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**MANZANAR, BERLIN, VENICE:
TRANSNATIONAL VIRTUAL REALITY ART INSTALLATIONS**

Abstract:

Manzanar, Berlin, and Venice are major tourist destinations, and visitors want to learn and experience the places' history. Especially Manzanar and the Berlin Wall emanate the ephemerality of man-made structures and of a past that does not easily lend itself to create a unifying narrative, but rather one of complications and tensions. Due to their destruction, removal, and—in the case of the Venice lagoon—threat of flood tides and erosion their translatability into visual art become all the more important. The article examines the contemporary artworks of Tamiko Thiel who not only reconstructed the places in her 3D virtual reality installations *Beyond Manzanar* and *Virtuelle Mauer: Re-Constructing the Wall* but also put them in a transnational perspective. *Beyond Manzanar* manages to convey a feeling of imprisonment that is not only connected to Japanese American experiences; the *Virtuelle Mauer* provides an immersive experience of living 'in the shadow of the Wall' that can be applied to other such contexts. Lastly, Thiel's installation *The Travels of Mariko Hōrō* moves the question of potential agency of the Other to the forefront. The article traces how Thiel has created socially engaged artworks of cultural translation and negotiation that have the potential to be translated into social practice.

Keywords:

Tamiko Thiel, Japanese American Internment, VR Art (Virtual Reality Art), Berlin Wall, Orientalism, Transnationalism

Introduction

The commemoration of Japanese American internment experiences was characterized by a long period of silence. Public statements as well as published fictional and artistic renditions of the forced removal and incarceration were rare in the period directly following the war.¹ The representational silence was furthered by a spatial erasure of the internment camps, e.g. Manzanar, after the war. After the camp was officially closed in 1946, the former barrack buildings, utility systems, administration buildings and other structures were considered surplus property. They were dismantled, hauled away, many of them sold to returning G.I.s and their young families (Finch 1946, 2). Different, but in a similar vein the Berlin Wall was almost entirely eradicated after its fall in 1989. Many segments were given to institutions all over the world, such as the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France, or the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, Massachusetts.² Today only three original stretches remain in Berlin, one of which has become part of the official monument at Bernauer Straße. In March 2013 protests erupted against the partial relocation of 1.3 kilometers of hinterland wall on Mühlenstraße in Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg that have become a tourist attraction known as East Side Gallery (see Leopold and Horeld 2013; Küpper 2013). The river Spree served as actual border at this location, which meant that this part of the wall was inaccessibly deep in East German territory. Artists began painting the hinterland wall in 1989-1990 when it became accessible; they were thus copying the graffiti practice of the original western wall and in this way created a replica. A quite different, yet equally threatened location is the Venice lagoon. As a major maritime power and an important center of commerce from the late Middle Ages to the Renaissance Venice became a metonym of Western culture for its art and architecture. Today, Venice wavers between being described as “undoubtedly the most beautiful city built by man” (Barzini 1982) and being known for its element of elegant decay, an epithet connected to the concept of patina and also to what Miles Orvell in the context of the mediation of the terror attacks of 9/11 has called the “destructive sublime” (Orvell 2006), a fascination with decay and destruction.

1 Among the few examples are Mine Okubo's *Citizen 13660* (Okubo 1978) and Monica Sone's personal narrative *Nisei Daughter* (Sone 1979). John Okada's *No-No Boy* (Okada 1957), is not only the first Japanese American novel of the internment, but it is also often regarded as the first Japanese American novel (cf. Girst 2015). On the readjustment and social amnesia of Japanese Americans between 1945 and 1955 see Kashima 1980, 111–14.

2 In 2009 twenty symbolic parts of the wall 'toured' from Berlin to Israel, Palestine, Korea, Cyprus, Yemen and other places where division and border experience shape everyday life. In the same year, Tamiko Thiel and Teresa Reuter's installation *Virtuelle Mauer* was exhibited in Goethe Institutions in the United States, India and Sri Lanka.

All three places are popular tourist destinations. Since April 2004 the National Park Service maintains an interpretive center at the former internment camp Manzanar, thus ensuring a permanent touristic presence on site.³ At Berlin, the ‘Mauermuseum’ at Checkpoint Charlie opened in 1963, and remains one of the most visited museums in Berlin; since 1998 the ‘Gedenkstätte Berliner Mauer’ commemorates Berlin’s division and the 136 victims who were shot or died at the Berlin wall. Venice, albeit no longer the sole capital of Western culture, is a major tourist destination worldwide and is visited by 66,000 people on average a day (Eade 2011). Especially Manzanar and the Berlin Wall emanate the ephemerality of man-made structures and of a past that does not necessarily lend itself to create a unifying narrative, but rather one of complications and tensions. Due to their partial destruction, removal, and—in the case of the Venice lagoon—threat of flood tides and erosion their translatability into creations of visual art become all the more important. How can their potential be enhanced and their narratives be artistically reconstructed to allow for visitors’ experiences of a past not necessarily their own? The artist Tamiko Thiel and her collaborators Zara Houshmand and Teresa Reuter not only reconstructed the places in 3D virtual reality installations *Beyond Manzanar* and *Virtuelle Mauer: Re-Constructing the Wall* but also put them in a transnational perspective. *Beyond Manzanar* manages to arouse a feeling of imprisonment that is not only connected to Japanese American experiences during World War II but to the experience of other persecuted minorities. The *Virtuelle Mauer* conveys a sense of what it was like to live ‘in the shadow of the Wall’ that can be applied to similar, still existing border conditions. Finally, Thiel’s installation *The Travels of Mariko Hōrō* turns to questioning the practice of art tourism and the touristic gaze itself. It reconfigures and thus questions practices of Orientalism by turning the Other into a social actor.⁴ As such, it is a form of ‘Oriental’ cultural production that is ‘returning the exoticizing gaze.’ Architectural critic Dean MacCannell’s calls sightseeing a practice of social structural differentiation and explains that “even as [tourism] tries to construct totalities, it celebrates differentiation” (MacCannell 1999, 13). In this sense, Thiel’s art installations not only constitute virtual sites of tourism (located at actual tourist sites) and enhance the tourist experience, but they also question the practice of consuming art at the same time. They stand as critical artistic interventions that elegantly force viewers to change their way of perception and project a future vision that takes us beyond the confines of nation-states.

