not* selling. They traffic not in material art objects made by Van Gogh, but in Van Gogh-themed digital animated environments. *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience's* Iacampo, for one, deems the "digital transition" to be an asset in advancing ways of exploring art. "Digital media in itself is art because we're not just taking paintings and showing them—you know—as a picture. What we're doing is we're exploring each painting. We're animating each painting" (Miner and Spindler 2018). Iacampo's untroubled endorsement of digitizing and remixing Van Gogh's oeuvre is worth unpacking in light of our discussion of the attention-experience economy. Specifically, what might the exhibitions organizers' sidestepping of static material paintings in favor of large-scale, animated digital mash-ups reveal? What could this tell us about the particular mode of engagement these experiences promote and reward?

N. Katherine Hayles' analysis of changing attention patterns in higher education is instructive in this regard. Through a careful examination of classroom dynamics, Hayles proposes that we are living through a rapid and dramatic generational shift in attentional systems and cognitive modes. Teachers and their students are out of sync, in large part because the former tend to rely on habits of "deep attention", whereas the latter tend to favor habits of what Hayles calls "hyper attention". She explains: "Deep attention . . . is characterized by concentrating on a single object for long periods (say, a novel by Dickens), ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged, preferring a single information stream, and having a high tolerance for long focus times." Hyper attention, instead, "is characterized by switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom." (Hayles 2007) It perhaps goes without saying that the Van Gogh immersive experiences epitomize a throughgoing endorsement of hyper attention in art as in everyday life.

Adopting Hayles' framework and terminology, we could interpret these art-themed exhibitions' unfettered enthusiasm for animation of all kinds—of paintings, of emotions, of multisensory experience, of user-generated video—to be symptomatic of a broader cultural turn. To cite just one example, we might recall that the much-discussed inaugural advertising campaign for Meta (formerly Facebook) also showcased a "creatively" animated digital rendition of a famously evocative painting. Like so many twinkling stars and swirling sunflowers, Henri Rousseau's celebrated *Fight Between a Tiger and a Buffalo* (1908) now moves and grooves, set to music and leaping from 2D to 3D. Analogous to the digital Van Gogh events, the would-be museum visitors depicted in Meta's "The Tiger and the Buffalo" ad are whisked out of the staid galleries and immersed into a famous painter's imaginary jungle-themed world.

On the topic of experiencing art in the age of hyper attention, it bears asking: do 21st century audiences now require immersion and animation to appreciate otherwise static, 2D paintings? And, if so, what does this mean for art spectatorship and its relationship with the attention-experience economy? From the perspective of art and attention, the question is not an idle one. The answer remains ambiguous, although we might make some educated guesses. Have our well-intentioned art institutions unwittingly evacuated emotion and pleasure? Have they failed to signal their accessibility and approachability to the extent that they are now forced to watch audiences meet their needs through commercialized, animated art-flavored spectacles, or even through staging similar shows or exhibition spaces themselves? Farago contemplates this issue in an especially thoughtful way. On his recent experience of viewing Van Gogh's paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, he muses: "you can stand as long as you like in front of Van Gogh's *Wheat Field with Cypresses*, the agitated clouds rolling like waves, its climbing greenery edged with trembling blacks". He concludes with a heartfelt call to action: "I want everyone to discover, right there in the thick grooves of the oil paint, the wonder and vitality of art that needs no animation". "There has got to be a way to lead people back to that discovery", resolves Farago, "even if some of us take a selfie afterward" (Farago 2021).

If critics such as Farago maintain optimism for a renewed interest in sustained engagement with material works of art, theorists of the attention economy paint a more sobering picture. Sven Birkerts' ruminations on art and attention in the Internet age have special meaning in this context. "The short version is that the world, its elements, its nouns, seems to have receded a bit, as has its intractability, the defining obstacles of time and space", he writes. Birkerts adds, wistfully, "It's almost as if world and screen were in inverse relation, the former fading as the latter keeps gaining in reach, in definition, in its power to compel our attention" (Birkerts 2015). In *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention—and How to Think Deeply Again*, Jonathan Hari describes how our focus has in effect been stolen, leaving us uniquely vulnerable to corporations determined to raid our attention for profit. Jonathan Crary, in his celebrated treatise *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, takes this line of critique even further, identifying the structural problems that undergird what Hari calls our technology-induced anxiety and lack of focus. Crary convincingly posits that the constant stress and 24/7 expectations of our contemporary "grind" culture may be even more impactful than digital devices and social media, while also being more challenging to identify. His diagnosis is chilling: "As the opportunity for electronic transactions of all kinds becomes omnipresent, there is no vestige of what used to be everyday life beyond the reach of corporate intrusion" (Crary 2013). "An attention economy", he continues, "dissolves the separation between the personal and professional, between entertainment and information, all overridden by a compulsory functionality of communication that is inherently and inescapably 24/7" (Crary 2013). On Crary's unsparing read, the Van Gogh immersive experiences substantiate both corporate dominance and the imperative of non-stop productivity and communication: with their clarion calls to continually engage digital devices, these immersive art-themed spectacles mine consumers' emotions, integrating audiences more fully into corporatized productive routines, profiting all the while.

