

Article

A Lived Experience—Immersive Multi-Sensorial Art Exhibitions as a New Kind of (Not That) ‘Cheap Images’

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Abstract: This article analyzes the phenomenon of multi-sensorial, digital, and immersive art exhibitions of popular artists, which has been widely neglected in academic research, from a historical perspective. Reflecting the significance of lived experience in art consumption, this 21st-century phenomenon can be confronted productively with early-20th-century art reproductions. The article focuses on the characteristics of both popular phenomena and on their advertisement, as well as on the discourse around them, documenting reactions from resistance to persistence and accommodation. The analysis shows noticeable similarities between the two types of popularization of high art, positioning the new immersive exhibitions in a traditional line of technical innovative art popularization. Whereas photomechanical art reproduction had an immense influence on the popular art canon, being also dependent on ‘photogenic’ conditions of artworks and thus focusing predominantly on painting, the contemporary canon is predisposed by the immersible characteristics of artists’ oeuvres.

Keywords: immersive exhibition; photomechanical art reproduction; popularization of art; canonization; experience; popular culture



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1. Introduction

“Ah, this is incredible. I feel like I am actually *in* the painting” (Emily in Paris 2020, TC 11:54). Sitting on the floor, leaning against the illuminated wall of the immersive exhibition Van Gogh—Starry Night at the Parisian Atelier des Lumières, which actually took place from 22 February 2019 to 5 January 2020, Netflix series Emily in Paris’ protagonist Emily Cooper is impressed. The multi-sensorial exhibition hence fulfills its promise of full immersion into the paintings shown in digital reproduction.

The viewer of the series accompanies Emily and her two friends through the exhibition hall and catches a glimpse of the historical building’s interior, which is illuminated with projections of Van Gogh’s Starry Night that not only cover the walls but also the actors’ bodies and faces. Emily identifies the painting, adding that it is “one of my favorites” (ibid., TC 10:52). She apparently does not have any further knowledge about the painter and his work, whereas Emily’s friend Camille, a gallery owner, adds some supposedly art historical information about Van Gogh’s mental condition. Gabriel, Emily’s neighbor, love interest, and also Camille’s boyfriend, relates to Emily by saying “mine, too” (ibid., TC 10:56). They both look at each other as if it was extraordinary for two people to like the same popular painting of one of the most popular artists in Western art history. What functions within the series as a suggested intimate relation between the two meant-to-be-together main characters in reality points to the absence of any real individual interest in the consumption of popularized culture. Nevertheless, for fictional Emily, visiting the exhibition is an inspiring key moment that works as a catalyst for her career and thus makes her more interesting as a person.

The fact that many facets of the ‘immersive exhibition’ are reflected in a fictional story like Emily in Paris makes it seem worthwhile to analyze this popular phenomenon in

greater detail. Interestingly enough, academic research about immersive exhibitions so far has almost only been done in the form of master's theses and with a focus on (positive) visitor experience (De Círez Jiménez 2018; Brosset 2019; Carú et al. 2020; Pan 2021). This article is an explorative attempt to analyze and classify the phenomenon and its discourse, offering a new perspective by comparing it with the historical discourse on cheap and popular art reproductions (especially in popular book series) around 1900. In doing so, the focus lies on the public reactions to the popular then and now, demonstrating that there are considerable similarities and arguing that, in following the traditional line, immersive exhibitions might be seen in the context of Malraux's Imaginary Museum. The historical perspective also makes it possible to retrace the development of the popular art canon through new forms of popular reception.

2. Old Artworks Brought to Life: The 'Experience' of Immersive Exhibitions

Since 2011, so-called immersive exhibitions make "masterpieces come to life, giving visitors the sensation of walking right into [...] paintings" (Van Gogh Alive). These exhibitions seem to want to reach an almost Stendhalian way of art reception, 'submerging' into and mentally approximating, nearly touching the artwork('s reproduction).¹ State-of-the-art light and video technology illuminates mostly old industrial halls with oversized moving reproductions of famous artworks. The 35- to 45-min loop 360° video projections have more similarities with film screenings than with exhibitions, as visitors can wander around the space but are obligated to follow the digital projections in the video's pace in the manner of a cinematographic show.

These successful installations have been touring the world for years, showing the same artist's work simultaneously at different places while saving on high rental fees. Since 2018, the company Culturespace has even established permanent exhibition centers, called Digital Art Spaces, in places like Seoul, New York City, Dubai, Amsterdam, Paris, Bordeaux, and, from 2023 onward, in Dortmund, as well as, beginning in 2024, in Hamburg.