In his address to the American Studies Association in 2001, Ethnic studies scholar George Sanchez called upon the scientific community to speak out for a tolerance of difference to ensure a continued diversity of experiences shaping U.S.

3 In 2014 Manzanar National Historic Site counted close to 80,000 visitors and ranks at 241 for this park type (i.e. National Park, National Monument, National Historic Site, National Historic Park) (“U.S. National Park Service User Statistics” 2014).

4 I am basing my understanding of an acting and thinking Other/Oriental on Yu 2001; Ngai 2005; and Park 2008.

history, society and culture in times of “global interconnectedness.” Three years later, his demands were expanded by Shelley Fisher Fishkin, who demanded a focus on the nation as a participant in “global flows of people, ideas, and goods and the social, political, linguistic, cultural, and economic crossroads generated in the process” (Fishkin 2005, 22). Transnationalism furthermore requires, according to Russell Duncan and Clara Juncker, “a loosening of boundaries, a deterritorialization of the nation-state, and higher degrees of interconnectedness among cultures and peoples across the globe” (Duncan and Juncker 2004, 8). This dimension not only affects individual identity when such contact zones merge in one person (as is the case with Tamiko Thiel), but it also affects the interaction or crossroads of peoples and cultures.

Human experiences achieve cultural meaning through what Marita Sturken refers to as “technologies of memory” (Sturken 1997, 10). The translation of these experiences into technologies or media of memory needs time, a location, and a form. Temporalization and spatialization have also been described as key categories in the definition of identity. In an unconscious response to Sanchez’s call to work at the “crossroads of time, place, and memory” and Fishkin’s agenda to transnationalize American studies, Thiel with her installations has created works of cultural translation and negotiation. Her personal and artistic identity was shaped on three continents (Asia, America, Europe), and—like her fictional character Mariko Hōrō (Mariko, the wanderer)—she remains a traveler between them. Invested with the power of an outsider—who is at the same time an insider—Thiel lays bare and questions the experiences, memories, and failures of cultures.

Beyond Manzanar

‘Absent Presence’: Creating Installation Art in Transnational Contexts

I pass a small signpost for a historical monument, like a footnote on the highway. Something makes me slow down, back up, and get out of the car, stepping back into the silence of the landscape. There doesn't seem to be much there—a couple of sentry huts built of stone, what looks like an abandoned warehouse but was once an auditorium, a few tall trees and a patch of green that says there's water out there somewhere. Beyond the green, a small white monument stands dwarfed in the shadow of the mountains. This is all that remains of the Manzanar internment camp.

(Houshmand, n.d.)

Zara Houshmand, an Iranian American writer, theater artist, and multimedia designer went on a meditation retreat to Whitney Portal, California, in the immediate aftermath of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. Initially, the media had blamed the attack on Muslim terrorists, thus provoking a wave of hate

crimes against people of Middle Eastern origin. When Houshmand, who was not personally affected by the Oklahoma bombing, happened to visit the site of the Manzanar internment camp on her way to Whitney Portal, it seemed more like a confluence of events (qtd. in Thiel 2001b, 1) (fig. 1). She was not only deeply impressed by the ‘absent presence’ of this former site of Japanese American incarceration but also by the striking similarity of the desert landscape and its mountain background to Iran. Houshmand recalls:



Figure. 1: Cemetery Monument with offerings, Manzanar, 2002. Photo by the author.

I imagined history repeating itself in the most literal way, on this very land, and the irony of mapping such a prison onto the prisons that memory and longing make: the alien looking inward on the landscape of exile, here in this desolate corner of California where the American dream was betrayed. There’s a poem here somewhere, I thought. (Houshmand, n.d.)

The poem was eventually written, yet not immediately; Houshmand instead shared her experience with Tamiko Thiel, an American visual artist of Japanese German heritage.⁵ The grid of roads drawn in the desert during World War II by the military reminded Houshmand of the geometric layout of an Iranian garden. ‘Manzanar’ was named after the apple orchards planted by Euro-American settlers, and Japanese Americans had also created gardens there. In her autobiography *Farewell to Manzanar* Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston describes how Japanese Americans assumed agency through the creation of camp gardens:

Gardens had sprung up everywhere, in the firebreaks, between the rows of barracks—rock gardens, vegetable gardens, cactus and flower gardens. [...] You could face away from the barracks, look past a tiny rapids toward the darkening mountains, and for a while not be a prisoner at all. You could hang suspended in some odd, almost lovely land you could not escape from yet almost didn’t want to leave. (Houston and Houston 1973, 99)

5 Thiel’s grandparents, her mother and siblings lived in Hawaii and were not interned during World War II. The internment experience thus did not scar her family history as it did that of Thiel’s Japanese American friends.

The potentially subversive quality of the gardens as places of temporary escape and inspiration is contained because they remain situated within and thus associated with a place of confinement, atrocity and trauma.

