

Intervista a Allegra Shorto

a cura di Elisabetta Modena

Allegra Shorto (Sao Paulo, 13/02/1994) è Art Director della galleria Khora Contemporary di Copenhagen. Ha fatto parte del team curatoriale della TBA21-Academy. Per Khora Contemporary ha seguito la produzione di opere in VR di numerosi artisti, tra cui Paul McCarthy, Christian Lemmerz e Tony Oursler.

EM I would like to know something more about Khora Contemporary gallery.

AS Yes, the company was founded in 2016 by four founders, and one partner joined early on. Two of the founders come from a VR background and the other two founders come from an arts background. Jens Faurischou and Masha Sabsay Faurischou are a Danish couple who have an art foundation in Denmark. They came from the perspective that they were already working with artists, and several of the artists had expressed an interest in the technology, but it is difficult to start using it because you need a technical expertise. And either you go the route of coding yourself, and for many artists far along in their practice learning to code from scratch is an incredibly time heavy, intensive process; or you go through the route of hiring developers, but developers didn't have the experience of working with artists, which is quite a particular thing to do because it's more experimental than the usual commercial projects. They saw a gap in the market and that the artists wanted to engage with the technology and they conceived of a way that that might be possible. They paired up with this company, Khora. Khora is a VR production company, working on commercial projects, in healthcare, in mental health and real estate... They approached Simon Lajboschitz and Peter Fisher

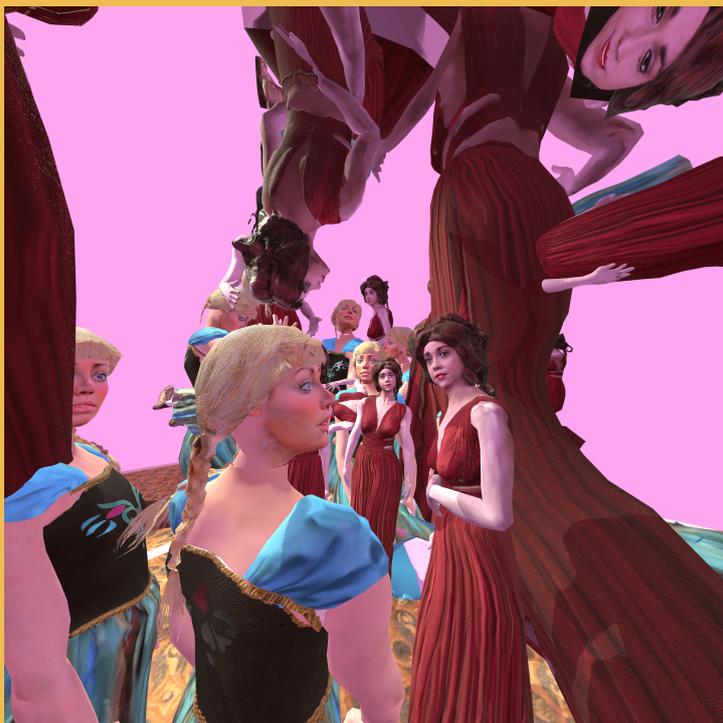


Fig. 1 – Paul McCarthy, *C.S.S.C. Coach Stage Stage Coach VR experiment Mary and Eve*, 2017 © Paul McCarthy and Khora Contemporary
 Courtesy of the artist, Hauser & Wirth, Xavier Hufkens and Khora Contemporary

and asked to work together, collaborating with the artists. I think at the heart of this idea was that we as a company could do what VR developers could do, but in a shorter amount of time. The artist would conceive of the idea and we could produce it in a matter of months, which that's something that would normally take a freelance developer a year or more. Plus, we could do it to a really, really high specificity. So, we have expertise, we have manpower and we have a network, which means that we're connected to artists and developers and can bring them together.

EM But how does it work? How do you get in touch with artists?

AS We are sometimes approached by an artist. Sometimes we can see the potential of a practice that could lend itself well to the technology. And in those instances, we approach the artist and suggest the idea. So, it really depends on the situation. Each artist is selected through a team process: we all get together and discuss the project. Is this idea conducive to the technology? Is the artist pushing the boundaries in some way? If there's unanimous interest then we'll go for it.

EM Those are also very expensive artworks to produce and I think that the market isn't so big. So, who is actually going to buy and collect VR artworks?