Especially in a post-pandemic and digital society, these immersive exhibitions seem to reach a public willing to subject itself to live and lived experiences, that is, to "impressions of presence",² according to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2003, p. 210). It is not without reason that the term 'experience' appears in every exhibition's title. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the English term 'experience' does not differentiate between experience as "(the process of getting) knowledge or skill from doing, seeing, or feeling things" and (lived) experience as "something that happens to you that affects how you feel." Presumably also playing with this double-meaning of experience, the immersive exhibitions allude more to the second type of only perceptive experience—also named 'lived experience'—by addressing the public on an emotional level, not in a knowledge imparting, rational way (Gumbrecht 2003). Lived experience always has to do with the self, and it is related to individual emotions, biographies, and memories (Lessau and Zügel 2019, pp. 8–9). 'Art experience,' in this sense, is a non-rational, un-reflected impression caused by art (Renner 1991, p. 300). Experience-driven events can be seen as a self-staging of individuals searching for a special or especially interesting life (Hitzler 2011, p. 13; Eickelmann 2016, p. 361), performing lived experience rationality (Schulze [1992] 2005). Shows like immersive exhibitions, according to Hitzler's definition (2011), have a high event potential and experience value addressing both qualitative and quantitative dimensions. The experience is something extra-ordinary, that is, not commonplace, as it makes the participator special, and it offers accessibility for anybody, being both low-threshold and high culture. According to Vester's classification of the 'lived experience' (Vester 2004), immersive exhibitions can be located in all of the three 'dimensions of the experience': cognitive, affective, and locomotive/behavioral. They thus ideally offer a 'whole' and intensive experience. Concerning the 'modes of experience' they are rather passive than active, even though they aim to offer a more active-orientated mode by encouraging visitors to 'interact' with the projected images. Immersive exhibitions are furthermore situated in Vester's aesthetic 'field of experience', nevertheless aiming also to address the theoretical field.

Whereas for example panoramic painting or cinema can show immersive characteristics in 19th century popular culture (Grau 2003; Werber 2012), lived experience and pleasure in *academic* art reception have been removed from the discourse since the enlightenment, making ‘not taking effect’ and insularity the main characteristics of high art (Kemp 1985, p. 16). In contrast, immersive exhibitions include experience, affect, and effect of high art from both a productive and a receptive side. In this sense, the personal experiences of the artist are staged as decisive for their art production (see Section 3.1), while the very own life of the individual visitor influences the way they see and feel the art. What seems to be a postmodern appearance of individualism, event-culture and experience-society (Schulze [1992] 2005; Bachleitner 2004) can be traced to early-20th-century culture, also focusing on the lived experience of art contemplation in the context of cheap art reproduction. The experience in both cases is led by the medium of (re)presentation more than by the art itself. These similarities, discussed in the following section, point to the apparent need for a non-academic, experience-driven art approach in society. The exclusion of lived experience in high art discourse especially might make the exhibitions so successful.

3. Popularization of Art through Reproduction and Lived Experience: Today and in the Past

In this main part of the article, I relate the discourse of the currently popular phenomenon ‘immersive exhibition’ to the discourse around art reproduction and popularization around 1900. I do so especially by considering popular monographic art book series, since both immersive exhibitions and book series are based on the ‘big names’ of art history.

Art series for the great many emerge in Europe and the US around 1860, multiplying around 1900 (Kitschen 2021, p. 15) due to the development of photomechanical reproduction techniques and a growing interest in art and art history. Kitschen (2021) distinguishes between specialized literature, popular-scientific publications, and popular series without the aim of deeper art historical understanding that are there to offer enjoyment of art to everybody. Since immersive exhibitions claim to be non-academic and often do not offer any (popular) scientific information, I will only compare them with popular series. In doing so, I will include primarily the discourse on the German-speaking reproduction industry but also base the study on Kitschen’s analysis of international art series.

Within this research, the aim is not to illustrate a whole discourse but to explore examples from Germany, Europe, and the US in order to make visible the very similar mechanics in dealing with popular phenomena then and today. Since both the reproduction industry and the immersive exhibitions have become an international business, despite their national differences, I argue that their characteristics, their advertisement, as well as reactions concerning them can be seen as a general transnational (Western) discourse about the popularization of art.³ In doing so, I refer to the theoretical framework of CRC 1472 Transformations of the Popular from which this article emerges, which enables me to compare the two different phenomena systematically. In this context, popularization means the distribution of high cultural knowledge as an intended ‘elevation’ of the people, defined as ‘first order popularization’ (Döring et al. 2021). According to the logic of this high/low-axiology, knowledge is edited and prepared adequately in order to be popularized, which is exemplified especially in Section 3.1. The cheap, photomechanical reproduction of art on a massive scale as well as its new, less cheap, digital, and immersive reproduction form destabilize the established differentiation between, and the access to, ‘high’ and ‘low’. They transform the view on and the dynamics of the popular, comprehensible for example in the form of (self-)advertisement (cf. Section 3.2). Moreover, the destabilization of ‘high’ and ‘low’ provokes resonance (Döring et al. 2021). Those reactions to the popular are assessed in Section 3.3.