At the outset of their artistic collaboration which became the virtual reality installation *Beyond Manzanar* both Houshmand and Thiel were struck by the layers of meaning they had discovered in the creation of gardens, which connected the Japanese, Iranian and American cultures.⁶ More importantly, the two artists realized that they both shared similar experiences and memories, belonging to groups that represent(ed) ‘the face of the enemy.’⁷

* * *

Since the 1990s Japanese American internment experiences are finally achieving cultural and political attention after Japanese American groups, organizations and individuals pressed for a formal apology and for redress in the 1980s. At this time, Japanese Americans needed both to regain a voice—after a long period of silence—and to reclaim a place in the American national landscape of memory because many of the former internment camp sites had been eradicated by the federal government shortly after the closure of the camps in 1945.⁸ Considering the ‘absent presence’ of Japanese American internment experiences, one is tempted to ask whether any memorial of brick and stone can properly commemorate the time of incarceration. Marita Sturken believes that “the most powerful kinds of memorials demand forms of re-enactment in the sense that they force viewers to participate rather than to find a comfortable distance” (Sturken 2001, 46). Unknowingly heeding Sturken’s suggestion, the artists Tamiko Thiel and

6 *Beyond Manzanar* was the artists’ own idea, and although they received some funding for it (most notably the IAMAS grant, see later in this article), it is not a commissioned work of art.

7 Almost forty years after the wrongful incarceration of over 120,000 Japanese Americans, in 1979, at the height of the Iranian hostage crisis, a suggestion to intern Iranian Americans circulated in the United States.

8 In 1988, the Civil Liberties Act awarded the 60,000 former internees still living \$1.25 billion in reparations. Two years later, in October 1990, President George H. W. Bush signed a formal apology as well as the first checks made out to members of the Japanese American community who had been incarcerated. The Civil Liberties Public Education Fund (CLPEF), established under the Civil Liberties Act, was mandated to finance projects that would educate the public about internment, sponsor research activities and award national fellowships. As a result, visibility and knowledge of the internment began to increase in the 1990s, and the ground was prepared for the recognition and discussion of Japanese American experiences during World War II (see Gessner 2007, 32). In 1992 the federal government stepped in to position Japanese American experiences within the national narrative. Manzanar remains the only national historic site of an internment camp that is being restored and since 2004 features an on-site museum and interpretive center. In January 2001, Minidoka Internment National Monument became the 385th unit of the National Park System. Yet, to this date, Minidoka does not have any visitor facilities or services available on the site. Heart Mountain, Wyoming, a national historic landmark since 2007, has a privately funded interpretive center since August 2011.

her collaborator Zara Houshmand, who were struck by Manzanar's significance in exemplifying the treatment of 'an Other,' virtually reconstructed the site, also widening its scope and perspective by working across cultural boundaries.

When they started working on *Beyond Manzanar* in 1995 neither Thiel nor Houshmand could anticipate the political climate that would follow the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, or what would occur in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo under the veil of the so-called war on terror. Thiel and Houshmand took up discussions in the field of cyber culture which define multimedia interactivity as more problematic and complex than merely moving a computer mouse or pressing a button. Janet H. Murray points out that computers allow narrative to be moved to a realm structured by games, for example, "a digital artist might use the structure of the adventure maze to embody a moral individual's confrontation with state-sanctioned violence" (Murray 1997, 131). Some cyber culture critics go even further in their visions of how interactive technologies can revolutionize social memory. Flavia Sparacino, Glorianna Davenport, and Alex Pentland believe that the art museum could become "a living memory theatre" by incorporating wearable computers to create immersive museum environments. New technologies should be used to clad us in memory devices in order "to imprint us with the memories of the past and project them indelibly into our future" (Sparacino, Davenport, and Pentland 2002, 81).

For *Beyond Manzanar*, a *realistic* reconstruction of the internment camp site, with guard towers and barracks, became the framework. Yet, being *virtual* reality, it also provides "an experience that is impossible to get from visiting the real site" (Thiel 2001a). Inside the virtual camp, the artists planted a Japanese and an Iranian garden as "magical healing spaces like those the mind builds when reality fails" (Houshmand, n.d.). They "combined techniques of computer games and theater design to create a highly symbolic, often surreal environment with a poetic reality stronger than photorealism" (Thiel and Houshmand 1998b). Virtual reality's performative quality seems indeed to imply a close relation to theater.⁹ "As in a theater setting," Elizabeth K. Menon contends, the viewer "watches a performance played out by actors (visually manifest individuals or objects) based on a script (which controls the action and physically exists, although it is not literally visible)" (Menon 2005, 29). Compared to theatrical performance, the range of interaction possible between the art installation and its viewers then allows for a greater degree of freedom and engagement.

Four contexts seem relevant when exploring *Beyond Manzanar*. First, it widens the scope of the topic of Japanese American experiences by including the Iranian American community; its message is universal. Second, it was created in response to attacks on people of Middle Eastern origin after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, during which the media had erroneously linked the attack to the Middle East.

9 In *Computers as Theatre*, Brenda Laurel argues that Aristotle's elements of the dramatic arts could be connected to the realm of human-computer interaction (Laurel 1993).

Third, it refers to attacks on Iranian Americans and calls for their internment during the 1979-1980 Iranian Hostage Crisis.¹⁰ Finally, the installation parallels instances of xenophobia and criticizes assaults on Arab Americans and Muslim Americans in the aftermath of 9/11.¹¹ Since visitors are taking on the role of the internee, they are confronted time and again with their own confinement despite the apparent freedom of movement within the virtual space. The provocative juxtapositions make *Beyond Manzanar* an artistic achievement that may trigger profound empathy in visitors who have neither experienced the Japanese American internment, nor suffered under exclusionary sentiments and discrimination.

