

curatorial foreward

by Asma Kazmi

On the face of it, Shezad Dawood's VR Buddhist temple encapsulates the viewer with a discriminating sense of time and place by presenting complex visual, aural, and haptic relations. The viewer is transported to Kalimpong, a hill station in West Bengal known for its breathtaking views of the Himalayas and British colonial-era educational institutions. The experience is totalizing, with detailed encounters that incorporate opulently decorated interiors, luxurious tapestries, and ancient manuscripts. Around the periphery, however, the embodied experience also produces strange fissures, realizations, and questions—why am I here? Is this place “authentic” or some degree of an orientalist fantasy? When the richly patterned rug dissipates, and my body feels the startling sensation of a free fall, how do I simultaneously feel solid ground under my feet?

This is the contradiction or the strength of VR/AR: that it creates what Borges might call the *garden of forking paths*—a structure that foregrounds the simultaneity of all possible narrative and experiential threads. The artworks included in **Deep Dive Or the Limits of Immersion** allow for a contrapuntal and critical read of VR/AR by interweaving multiple

visual perspectives, synthesized media, non-linear narrative forms, interactivity with no logic or rules of engagement, non-photoreal and deconstructed formal vocabularies, a low-res aesthetic, and bulky headgear that keeps the viewer tethered to the computer and heightens their awareness of their bodies.

While industry developers of VR/AR prioritize creating a fully immersive, rich, and transparent medium that mimics reality, artists explore and embrace cracks and breakages by establishing new and sometimes oppositional low-cost production methodologies. Like early video art, the viewer/user of art VR/AR is swept away by the aesthetics of pixilated interfaces, itinerant and floating unintended virtual artifacts, compressed, remixed, stitched, copied and pasted 3D objects, sounds, and images. These audio-visuals create new kinds of representations that oppose ubiquitous commercialism, as the viewer surrenders to the foreignness of this new experience. These representations open up multiple reads and critical reflections on the tangible, material, emotional, and embodied qualities of immersion.