3.1. Characteristics

The main characteristics detected in both popular art series and immersive exhibitions can be summarized as the following:

- Monographic, and thus biography-focused;
- Simplified, catchy wording;
- Image above text, enjoyment above education;
- Guided seeing and feeling;
- Popularity;
- Deinstitutionalized, and thus a lower entry threshold.

The highest percentage of art-related popular series were (and apparently still are) monographic series dealing with the life and work of mainly male artists (Kitschen 2021, p. 15). Likewise, today's immersive exhibitions work monographically, even though they sometimes summarize various artists. There are monographic shows about Da Vinci, Monet, Kahlo, Klimt, Dalí, and of course Van Gogh, but also collective ones about French Impressionism (Monet & Friends Alive) or the "giants of the Renaissance" (Leonardo Da Vinci—Raffael—Michelangelo: Giganten der Renaissance). The reduction to a biography happens to be a popularization strategy based on the assumption that the story of an interesting life generally is more appealing and approachable than formal (art) historical knowledge and able to develop a veritable "craze for biographies" (The Spectator, 14 April 1888, 11, quoted in Kitschen 2021, p. 17). The work hence is being explained through and traced back to the artist's life experiences. Experienceability is given through the artist's life and one's own relatability. "[. . .] It must not be forgotten that the easiest access to the art of the past is usually not through the study of comprehensive works but rather through the work of one representative master (MONOGRAPHS). If we occupy ourselves lovingly with Michelangelo or Rembrandt, we are likely to learn more about Italian or Dutch Art than if we read a good many surveys of the whole fields" (Gombrich 1950, p. 449). The art historical canon, of course, contains artists' names, consolidated through monographic exhibitions, genius cult, and popular art series, departing from personal and relatable biographies aiming to entertain and educate at the same time (Kitschen 2021, p. 17). As Gombrich describes, we are able to 'lovingly' deal with artists and art through the stories of their lives.⁴

Even though the mere artist's name is often enough to speak for itself, in some early cases, the wording, particularly in titles, subtitles, and accompanying texts, can be characterized as simplified and catchy, summarizing the artist's life in one quality. Particularly, the German art book series *Kleine Delphin-Kunstbücher*, published from 1915 to 1926, campaigned with Grünewald: Der Romantiker des Schmerzes (Mayer 1917), Murillo: Der Maler der Betteljungen und Madonnen (Mayer 1918), or Tizian: Der Maler venezianischer Schönheit (Kirschstein 1923).⁵ Some similar form of artist popularization occurs in today's titles, for example "Leonardo Da Vinci—Raffael—Michelangelo: Giganten der Renaissance" and "Monet: Rebell und Genie",⁶ or Van Gogh being called the "Sunflower Superstar" (Van Gogh Experience).

The main characteristic of the popularization of art is, of course, the image, i.e., the reproduction of the artwork itself. In popular art publications and in relation to the written word, the image appears in large quantities (Kitschen 2021, p. 19). Generally, popular series contain only a few pages of text without original research that accompanies a large number of reproductions, preferably, in color (Imorde and Zeising 2022). Art historical factual knowledge was explicitly not desired (Kitschen 2021, p. 149), and—within the *Kunsterziehungsbewegung*—confronting laypeople and children with scientific knowledge was not appreciated pedagogically (Joerissen 1979). Letting the artwork speak for itself, for example, in classrooms, was seen as an effective method of 'quiet' education and visual enjoyment (Imorde and Zeising 2018).

This focus on the visual goes hand in hand with the claim by the advocates of popular reproductions for an aesthetic experience and enjoyment of art through emotion for the

many (Imorde 2009a). It leads Michel (1920, p. 150) to state that the reproduction industry is based on the experiential value of artworks. As Imorde (2009b, p. 127) confirms, only the claim of emotional autonomy of the individual made art suitable to the mass market. A similar kind of democratization and spectacularization of culture (Brosset 2019, 15ff.) is rooted in the idea of immersive exhibitions. The (moving) image and colorfulness appeal to visitors' emotions on another level of spectacularity, adjusted to a digitally prone cultural public, making them 'understand' art in their personal way without adding much educational text-intensive information (some of the exhibitions do not provide any). As Kitschen (2021, p. 161) notes: "[...]images enable a more direct access to art than text, independent of educational background, and at the same time meet the modern tendency of over-illustration [Bilderwütigkeit] of the public." Interestingly enough, this quote can be read as a description of both phenomena, today and a hundred years earlier.