Bringing In the Art Museum Visitor: Navigating *Beyond Manzanar*



Figure 2: Two visitors explore *Beyond Manzanar*. Tamiko Thiel and Zara Housmand, San Jose Museum of Art, 2003. Photo by the author.

Using a joystick mounted in front of the life-sized projected image, museum visitors can freely move within the virtual space. Thiel and Housmand created a nonlinear narrative, which every visitor/user constructs anew. While only one visitor/user may control the actual movements and decide which course or road to take, other visitors may watch and share the experience (fig. 2).

The starting point is a ground plan with rectangles and barracks emerging, as well as an enormous mountain range, the Sierra Nevada, which majestically marks the horizon. Similar to the way the mountain landscape frames the scene, *Beyond Manzanar* is framed by two prayers: the *azan*, the Muslim call to prayer, and a Buddhist Mandala. The visual experience

10 During the crisis, the Carter administration took preliminary steps against Iranian college students living in the United States (Daniels 2002, 307). Ali Behdad calls attention to “the mostly forgotten, inhospitable treatment of Iranian students in the US during the hostage crisis both as a way to challenge the now-familiar privileging of 11 September 2001 as threshold moment for the reconfiguration of racial, ethnic, and religious dynamics in the US, and also as a way to make a broader claim about the underlying structures of disavowal which [...] have led to the frequent depiction of official responses to 9/11 as historically unprecedented” (Behdad 2008, 286).

11 Two weeks after the terrorist attacks a third of the respondents in a poll said they would favor the detainment of Arab American citizens until their loyalty could be proven (Bai 2001, 21). Also, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) responded to numerous incidents of violence and harassment against Muslim Americans and other individuals or groups that are perceived to be of Middle Eastern descent (Anti-Defamation League 2001).

is augmented by the sound of howling desert wind and the rustling of footsteps in the desert sand. When visitors/users follow the open road trying to leave the camp a barbed-wire fence fades in. The sudden removal from an open landscape to the camp's enclosure underscores "the emotional impact of confinement" (Thiel and Houshmand 1998a). Although the mountain range of the Sierra Nevada still dominates the horizon, guard towers now become visible. The fence represents more than a physical object as poems about exile and internment in Farsi, Japanese, and English appear interwoven within the barbed wire. Two of the 'fence poems' are by the thirteenth-century Persian Sufi mystic Rumi, whose family fled one step ahead of the Mongol invasions. He employs conventional themes of Persian poetry: exile and separation from the beloved are usually understood as a metaphor for separation from God, the human condition as a 'fallen' state, and the emotional quality of longing as an expression of spiritual aspiration.¹² The second poem reveals the concepts of imprisonment versus freedom, and fences versus gates as mere mental constructs. The Persian poems thus reference a state beyond the immediate troubles, an internal state rather than an external resolution that may exude hope for anyone confined. The Japanese 'fence poems' are contemporary expressions by former internee Sojin Tokiji Takei. His poems express the feeling of confinement, but also the boundlessness of nature experienced in prison. Nature, however, is not always compassionate, as nothing grows in the wasteland. The two concluding 'fence poems' are taken from the earliest anthology of Japanese poetry, the *Manyōshū* dating back to around 770 AD. Compared to Takei's lines, their portrayal of the deep sorrow of confinement is even bleaker.

The installation offers no way out of the camp by means of overcoming the fence. Museum visitors navigating *Beyond Manzanar*—like the Japanese American internees—have become prisoners. "Confined within the camp, [they] have nowhere to go but inwards, into the refuge of memory and fantasy" the artists explain (Thiel and Houshmand 1998a). Condemned to wander through the camp, visitors/users notice racist World War II-era newspaper headlines materialize and dissolve: "It takes 8 tons of freight to k.o. 1 Jap," "We don't want any Japs back here ever!" These anti-Japanese headlines literally "fill the air with hate" (Thiel 2001a). Cole Porter's song "Don't Fence Me In" constitutes an ironic commentary on the situation of obvious confinement. The camp barracks seem inhabited, as photographs illustrating the internees' daily lives at Manzanar are visible through the windows.

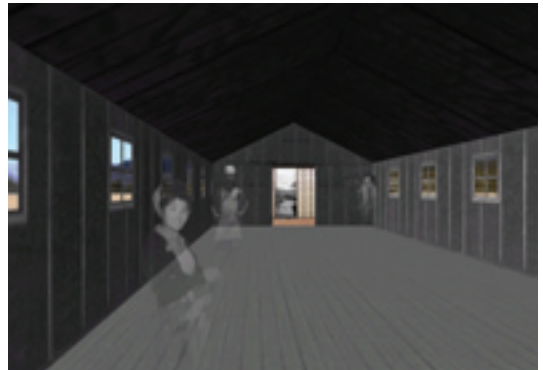


Figure 3: Barracks seem inhabited by ghosts from the past. Tamiko Thiel and Zara Houshmand, *Beyond Manzanar*, 2000.

12 I am very grateful to Zara Houshmand for explaining the reference to Persian poetry to me.

Once inside a barrack, the closing door traps visitors/users inside. They encounter ‘shadows’ of Japanese Americans or—to be precise—black and white photographs or cut-out silhouettes of other internees (fig. 3). Some of the photographs seem suspended from the virtual ceiling like Japanese scrolls. Other photographs displayed in a gallery-like style, yet mounted on what looks like a wallpapered living-room wall, tell the story of Japanese immigration to the United States. Some photographs show immigration papers and document Japanese American life before the war. American-style family and wedding photographs are displayed next to a young Japanese American who is proudly wearing his U.S. Army uniform. The photographs suggest that a homogeneous national identity defined by origins or residence alone is not possible; instead Japanese American ethnicity is defined and complicated by an acceptance of both parts.