AS You've touched on a really interesting point. The market for VR is still at an early stage, there's not very many specialist VR collectors. That said, we don't consider VR as separate to more traditional artworks. We sell these works in much the same way. Think of an artist like Paul McCarthy: VR is one part of his practice, but the technology does not define the work. It's a tool. What's interesting, and what makes it possible to sell the artwork, as with any sculpture or painting, is if you're interested in that artist's practice. The chances are that you'll be interested in his work in VR. Because it all stems from the thought process. Stimulating the market involves educating people about the technology because collectors often will be understandably skeptical: they don't understand how the artwork is conserved, how the technology is going to develop. They ask themselves if the artwork will be relevant in 10 years. It's quite hard to wrap your head around an artwork that

exists inside of a headset. The more we show it in museums, the more we educate people, the more we show up for talks, the more people start to understand and gain in enthusiasm. I think Covid has been a really pivotal time for this technology because we've seen that so much of our life is now lived online. We've also seen, with the advent of NFTs, people recognizing the value of a digital artwork. VR and AR are in increasing demand.

EM What about working with, I mean, groundbreaking artists such as Paul McCarthy or Tony Oursler? Because they are not born as, as you were saying, VR artists. So, how was working with them?

AS Well, they come at it in a very free way. Often, they'll say to the developers "I want to do this", proposing effects the developers have never thought of. This prompts experimentation, taking the technology in new directions. We often walk away from the process having learned just as much as the artist has. A specific example would be Paul McCarthy's first artwork: the characters appear quite awkward and pixelated at times and that's actually an aesthetic that the artist requested. He asked the characters to appear disjointed because he didn't want to mimic reality. He wanted to play on the idiosyncrasies of the technology and enhance them. I think that our baseline is that the artist always leads the way. So, they come to us using their language and we adapt ourselves around their language. That shows through in the artworks and the painstaking efforts we take to stay faithful to the original concept. With Yu Hong's piece, for example, we adapted all of her brushstrokes into VR, whereas Christian Lemmerz has a much more sculptural perspective. We adapt accordingly.

EM Yes, so each is unique and each is based on the artist language and you were saying that it doesn't take a long period. So, some months to produce a VR artwork.

AS Yes, but actually I would say that the length of time isn't necessarily determined by the development, it is usually the amount of time it takes for an idea to ferment. We could create the work in three weeks if the idea were totally there and we knew exactly what we were doing. But so much of the

process is in the dialogue between the developers and the artist and the slow fermentation of the idea. So, the artist will come to us, they'll have a concept in mind, will go away and create. They'll see the footage and change their mind based on what comes out. It's a real back and forth process.

EM I do think that there is a connection between VR and environmental installation, because artists used installation art like a world, an image-world. What do you think about this idea?

AS I think what you're suggesting is interesting. It brings to mind that VR is dematerialized and can exist anywhere: that's part of the magic of it. I can experience an artwork here in the UK simultaneously with someone in Tokyo. You know, Berlin, London, Paris, whatever, it can happen all at the same time. And the fact that it's not tied to a place is revolutionary. It means that locations that have not previously had access to major exhibitions can suddenly have access to them. I used to work with TBA21–Academy. They create artworks linked to the theme of the oceans. We would travel to the South Pacific on a research vessel and create artworks with the local communities there. And at the end of that experience, we would take the artworks home to Europe and curate shows for the audiences here. The shows that germinated from these expeditions were fascinating but sadly the locals we met on our travels never got to see the results. VR enables remote exhibitions. Another thing to consider is the digital landscape. I'm interested to see where that goes.

EM I mean you enter in an image-world. So, I'm an art historian and I think that the installation art already did this before in 20th century because you enter a new world, you enter a space. It's interesting, right?

AS Minimalism was so based on phenomenology, being in the space with the work. But here your body is completely disengaged and you have no feeling, there is no interaction with any object. Which is a curious thing because there is a black void in the VR. Your body occupies the space, but if you look down you don't exist. You are not in the space. It's so curious.



Fig. 2 – Tony Oursler, *Spacemen R My Friended*, 2016
Courtesy of the artist and Khora Contemporary

EM I'm particularly interested in storytelling and I think that in some installation, think for example to Ilya Kabakov, there is a space completely designed and rebuilt and then there is also a story and I think there is a connection with VR artworks even if in a different material. I was wondering about your opinion.

AS Absolutely. I actually think it's a really interesting point because VR is inviting us to tell stories in new ways where narratives and powers are not linear. I find myself applying to film festivals in the narrative storytelling category with works where you're just in an environment and the image is telling the story. We're used to stories on a television, on a 2D screen and in a linear way that we can follow. But when you are living the story in VR, you're in it and you are part of it and you are influencing it. So, the idea of narrative is broken apart in some ways.

EM I am working on immersive storytelling and so there is also the video game, for sure, but I think there is also contemporary art. So, I am trying to reconstruct this point of view I think is not evaluated.