Nevertheless, the (emotional) reception seems to be guided in both examples. Early-20th-century consumers of popular art series were prepared for reception through instructions on how to see, enjoy, and empathize with art. Accompanying texts focused additionally on expression and the atmosphere of artworks (Kitschen 2021, pp. 189, 193). Website texts of immersive exhibitions can also be seen as this kind of user manual, telling visitors to be prepared to be "surrounded by a vibrant symphony of light, colour, sound and fragrance" (Van Gogh Alive) or to focus on "the glowing colors, the expressive way of painting and the powerful brushstroke" (Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience). The freedom of reception is even more restricted by the linear video projections, already confronting different paintings with each other or focusing on details, giving no room for individual direction of the look.

Opening elitist high art reception for the greater public generates popularity. Whereas popular art series counted on five-digit circulation (Kitschen 2021, p. 23), multi-media installations about great artists of course reach a larger audience of up to several millions of visitors, which is surprising considering the high ticket prices. What made popular art series and reproductions so popular was, inter alia, the low price, making the enjoyment of art affordable for literally everybody. This seems to be one of the major differences between the two phenomena. It can be assumed that due to the general welfare in 21st-century's Western societies, the high cost is no longer a barrier for high culture access. In any case, we must ask: What is the intended and actual audience demographic for immersive exhibitions?

The great acceptance of both art reproduction in the early 20th century and immersive exhibitions deinstitutionalizes society's general knowledge about art. Decisions of editors and organizers of immersive exhibitions are taken beyond scientific institutions such as museums and universities. Even though popular art series are supported by recognized scholars, they develop their own dynamics, as they're dependent on economic and other success factors.⁷ Apparently, some immersive exhibitions also rely on the input and consultation of art historians, like the German production *Monet: Rebell und Genie*, drawing attention to the scientific consultation on their main page while *Beyond Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience*'s art history consultant Fanny Curtat does not appear on the website but in magazine articles about the exhibition as a mediator to the spectacle (Alter Mark 2022; Daley 2022). Some immersive exhibition spaces like Leipzig Kunstkraftwerk even have an accompanying scientific education program.

3.2. Advertisement

In this section, I analyze the main elements and strategies present in self-advertising by both immersive experiences nowadays and popular art publications around 1900. For a better overview, promoting elements are condensed into the following bullet points. Special characteristics already named in Section 3.1 are, understandably, used to advertise:

- Non-academic, but educational;
- Immersive;
- Approachable;

- Unique;
- New and technologically up to date;
- Abundant with (colorful) images;
- ‘Second order’ popularization (Döring et al. 2021).

Van Gogh Alive promotes its show in opposition to traditional art reception, characterized as “tiptoeing through silent galleries and view paintings from afar in quiet contemplation.” Nevertheless, the “feeling” visitors get in the installation “is simultaneously enchanting, entertaining and educational” (Van Gogh Alive). While distancing himself from “prefabricatedly offered indoctrination” (brochure by E.A. Seemann for Seemanns farbige Kunstblätter, 1911) and “long-winded analysis and reflections, entangled historic studies and verbose digressions” (brochure for *Klassiker der Kunst in Gesamtausgaben*: Hans Thoma, 1909, p. 2, quoted in Kitschen 2021, p. 19), Bergner (1910), for instance, promotes the products of the publishing house E.A. Seemann within the context of traditional museums as well. Museum experience in the early 20th century seems to be different from the experience a hundred years later. Bergner (1910, p. iii) describes the endless halls with an overload of paintings, not to mention the pressing, hurrying, and chattering visitors, an interplay that does not allow any educational benefit. Even though the criticism of traditional art consumption is different, both opinions point to another way of art contemplation, which is experience-based and immersive.

“And indeed, there can be no purer enjoyment for quiet hours than the immersion⁸ in these wonderful house museums” (ibid.). Promoting E.A. Seemann’s three-color prints, Bergner sees immersion into art, i.e., through contemplation, empathy, and, importantly, self-education (ibid., p. iv), as the way of reaching a development of taste. Seeing, contemplating, and experiencing art is declared as key for enjoyment but also for long-term education of art friends and lovers (brochure by E.A. Seemann for Georg Warnecke’s *Meisterwerke der bildenden Kunst*). The multi-sensorial approach of the immersive exhibition, addressing the individual in an intimate and private way,⁹ is possibly the 21st-century version of the silent contemplation of reproductions at home.

Other common elements of advertisement in both cases are the reference to the artefact’s approachability both emotionally and physically, its uniqueness, and its technical novelty, as well as fulfillment to contain realistic reproduction, quality, and quantity of the images.