Figure 4: The Iranian American nightmare. Tamiko Thiel and Zara Houshmand, *Beyond Manzanar*, 2000.

armed guard.¹³ In virtuality, the forced removal of Japanese Americans becomes very concrete. Then the scenes of Japanese American removal and internment change to the depiction of Iranian American scenes in another wallpapered room: Iranian American college graduates, American-style Iranian American bride and groom, and a grandmother with her grandchild stand for happiness and stability, for an ‘Iranian American Dream’ presented in gold-rimmed frames. Even a picture of President John F. Kennedy is displayed among the family photographs. Especially to an older generation of Iranian Americans who were eager to send their children to the United States before the revolution to be educated, Kennedy seemed to represent the best of America.¹⁴ If visitors/users move from the middle of the

Yet, what might be called a (Japanese) American Dream of acceptance, achievement, and prosperity is broken and becomes a nightmare as the context of the installation changes to camp photographs now mounted on the bare barrack walls. At the same time, miniaturized rows of barracks appear where the wooden floor should be. Floating above the barracks, deprived of stability, visitors/users behold photographs of Japanese Americans walking down Bainbridge Island pier under

13 These images were also referenced in the film *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1999) based on David Guterson’s novel (1994). Director Scott Hicks re-enacted the Bainbridge Island scene to depict the forced removal of Japanese Americans. Similar to Hicks, Thiel and Houshmand also use historical photographs to establish various spaces in their installation.

14 The image of Kennedy that Thiel and Houshmand constructed for *Beyond Manzanar* is meant to be a portrait woven into a Persian wall carpet, which was a very popular item in the carpet shops of Tehran in the 1960s and 1970s. I am grateful for Zara Houshmand’s comment here.

room closer to the images, the walls turn transparent to reveal media photographs of Iranians as the enemy, and the barracks of the Manzanar internment camp. One headline reads: “We interned the Japanese, why not intern the Iranians?” The accompanying photographs underscore the message by showing blindfolded men herded together, (the U.S. hostages being shown off by their Iranian student captors) as well as gun-toting women wearing headscarves (fig. 4). Like the ‘Japanese American Dream,’ the ‘Iranian American Dream’ becomes a nightmare. As in the Japanese American internment nightmare scene, visitors/users hover over rows of miniaturized barracks which thereby thematically links the events around the Iranian hostage crisis with the Japanese American incarceration.

Impressions of frustration and fear still linger, when the entire camp seems to disappear upon the visitors’ entering an Edenic garden. In this environment, they are distanced from what has once been the camp, only the mountain range on the horizon continues to convey the same sense of place (fig. 5). Forming a constant backdrop for the shifting layers of superimposed context the mountain panorama thus defines the Manzanar site. The Iranian landscape garden¹⁵ may suggest a ‘better’ version of reality, which can only be realized in virtuality. Yet, in *Beyond Manzanar* confinement rather than freedom remains the subject.¹⁶ If visitors/users approach the garden gate, the control over the invisible avatar they have been steering so far is suddenly taken away; the projection no longer reacts to the joystick’s movements. Agency is lost, and users are pulled out of the camp, which is then visible through the crosshairs of an F-15 fighter jet (fig. 6). The images



Figure 5: The Iranian paradise garden. Tamiko Thiel and Zara Houshmand, *Beyond Manzanar*, 2000.

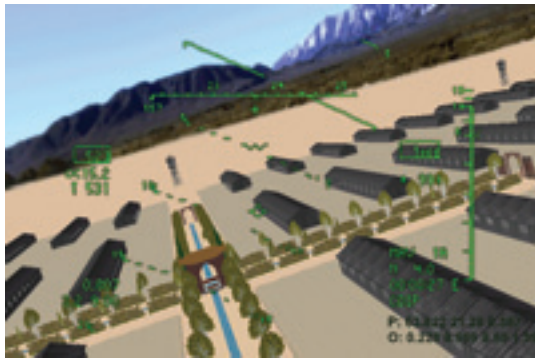


Figure 6: Video/Game/War—the only way out of the garden. Tamiko Thiel and Zara Houshmand, *Beyond Manzanar*, 2000.

- 15 According to Houshmand, the layout resembles a *chahar-bagh* garden, a conventional representation of paradise in Iranian art and garden design.
- 16 In this context, Matthew Wilson Smith writes: “*Beyond Manzanar* gives us virtual gardens, but these gardens have weeds: we are given both hope and oppression, rootedness and dislocation. The gardens comfort, but not for long. They provide refuge, but only as stations on a journey that remains as resistant to totality as cyberspace itself” (Smith 2007, 186).

are reminiscent of the pictures of so-called surgical attacks—pictures as they were provided to the public during the first Iraq War. Within *Beyond Manzanar* this constitutes a moment of disempowerment since users have already lost control over the joystick. Thrust upwards in the F-15 fighter they sweep over the mountains of Manzanar, unable to determine which position they hold in this war, whether they are the attackers or whether they are being attacked.¹⁷