The exhibition producers, for their part, see it differently. While they don't go so far as to refute the fundamental commercial nature of their enterprises, they do contend that their experiences offer educational and even social value. Accessibility is a strong point. The producers of *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience* estimate that about 50 percent of their audience has never set foot in a museum before coming to see their exhibition (Zaller 2022). The co-creators behind *Immersive Van Gogh*, the aptly-titled Impact Museums company, are more explicit about the perceived social relevance of their projects.<sup>26</sup> They characterize themselves as a "change company" and as "global influencers," devoted equally to entertaining spectacle and meaningful social exchange.<sup>27</sup> They describe the company's mission to *Forbes*, somewhat breathlessly, stating that:

*Our vision for the business is to build experiences that tell those incredible stories where people feel inspired to share on their social media and become a part of the movement and feel less helpless and feel their individual actions can actually make a difference because they see all of the individuals they come through with, plus their hundreds or thousands of millions of followers engaging, and we become an amplifier for a movement.* (Baltin 2021)

Arts writers may cringe at the flamboyant digital remakes of Van Gogh's renowned brushstrokes and the bald-faced co-option of the artist's inner turmoil for revenue-generating emotional impact; theorists of the attention economy may despair at the unabashed management of individual attentiveness and activity in the service of a 24/7 digital marketplace; but, for production teams such as Impact Museums, reworking Van Gogh's life and paintings into easily digestible, art-themed multisensory presentations is just the beginning. The long-term influence of the consumerist, screen-based immersive attention they foster in art and in everyday life remain to be seen.

In summary, to critically assess the significance of the digital Van Gogh events that crowd our contemporary cultural landscape, art critics must move beyond the myopic focus on Van Gogh's original paintings and unfavorable comparisons to engaging with original works of art in a museum. Rather than critiquing the immersive Van Gogh shows for not being authentic—for their inability to replicate the experience of viewing Van



Gogh paintings in person—I have proposed that these exhibitions represent a new form of immersive media spectatorship: they satisfy a desire to enter Van Gogh’s paintings of sunflowers, starry nights, and all the rest, in order to create (and perhaps document) one’s own customized digital experience with the work. I have further theorized how this 21st-century media art spectatorship reflects an alignment with the consumerist demands of the hybrid attention-experience economy and is buoyed by the ambitions of the profit-driven exhibition organizers. I have revealed how these interlocking dynamics merge seamlessly with visitors’ desires for Insta-ready personalized experiences and contemporary habits of our so-called hyper attention. In the face of the meteoric rise of the immersive art-themed exhibition, it is urgent to develop a robust critical framework for assessing the model’s current and impending influences. I hope that this article offers a first step in that direction.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The titular character of Netflix’s *Emily in Paris* visits a Van Gogh immersive exhibit in Episode 5 of Season 1.
- <sup>2</sup> “Edutainment” refers to programming that is meant to be both educational and entertaining. For a compelling examination of edutainment at the intersection of entertainment industry and arts institutions, see [Balloffet et al. \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> The choice of Van Gogh isn’t a mere coincidence. The Lume was created by Australia-based Grande Experiences, producers of the global sensation *Van Gogh Alive*.
- <sup>4</sup> Although the Van Gogh immersive exhibition phenomenon is global in scope, this article will focus primarily on sites in North America due to the current predominance of immersive exhibitions in that region.
- <sup>5</sup> After a hiatus of a few years, *Vincent Van Gogh, la nuit étoilée* (produced by Culturespaces, Gianfranco Iannuzzi, Renato Gatto and Massimiliano Siccardi) will return to L’Atelier des Lumières in August 2022.
- <sup>6</sup> The online promotional materials for Grande Experiences, producers of *Van Gogh Alive*, are representative of the digital Van Gogh production companies’ enterprising approach. “If you’re looking to host a touring immersive experience, establish a new semi-permanent, multi-sensory gallery in your venue, help reinvigorate the nightlife of your city or to establish an iconic, next-generation digital art gallery, please see the contact details at the bottom of this page.” ([Grande Experiences Website 2022](#)).
- <sup>7</sup> *Skull of a Skeleton with Burning Cigarette* (1885–86, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam); *Bedroom in Arles* (1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam); *Café Terrace at Night* (1888, Kröller-Müller Museum, Netherlands). The carwash *bon mot* is from [Davis \(2021\)](#).
- <sup>8</sup> See, for example, Christina Morales’s article in the *New York Times*: “The immersive experiences are meant to complement the work displayed in a museum, not take away from it, according to [*Imagine Van Gogh’s Annabelle*] Mauger and other producers of the exhibitions. They are particularly useful, they said, in introducing art to children, who, because of their height, may not see paintings well in crowded museums. It also replaces the often rigid museum etiquette, with its near silence and strictures intended to protect the artwork, with a looser atmosphere filled by music, lounging and chitchat.” ([Morales 2021](#)).
- <sup>9</sup> For a cogent summary of the foundational media spectatorship theory debates, see [Mayne \(1993\)](#).
- <sup>10</sup> For a detailed account of histories of attention and perception in relationship to visual art, see, for example, [Crary \(2001\)](#) and [Stafford \(2007\)](#).
- <sup>11</sup> While Farago’s immersive commercial exhibition historical references are definitely on point, it’s worth noting that Le Corbusier’s Philips Pavilion at the 1958 World’s Fair in Brussels predates both examples. See [Mondloch \(2004\)](#).
- <sup>12</sup> For more on Rist’s exhibition, “Big Heartedness, Be My Neighbor”, see the Museum of Contemporary Art website. Despite Knight’s confident assertion that Rist’s media installations are “the real thing”, disambiguating the Van Gogh immersive exhibitions from the genre of media installation art is an exceptionally complicated task. I will take up this issue in a separate article. For now, we might well ponder Joseph Henry’s prophecy: “Pity the virtuous intentions of today’s serious media-installation artist” ([Henry 2021](#)).
- <sup>13</sup> The profoundly influential concept of the culture industry, which proposes that the increasing commodification of culture in modern capitalist society has transformed culture itself into a crucial medium of ideological domination, was first introduced by [Horkheimer and Adorno \(1944\)](#). Following these thinkers, many of the foremost cultural critics of the twentieth century have convincingly argued that we must be ever vigilant against the uncritical embrace of the popular and the new, particularly insofar as they are bound up with the culture industry (Horkheimer and Adorno), commodified spectacle ([Debord 1995](#)), and the seeming insatiable quest for the “experience of experience” itself, in relationship the experience-hungry contemporary art museum especially ([Krauss 1990](#)).