Another promotion strategy is the exposure of popularity. The CRC 1472 *Transformations of the Popular* calls this kind of popularization ‘second order popularization’ (Döring et al. 2021). It is a phenomenon that has come up especially in the 1950s when observing popularity acquired its own dynamic through rankings, ratings, and charts. Having become an automatism in the 21st century, it is not surprising that immersive exhibition companies use their enormous quantitative success in the promotion of their events.

Van Gogh Alive apparently is “[t]he most visited immersive multi-sensory experience in the world”. Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience has “already fascinated over two million visitors” and promotes its show on Facebook, drawing the attention to the fact that they are the most purchased event in Berlin, being no. 1 of Eventim’s Ticket Charts on 19 July 2021. Another strategy to display popularity and especially customer satisfaction is the customer review, which can be found on almost every immersive exhibition’s website, drawing attention to the numerous appreciations for the unique, emotional, and immersive experience.

Both strategies appear in advertisements for popular art reproductions and series, although the popularization through quantification is not as striking as in the contemporary example. Editorials promote their products by pointing to the reproduction of the most “renowned” (Franz Hanfstaengl *Catalogue of Photogravures*, p. 92) or “celebrated” (ibid., p. 93)¹⁰ artists and artworks “whose names are now household names and whose works are too widely known and appreciated to need comment here” (ibid., p. iv). Yet they also refer to the already given circulation; E.A. Seemann’s *Berühmte Kunststätten* “have already circulated in over 100,000 volumes” (brochure by E.A. Seemann for *Berühmte*

Kunststätten), and their series *Die Galerien Europas*, which “today have already circulated in thousands of copies in German and foreign editions,” are “received with lively interest by the art loving public” (Brochure by E.A. Seemann for *Die Galerien Europas*, 1907). Hence, audience reception and quantification already play a role in early-20th-century advertisements for art reproduction. Furthermore, customer reviews are an integral part of advertising brochures and can be documented in large numbers. This reference to high circulation figures is anything but self-evident because art is usually not justified quantitatively, but qualitatively. Another form of second order popularization can be identified as the exposed prolongation of exhibitions and, as I argue, its equivalent: the exposed reissue of a series or volume.

3.3. Reactions

Instead of offering an empirical study or complete discourse analysis, I want to point out some typical reactions to art popularization observed in both historical and contemporary cases. According to a main hypothesis of the CRC 1472 Transformations of the Popular, there are different types of reactions or legitimation strategies handling popular phenomena (Döring et al. 2021).

One historically dominant reaction to the popular is resistance. Members of the elite who stick to the distinction between high and low supposedly feel threatened by the growing prominence of the popular and fear the loss of discursive power (Döring et al. 2021, p. 6). This kind of reaction can be noticed in feuilleton articles or art magazines, through journalists’ ‘field reports’ calling the immersive effects “kitsch” (Kreye 2019; Raymann 2021), a “crude” and “aggressive” (Zamankhan 2015) “bombardment” (Klimovskaya 2021), or a mixture of “slideshow, documentary and Hollywood blockbuster” (Zamankhan 2015). Articles furthermore criticize historical misrepresentation and de-contextualization as flattened, cheapened, and downgraded original works, the focus on the visitor instead of the artwork (Sattler 2021; Rustler 2021), the exploitation of “long-dead artists for commercial gain” (Taylor 2021), or the lacking fidelity to the original and the unrealistic size of painting reproductions (ibid.). Denouncing the superficial persuasive and manipulative qualities, and especially the economic character of staged experiences, is a common point of criticism, as Bachleitner (2004, p. 19) states.¹¹ Yet it must be said that much feuilleton criticism is conciliatory and also sees positive sides of the phenomenon. A more condemning reaction comes from cultural elite’s representative Max Hollein, director of Metropolitan Museum of Art, who stated that multi-sensorial experiences are nothing but entertainment (Crow 2021).

Another historically consistent argument regards the loss of imagination whilst visiting immersive exhibitions. Contemporaries of technical progress seem to criticize the increasing loss of demanded imagination in cultural production from the written word and black-and-white illustrations to color reproductions, from silent cinema and sound to color and 3-D cinema, arriving at immersive exhibitions (Avenarius 1911; Kisa 1906; Beck 2022, pp. 97–107).