When the F-15 finally passes on the screen, a poem—referred to as ‘Mandala for Manzanar’—written by Houshmand appears against the mountain backdrop. It counters the violence of the previous scene and pleads for a perceptive exercise, expressing the hope that the story may never be repeated. The first stanza is tied to the specific surrounding of the Manzanar site and is thus situated in a Japanese American context; to the west lies Japan, “*a sea of strangers*” to the speaker who wears the same face, but feels no connection. In the second stanza the “*sea of strangers*” becomes “*a million mouths.*” The speaker, supposedly part of a developed industrialized nation, identifies the foreign tongues as her own tongue, suggesting hemispheric connectedness (North and South) in a globalized world. In the third stanza addressed to the East, the speaker also wants the reader to identify with the ‘Other’. The division between ‘them’ and ‘us’ is only a construct. In the fourth and final stanza, the speaker returns to the North and cautions North America to responsibly accept its role in the world “to console or feed,” but to also be “ever watchful never to repeat.” The circular structure of the poem evokes the four cardinal directions of Buddhism, which is also frequently occurring in Native American oral tradition. After wavering between emotional highs and lows due to the constant change between different layers and environments within virtual reality, Houshmand’s poem provides a cathartic resolution to the visitors/users who navigated the space. What Lauren Berlant would perspectivize through the lens of affect (2004), Brady sums up with regard to the function of such a multisensory experience, as it is provided in Thiel’s *Beyond Manzanar*; he references Foucault’s explanation of subject formation to point to the “emotional response inevitably felt by visitors [...]. The affective reaction allows visitor to confirm their role in particular social relations, and their participation has served as a technique of the self” (2011, 452).

Beyond Manzanar has found a permanent home in the San Jose Museum of Art. The museum is dedicated to visual culture in Silicon Valley, presenting twentieth and twenty-first century art to the diverse audiences of the Bay Area. *Beyond Manzanar* has also been shown in New York and Seattle. In spring 2005 *Beyond Manzanar* was part of a museum exhibition called *Xenopolis: On the Fascination with and Marginalisation of the Other* in Munich, Germany. An exhibition in Wolfsburg, Germany, on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II, also featured the installation in 2005 with an agenda to discuss the nature of war,

17 In reality the occasional sonic boom or high drone of fighter planes from nearby Edwards Air Force Base is the only sound that disturbs the silence at Manzanar today. The fighter plane sequence thus also has a concrete relationship to the particular landscape and may offer yet another layer of meaning to *Beyond Manzanar*.

its motivations and command structure and to interrogate the constant presence of war in our media age.

Virtuelle Mauer: Re-Constructing the Wall

Reconstructing a Vanished Space

“Where was the Wall? Are we in East Berlin or West Berlin?”—taking these frequently asked questions of the twenty-first-century Berlin tourist serious enough to provide an immersive answer Tamiko Thiel and her architect collaborator Teresa Reuter set out to reconstruct a vanished demarcation line that shaped Berlin as a political-militaristic, social, and cultural space for almost three decades. Built in 1961, the Wall became the concrete symbol of Berlin and Germany’s division, as well as that of the ideological and political systems facing each other during the Cold War. In their exhibition concept the artists Thiel and Reuter explain: “For the East German government, that built the Wall to prevent its own citizens from fleeing to the West, it was the ‘anti-fascist protective barrier.’ For the West German government, which refused to officially recognize its existence, it was an ‘unlawful’ consequence of the East-West conflicts of the Cold War” (Thiel and Reuter 2012). When it came down in November 1989, the wish was for getting rid of the hated Wall as quickly as possible. While larger pieces were officially given to institutions around the world, souvenir hunters did their share and hammered pieces off the wall, the colored graffiti ones (of the Western side of the wall) attaining particular value in the hierarchy of concrete.

In the 2000s young people came of age, who had neither experienced the Wall or the political threat and the sociological divisions it engendered. In this respect John Czaplicka of Harvard University Center for European Studies very convincingly explains that the Wall “was constructed in the collective experiences of those who encountered it.” With this defining space gone how could one convey why the “Wall in people’s heads” was such a constant presence and what “living in the shadow of the wall” meant in everyday life? Czaplicka relays his personal experience of uneasiness and temporary imprisonment when crossing the border and passing from one side of the Wall to the other. His words surely resonate with many Westerners who have experienced it similarly:

Once allowed into the labyrinthine security of the built expanse dividing Berlin, you had no assured egress. One waited before searching and suspicious eyes, waited for a passport to be returned, waited to exchange money, waited for entry into the next box of the border maze. Metal gates and doors divided the shifting enclosures of

a machinery of state. The complexity, variability, and duration of the Wall's experience cannot be conjured up by mere images in a museum. And only Kafka could capture the feeling of helplessness that filled the lasting interval between entry and exit. Waiting within the grasp of the Wall seemed an eternity. No one expected it would fall.

Yet the experience of border-crossing was different each time; you never knew what to expect. Consequently, any artistic or memorial piece trying to take on the complexity of the Wall would have to be equally unpredictable, variable, and multi-directional, allowing for different paths, views, and experiences. The answer may thus not lie in touring the few slabs of the Wall still standing upright (such as at Niederkirchnerstraße close to the *Topography of Terror* exhibition, at Liesenstraße, or at the East Side Gallery of the hinterland wall) but in a spatial experience of enclosure and exclusion that effective memorial architecture or experiential digital art might provide. Thiel and Reuter's impressive solution to these questions is their virtual reality (VR) artwork installation *Virtuelle Mauer: Re-Constructing the Wall*, an interactive 3D computer graphics environment that reconstructs life during the period defined by the Berlin Wall and allows visitors/users to experience a segment of it in its former complexity.