AS We come together with filmmakers, artists, technologists, futurists. These are the people that I'm meeting at VR conferences, where traditional disciplines are challenged, the boundaries or structures of these disciplines are refused or intertwined.

EM You were talking about the museum and how to educate people in it about this technology. So, I was asking myself what about your relationship with museums?

AS Yes, I remember when I started working in virtual reality four years ago now, which seems like a short amount of time, but in this industry everything is developing at a fast pace. When I started out we were approaching institutions about showing our works, we were explaining to them the merit of it. I would say that dynamic has flipped in our favor somewhat. The institutions are approaching us more and more, about commissioning work and about showing the existing works. I would say that it's because they have started to understand that it engages audiences. There is real interest in

experiential artworks and how the museum experience can become more inclusive, interactive and more social. VR is a big part of that. And we rely on them also in a major way because a lot of the funding for these artworks comes from the currency that is a mass audience. People buy tickets to the shows and through ticket sales we can pay back production costs. So, it's definitely a kind of mutually dependent relationship.

EM I think there is a big problem in VR experience. I'm studying VR artworks, but it's difficult to view them. I have two problems: one is to reach these artworks and the second one is related to the devices because artworks are conceived for specific headsets and they are not accessible for others. So, I think there is a big problem about the way you can experience these artworks.

AS VR artworks are not like a video game in that they can be downloaded and experienced independently. There's definitely a social component to experiencing the works. We also recognize that, as a new medium, it's important to solidify a ritual around how these works are experienced. That's not to say that modes of display aren't changing. VR has a mass appeal. There are shopping centers in China where you can experience VR art and that's something we've never considered before. But we're starting to question the old ways because well, why not? Why should we withhold access and limited to elite institutions?

EM And what do you think about the Augmented Reality?

AS We're really enthusiastic about AR. A lot of the conversations I'm having with museums at the moment are centered around AR because it makes it possible for people to experience art outside of the walls of the museum. The Serpentine has run an interesting program where they show AR artworks throughout Hyde Park in London. They've worked with artists like Jakob Kudsk Steensen and Hito Steyerl, whose works you could experience throughout the park. I think we're in a kind of wild west moment for AR because public spaces are all up for grabs.

EM This is the reason why AR is also used for political issue by artists. So, you can create for example monuments, alternative monuments in public space. So, you can build a different story, tell your own story. And you can overlay it onto any existing space.

AS You could theoretically set up an AR show in the middle of the street and there would be no grounds for restriction. Virtual spaces are still free and unregulated. So, artists are really at liberty to put on a virtual show anywhere in the world they want. I'm sure in the future they'll be structures around virtual spaces. We'd like to be part of the conversation about how those virtual spaces are set up and monitored.

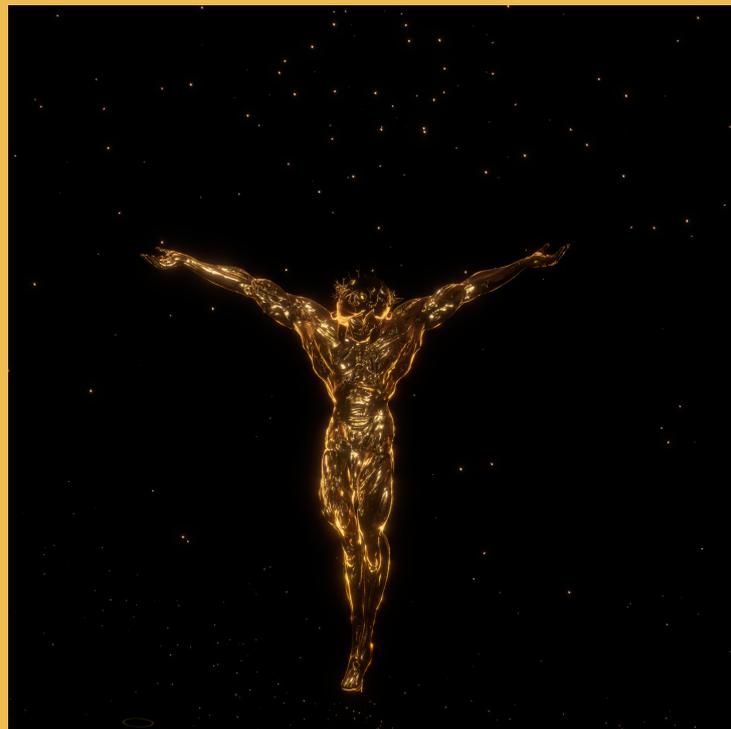


Fig. 3 – Christian Lemmerz, *La Apparizione*, 2017
Courtesy of the artist and Khora Contemporary