The historical resistance against cheap art reproductions and popular art series can be found, for instance, in art historian Wilhelm von Bode’s article “Die Sintflut deutscher Kunstbücher” (1924). The ‘flood’ he evokes both considers the great amount of popular art books and the vast number of reproductions in it. It can thus be paralleled with today’s criticism of bombardment and overload. Bode also criticizes the economic interest in the reproduction market (Bode 1924, p. 175) and the competition between valuable and cheap, amateurish products (ibid. p. 176). Furthermore, in his article “Zur Illustration moderner deutscher Kunstbücher” (Bode 1899), he focuses on the flawed quality of most of the reproductions. Art historian Joseph Sauer (1907, sct. 401) states his opinion about the scientific value of popular series, calling them trivial, superficial, and written by dilettantes. Judgments referring to quantities like overload, or flood, or pointing to the economic factors qualify the product (both immersive exhibitions and photomechanical art reproduction) as non-artistic. It is conceived as too much affect-orientated and thus

as related to ‘low culture’ being “sensually fascinating, but alien and dismissive towards meaning” (Venus 2013, p. 56).

Moreover, there is one type of reaction that is difficult to document, as I assume that there is much non-reaction due to non-appreciation. This kind of reaction—supposedly not reacting at all on purpose—which I would like to call persistence against the popular, seems to be an even stronger form of resistance than openly writing against something. Looking for research on multi-sensorial immersive exhibitions, I only found material on the immersive, interactive, and technological elements in science or art museums (Belaën 2005; Carú et al. 2020), on experience-oriented museum exhibitions (Eickelmann 2016), and on immersive (non-reproductional) art installations. Admittedly, as a relatively new phenomenon arising only in the last two to three years, it is not surprising that these installations have not made it into academic research yet and have been covered only journalistically. However, as already mentioned, research has been done on visitor experience, leading to the conclusion that there generally has been very little academic interest in the phenomenon from a productive and/or discursive perspective, supposedly because of the art historians’ unanimous negative opinion about immersive multi-sensorial exhibitions. This kind of ignoring persistence against the popular can be methodically difficult to detect in a historical case but, for instance, can be traced to the persistence of some popular art series in not including a popular artist like El Greco, supposedly *because* of his emerging popularity.

As a third form of reaction, there is accommodation, that is, the acceptance of, and especially the adaption to the phenomenon as a new part of (popular) culture (Döring et al. 2021). In case of the immersive exhibitions, accommodation can be documented, for example, through art history consultants. A number of institutional representatives argue in favor of the exhibitions by pointing to the positive aspects, e.g., in interviews with newspapers or magazines. Elke Kollar, chair of the German Bundesverband Museumspädagogik, sees the potential of immersive experience in sharpening and changing the perception of the original works and diminishing people’s distance to high art, justifying every form of approach to artists and art, and including a different kind of audience (Oelrich and Czerny 2022). Apart from individuals or individual representatives of institutions, forms of adaptation by big elite institutions exist. Grand Palais, Paris, installed their ‘subsidiary’ Grand Palais Immersif as a permanent immersive exhibition showroom; Newfields Museum, formerly the Indianapolis Museum of Art, dedicated a floor to immersive installations, calling it THE LUME Indianapolis, supposedly due to financial reasons, since digital exhibitions tend to be more lucrative (Sattler 2021). Van Gogh Art Museum in Amsterdam sees the touring digital Van Gogh exhibitions as a good supplement, given that not everybody can afford traveling to the Netherlands (Rustler 2021). Accommodation generally seems to go along with the potential seen in immersive installations of getting people back to ‘real’ museums. Even though the art history content is questionable, critics acknowledge the democratic potential and the power of popularity, appreciating to “see a hall of lucky people, silently and devoutly falling into close-ups of brushwork and the whole oeuvre, no matter if they understand what it is about or not” (Kreye 2019). While speaking in an elitist tone, Kreye acknowledges that emotion can be a legitimate access to art, if not to art history.

An institution historically adapting to popular reproduction is school, as art reproductions were broadly used in school education as teaching material or wall pictures (Imorde and Zeising 2018). Today’s Grande Experience admits that “[s]chool groups love coming into our experiences” even though “[t]hey’re not necessarily learning anything, but we’re just introducing them in a different way, in some way. Hopefully, they’ll get something from it that would engage them further” (Wiener 2022). The word ‘learning’ in this context seems to be related only to art history content, at the same time promising some future influence on a subconscious emotional level, similar to the widespread belief of the silent but lasting effect of art reproductions in classrooms around 1900 (e.g., Richter 1909, p. 181; Imorde 2018, p. 31). In any event, experiencing art through digital projections at least seems to be seen as more meaningful than other activities. Simi-

larly, popular series on art, literature, and music around 1900 were also accepted because of being a better alternative in the fight against trashy literature (Kitschen 2021, p. 165).