The artists chose a closely built-up residential area for their project to convey the contradictory closeness and separateness the Wall created: from the former border crossing at Heinrich-Heine-Straße and Sebastianstraße, over the 'Engelbecken' to Bethaniendamm/Engeldamm. The approximately one kilometer (about half a mile) long stretch of former Wall and death strip separated the district (*Kiez*) of Mitte in the East and bohemian Kreuzberg in the West (fig. 7). People in

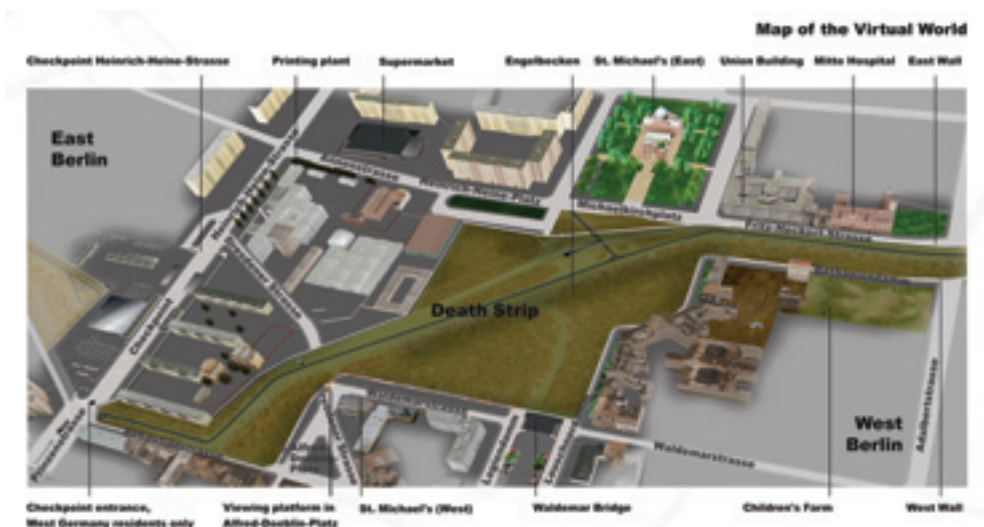


Figure 7: Map of the Virtual World. T+T (Tamiko Thiel and Teresa Reuter), *Virtuelle Mauer*, 2008.

this area were able to glimpse into the lives on the other side and literally lived in the shadow of the Wall, as the sunlight was blocked by the Wall for those living on the ground floor. Thiel and Reuter researched archival files and photographs and talked to witnesses and people from the neighborhoods before developing a dramatic concept based on a hyper-storyboard of interactively connected scenes. Relying on original documentation from a time before street view maps they reconstructed the border section with great attention to detail. For example, where the Wall divided the former congregation of St. Michael's Church (*Michaelkirche*), artist Yadegar Asisi had completed the church ruin in a deceptively authentic *trompe l'oeil* style on the Wall in the 1980s. The painting became part of Thiel and Reuter's virtual installation and also functions as a portal transporting the traveler through the Wall into the East facing the *Plattenbauten* (the typical East German prefabricated construction method) in their pre-renovated state in the 1980s.

Conceived and developed together with the Cultural Department of Berlin, further renowned partners indicate the (felt) political, social and cultural relevance of the project that is also part of the Berlin Wall Memorial Concept of the Berlin Senate Chancellery for Cultural Affairs.¹⁸ The work premiered on August 13, 2008 (the anniversary of the building of the Wall) at the Museum for Communication, Berlin. In the United States *Virtuelle Mauer* was first shown in November 2008 in the 911 Media Arts Center in Seattle. In April 2009 the Goethe-Institut presented the work at its Boston institution, where it was awarded the IBM Innovation Award of the Boston Cyberarts Festival. Sebastian Smee, art critic at the *Boston Globe*, called it the "highlight of this year's [...] Festival." Since then, *Virtuelle Mauer* has traveled to various places in Europe, North America and Asia, also proving the universal applicability of the artwork.

Bringing In the Museum Visitor: Experiencing to Live "in the Shadow of the Wall"

As with the VR installation *Beyond Manzanar* the virtual wall provides an interactive, kinesthetic and immersive encounter before a nine-by-twelve foot screen space users navigate with a simple joystick. The darkened and enclosed room and the life-size projection immerse the user in the scene. As protagonists and main navigators of the space users become average Berlin residents experiencing how it was to live "in the shadow of the Wall" along three time axes: the 1960s, the mid-1980s and the present time. Sounds as diverse as screeching tires from a truck

18 Partners include the Hauptstadtkulturfonds (Capital City Cultural Fund of Berlin), which also served as the primary financial sponsor (with 110,000 Euro); the support was complemented by the Berlin Wall Documentation Center, the Museum for Communication in Berlin, the State Department of the Federal Republic of Germany, the Goethe-Institut Boston, Dr. John Czaplicka, PhD of Harvard University Center for European Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology—Center for Advanced Visual Studies, metroGap e.V., Bitmanagement Systems.

crashing through the crude 1960s wall, or St. Michael's church bells, or the bleating of the goats from a children's farm add a sonic dimension to the experience.



Figure 8: Border guard at the Heinrich-Heine-Strasse Border Crossing. T+T (Tamiko Thiel and Teresa Reuter), *Virtuelle Mauer*, 2008.

which was, paradoxically, East German territory.²⁰ The houses of the street, however, stood in the West, and open doors invite users to take a look inside. Framed by one of the windows, they get a view back onto the Heinrich-Heine-Strasse border crossing, as well as a view of the Wall, the death strip (*Todesstreifen*) and East Berlin houses in the exclusion zone.



Figure 9: Border guard at the Heinrich-Heine-Strasse Border Crossing. T+T (Tamiko Thiel and Teresa Reuter), *Virtuelle Mauer*, 2008.

statements with short remarks in English. When the woman tells the story of the family in the corner house that was able to break open a boarded-up window one night and managed to escape, the Wall of the 1980s transforms into that of the

One might begin the virtual tour at Checkpoint Heinrich-Heine-Straße where, as the West Berlin citizen one has merged into, is confronted with the fact that at this border crossing the only people allowed to cross were residents of West Germany, diplomats and vehicles with special permission for commerce and transport.¹⁹ Back in the 1980s, users are turned back by the stoic border guard (fig. 8). They may continue to walk along the sidewalk of western Sebastianstraße,

At Alfred-Döblin Platz users may approach a couple on a sightseeing tour, a woman in a tiger-print leggings and short bright green hair—a style that clearly situates her in the 1980s—and her rather indistinctly-clad American travel companion (fig. 9). In a thick Berlin accent the woman tells the man about former stretches of the Wall being made up of buildings with boarded-up facades back in the 1960s. Her companion translates what she says into English or endorses her

19 In my description of the installation I am indebted to Tamiko Thiel and Teresa Reuter and their excellent website at <http://www.virtuelle-mauer-berlin.de>.