- On how the emergence of social media has changed how individuals interact and engage with their surroundings, see [Campbell et al. \(2014\)](#). On the topic of how visitors engaging with social media tend to experience art viewing as an immersive and interactive experience, see [Brown et al. \(2011\)](#).
- [Farago \(2019\)](#) offers an evocative consideration of painting spectatorship in the 21st century through a case study of Van Gogh. While Monroe's piece is devoted to the activities of the arts and entertainment company MeowWolf, there are significant parallels between these art-based commercial ventures in terms of the attention-experience economy.
- For an influential definition of the experience economy, see [Pine and Gilmore \(1999\)](#). On the attention economy, see, for example, ([Citton 2014](#); [Franck 2019](#); [Goldhaber 1997](#)).
- For a prescient look at how offering entertaining content and a robust experience has become imperative in the race to capture the public's attention (otherwise known as the "e" or entertainment factor), see [Wolf \(1999\)](#).
- [Counts \(2009\)](#) identifies four categories of technique associated with the design of spectacular exhibition offerings: dramatic effects (e.g., sound and light); plot mainly through the development of a story that builds to a climax; grand scale (e.g., the use of IMAX or giant screens); and authenticity (i.e., credibility of the effects used).
- Piancatelli, Massi, and Vocino succinctly summarize the critical discourse on social media value co-creation as consumer labor: "while most authors have adopted a positive stance on value co-creation, emphasizing its advantages and benefits, others . . . [such as [Zwick et al. \(2008\)](#), [Cova et al. \(2011\)](#)] argue that co-creation equates to exploitation of consumers because they are not rewarded for participating in the value creation practices".
- Note that the exhibition organizers actively solicit social media influencers to promote their brands. The "Calling all influencers!" page on *Immersive Van Gogh's* website is exemplary.
- See, for example, the social media feeds shared to the exhibitions' websites. For a representative example of user-generated video documentation, see [Hanuska \(2020\)](#).
- The researchers further propose that selfies, beyond merely co-creating value for the exhibition organizers, demonstrate a sort of iconic authenticity, in which each viewing experience is understood to be *iconically* (if not *indexically*) authentic to each visitor. They observe that selfies and their iconic authenticity of viewer experience, in a seeming paradox, may resuscitate the idea of artistic aura.
- The author points out that touch was understood as central to a visitor's encounter with an artwork well into the nineteenth century. For an historical account, see [Candlin \(2010\)](#).
- My emphasis.
- Impact Museums was founded by Josh Jacobs, Vito Iaia, Mark Shedletsky, and Diana Rayzman. Their *Immersive Van Gogh* exhibition was co-created with Lighthouse Immersive.
- The Impact Museums team outlines the inspiration behind their hybrid entertainment-social action method this way: "We have always sort of talked about the idea that it's hard to get people to take their medicine when it comes to serious topics . . . you need to begin by entertaining and that in order to reach a mass audience you need to be an entertainment medium; but in the process of entertaining you can educate and then inspire, so these can be sort of foundational change vehicles that take people through that entire gamut." [If] "you can do that on a kind of global scale, where you're reaching millions of people you really do have the ability to start aspiring to not just be an entertainment company, but be a change company." ([Baltin 2021](#)).

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