3.4. Malraux's Dream?

Today's popularity of immersive exhibitions supposedly cannot be related to a "hunger for art" (Seemann 1901), as editor Artur Seemann called it in 1901, but there still seems to be a broad interest in having access to what is defined as high art. Just as an increasing group of readers and consumers were interested in art history and artists' biographies at the beginning of the 20th century and used the new offer of popular art reproduction (Kitschen 2021, p. 205), people are still interested in art, which becomes literally visible, *inter alia*, through art prints on t-shirts, tote bags or shoes, or the social media trend of recreating artworks, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when museums remained closed (#artrecreation, #betweenartandquarantine). This approach to high art, relatable to the historical practice of *tableaux vivants* (cf. e.g., Männig 2021), is personal and non-academic. Even though in order to recreate an artwork, the elements have to be looked at in detail, interests might not go beyond self-staging and appropriating high art. Museums, in turn, in order to reach a broader audience, give more importance to experience-oriented exhibitions through educational programs, interactive elements, events, and exhibition design, apparently, perceiving a competition toward, for example, digital and immersive art experience, as Alte Pinakothek Munich's slogan 'Experience originals' ('Originale erleben') shows, pointing at the unique selling point of art museums as well as at their experienceability.¹² Nevertheless, the popularity of the immersive exhibition in comparison with the traditional art museum seems to indicate that the latter as the guardian of high art and as a still high-threshold institution cannot accommodate the cultural needs of the many.

Phenomena such as digital immersive exhibitions, artwork recreations, or even the video mapping *The Great Masters of Renaissance*¹³ as a contemporary popular art reproduction practice might ultimately be understood as the enhanced realization of Malraux's Imaginary Museum. They provide the advantages of reproduction, i.e., mobility, recontextualization, comparison, and combination, and, at best, they have retroactive effects on the actual artwork. Simultaneously, they still feature affective qualities comparable to the original work of art, perhaps yet losing the quality as objects (Malraux 1949, p. 44), but being bound to a corporeal experience.

Immersive exhibitions are the theatrical performance of the Imaginary Museum, pointing strikingly to the antistatic characteristic of reproduction.¹⁴ The divestment of the museum space is returned and re-enacted while holding on to the mobility and inherent dynamic of reproduced artworks and the imagination. In the current, often monographic version, immersive exhibitions are of course limiting, offering only oeuvre-internal and predefined relations. Nevertheless, as Malraux did not see the Imaginary Museum as a replacement for the real museum, immersive exhibitions ideally do not substitute non-immersive exhibitions but function as mobile auratic museums, and even as 'immutable mobiles', reinforcing the Western art history canon (Latour 2006; cf. also Perry 2017).

4. Outlook: The Reapproval of a Western Art Canon

"The program includes what is known and popular", Pofalla (2022) notes about the topics of immersive exhibitions. Popularity guarantees success, which is one reason for the early consolidation of Western art canon, as Kitschen (2021) describes. "Trop souvent, dans le domaine de l'histoire de l'art, les mêmes sujets déjà traités sont repris, car il est des titres qui, pour l'éditeur, sont la garantie d'une bonne vente" (Brière 1902, p. 604). Art reproduction hence plays a major role in canonization (Camille 1996; Kitschen 2021).

The touring multi-sensorial, and apparently borderless, exhibitions recall of UNESCO Travelling Exhibition of Color Reproductions (1949–1979) and its accompanying catalogue. As "a response to the massive spoliation of artworks by the Nazis during the war" (Perry 2017, p. 170), UNESCO's color reproductions were both a conservational measure and a democratic project of art popularization, which, according to Perry, transformed

“the education, appreciation, and consumption of art globally” (ibid., p. 181). Certainly, it reproduced a Western art canon, focusing predominantly on French modernist artists, thus reinforcing “an existing canon” (ibid., p. 180). Familiarity and repetitive exposure seem to lead people to value things, including art.

Coming back to the remarkable success of, especially, Van Gogh digital exhibitions,¹⁵ familiarity indeed seems to play a major role. [Kitschen \(2021\)](#) exemplifies Van Gogh’s artworks’ success in early color reproduction, showing that E.A. Seemann reproduced the Dutch artist’s works from German collections already by 1916, reissuing various portfolios. [Kitschen \(2021, p. 261\)](#) states that almost no other painter accumulated such an amount of color reproductions in portfolios, monographic series, books, magazines, postcards, or prints on canvas, becoming the world’s most popular painter in the age of photomechanical color reproduction (ibid., p. 259). This popularity that emerged already in the 20th century once again is exposed in the immersive exhibitions and profits from today’s general popularity of immersive multi-sensorial installations. At the same time, the big name of a renowned canonical artist legitimates the popular medium itself by contributing to a (‘first order’) popularization of art. Nevertheless, we must question whether this massive popularization of certain artists once again negatively influences the academic perspective on them toward a devaluation of the ‘noticed by many’ (see Werber et al. in this issue). Interestingly enough, the popularity of art history pop stars in this context can popularize other, less popular artists. The new edition of Van Gogh: *Starry Night at Atelier des Lumières* (5 September–20 October 2022) was followed by a ten-minute screening of Yves Klein—*Infinite Blue*, which one could hardly escape as a spectator. This combination of a famous main show act and a shorter presentation of a lesser known artist or subject is a common program for immersive exhibition spaces. Even though Yves Klein’s art historical value might be less approachable to a general audience—especially without mediation—the color International Klein Blue shows qualities that can be defined as ‘immersible’ and seems to be suitable for a light installation.

Malraux’s understanding of the history of art as the history of the photographable ([Malraux 1949, p. 24](#)), referring to painting and especially colorful painting, proves to be true for art history pop stars like Van Gogh, Klimt, Monet, and also Frida Kahlo, who seem to be particularly “color photogenic” ([Kitschen 2021, p. 226](#)). This photogenicity presumably helped artworks to become popular in early reproductions and again is important in the selection of artists for immersive exhibitions, as transnational artists remain in the popular canon for being also ‘immersible’ and ‘experienceable.’ Nevertheless, color reproduction not only focused on color photogenic artwork, but also chose already established masterpieces for a reissue in color (ibid., p. 253). Immersive exhibitions about Da Vinci and Co. are proof of the functioning of the “masterpiece principal” (ibid.).

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Notes

- ¹ This article deals with the very popular form of immersive exhibitions based on reproductions of older artworks. Nevertheless, there also exist other types, for example those produced by artists themselves, or non-artistic, ambient versions.
- ² All originally German quotes are translated into English by the author.
- ³ To avoid extending the article unnecessarily, I name only a few exemplary sources.
- ⁴ The artist’s signature as a personal approach to their psychology seems to play a role in relating to them, visible in immersive exhibitions as in popular (and specialized) art literature.
- ⁵ Grünewald: *The Romantic of Pain*; Murillo: *The Painter of Paupers and Madonnas*; Tizian: *The Painter of Venetian Beauty*.

⁶ Monet: Rebel and Genius.

⁷ Michael Fuhr (2004, pp. 84–87), for example, names various external, i.e., non-art-historical factors that influence the selection of certain artists for the *Künstler-Monographien* (Artist Monographs) by Velhagen & Klasing, such as: anniversaries or deaths, the selection of other editorials, nationalist reasons and/or variation in artist's nationalities, and especially the suspected interest of the audience as well as cost saving. It can be assumed that other editorials proceeded in a similar way.

⁸ In the German original, Bergner uses the term "Vertiefung." Rudolf Roß uses the expression "sich in das Kunstwerk versenken," translatable as "to immerse oneself in the artwork" (Roß [1901] 1929, p. 25).

⁹ De Círez Jiménez (2018, p. 57) argues that the dimmed environment does not put pressure on the visitor's open reaction in the same way as it happens in a bright museum space.

¹⁰ These are examples from the English version of Hanfstaengl's brochure. German brochures more often use the term 'bedeutend' (important).

¹¹ The resistance against experience-orientation can also be traced to the mere description of art. For example, Robert Vischer's and Richard Muther's texts were popular with the educated audience but criticized by his expert colleagues as superficial and focused only on the effect (Rebel 1996, p. 82).

¹² Beyond that, the stillness of paintings seems to be challenged by the attention regime of moving images, provided by social media. Just as immersive exhibitions, museum's social media accounts like @staatlichemuseenzuberlin animate their collection's artworks on Instagram.

¹³ The Berlin exhibition *Die großen Meister der Renaissance* (The Great Masters of Renaissance), created by Manfred Waba, shows reproductions of originals that are moved digitally through video mapping. Thus, it does not offer an 'immersive' experience but shows many similarities to digital immersive exhibitions concerning characteristics, aims, and reactions.

¹⁴ Malraux himself describes the relation between museum and reproduction as one between the visit of a theatrical performance and the lecture of a play (Malraux 1949, p. 44).

¹⁵ Currently touring Van Gogh immersive exhibitions are: Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience (by COFO Entertainment, Passau), Van Gogh Experience (by Gianfranco Ianuzzi, Renato Gatto, Massimiliano Siccardi), Van Gogh Alive: The Experience (by Grande Experiences), Beyond Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience (only in the US, Canada, and South America, Paquin Entertainment Group, Art History Consultant, Fanny Curtat), Van Gogh Exhibit: The Immersive Experience (by Exhibition Hub Edutainment), Imagine Van Gogh Exhibition (by Imagine Exhibitions).

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