20 “The Berlin Wall was usually built slightly inside the East German borders, so that West German authorities were not allowed to approach the Wall” Thiel and Reuter explain (Thiel and Reuter 2008).

1960s and a rope is left dangling from a window. In the realistic world of art the linearity of historical discourse is deconstructed as users hover between times and transforming spaces. In fact, users then witness the official consequence of the rope flight: the upper levels of the houses are demolished and the ground floor windows and doors are filled with bricks; stumps of houses had become an insurmountable barrier. They were left standing up until the 1970s, at which time they were replaced by a much stronger wall.

Apart from the sightseeing couple the square and streets seem deserted, “as they would have been near the wall,” Annette Klein, program coordinator at Goethe-Institut Boston recalls (qtd. in Hadge 2009). If one continues to move down the street the virtual world transforms

back to the 1980s and users pass along a colorful stretch of graffiti on the western Wall; it is almost like moving along an open gallery. Only a little bit further down the street,

one meets people again: an older German woman is talking to what appears to be her Turkish neighbor. She informs her neighbor about the “Studio am Stacheldraht” (SaS) a mobile barbed-wire radio studio in a VW bus that began broadcasting news and information to East Berliners in August 1961. Supported by the West Berlin Senate and RIAS (Broadcasting in the American Sector), the programs served to counter the public address systems that transmitted propaganda from the East. While the two women talk to each other, the border houses of the 1960s reappear and the “Studio am Stacheldraht” VW bus begins a broadcast (fig. 10).

The virtual wall also includes portals that allow for switching sides. For example, from Waldemar Bridge the *trompe l’oeil* wall painting of St. Michael’s Church catches the user’s eye. When users approach the image on the western Wall, they are transported into the time of the reunified twenty-first century city with the Wall gone. Users are able to freely cross into former East Berlin. Yet, only as long as they remain in the confines of the former death strip they stay in the



Figure 10: The VW bus from “Studio am Stacheldraht” appears and begins a broadcast. T+T (Tamiko Thiel and Teresa Reuter), *Virtuelle Mauer*, 2008.



Figure 11: View from Hospital Mitte: Death strip and children’s farm in Kreuzberg at the corner of Adalbertstrasse and Bethaniendamm. T+T (Tamiko Thiel and Teresa Reuter), *Virtuelle Mauer*, 2008.

present. As soon as they cross the unseen border into the former East, the scenery transforms and the Berlin Wall of the 1980s fades back in. The hinterland wall of the East blocks the view and feelings of confinement and uneasiness creep back in. An open door on the East Berlin side leads users into the old Hospital Mitte, which was one of the few places where average East Berliners who did not live close to the Wall could visually overcome the hinterland wall and see what the death strip looks like (fig. 11). They could also peek into the West and would see that—at that time in the 1980s—there was plenty of unused and run-down space in the so-called ‘golden’ West: a children’s farm occupied the corner of Adalbertstraße and Bethaniendamm.

In contrast, the residential quarter around Heinrich-Heine-Platz in the East was a thriving area that had undergone urban renewal as one of the first after the war, including the building of high-rise *Plattenbauten* and a HO Kaufhalle department store. Yet, moving just around the Kaufhalle users are back at Heinrich-Heine-Straße border crossing—this time facing it from the East, again with no means to overcome it—powerless and helpless.



Figure 12: Catholic church of St. Michael, built in 1851. T+T (Tamiko Thiel and Teresa Reuter), *Virtuelle Mauer*, 2008.

In a flashback vignette seen from the East, users witness a truck trying to break through the barriers from East to West only to be violently stopped by gunfire.²¹ Literally, forced to turn back, users are likely to find their way to the Catholic church of St. Michael (fig. 12)—this time the real and not the painted one—and for the users the main portal of what might be read as a sanctuary opens. They are taken on what Thiel calls a “surreal

journey high over the roofs of East Berlin” and back into the twenty-first century. Landing in the Engelbecken Park, the former death strip, users are free to choose their path to the West or the East—if they remember where the border was.

By providing an immersive, kinesthetic experience in the spaces divided and created by the Berlin Wall, especially the feeling of confinement is convincingly conveyed, for example by having visitors navigate the narrow space between the Wall and a block of West Berlin houses. Barbed wire and guard towers within the death strip, the presence of armed border guards at Checkpoint Heinrich-Heine-Straße furthermore reinforce the feeling of living under a permanent threat, both in the East and the West. Through the visual potency of the images, the affective quality is retained even if one does not speak English or German. Yet, many

21 The virtual escape attempt is based on a real event in 1962 when three men tried to escape to the West. The driver Klaus Brüske died, his friends survived seriously injured (Jekosch 2008).

questions also emerge in the virtual environment: How many people succeeded in their flight attempts through boarded-up windows before the houses were torn down? Or, how propagandistic was the “Studio am Stacheldraht”? Only some of the questions are answered in a brochure (in English and German) that provides explanatory background information on the political context, the social differences between East and West Berlin and the urban situation in the densely populated area of Kreuzberg and Mitte. Besides a chronology of events the brochure provides a visual record and spatial understanding of the Wall that was also used for the creation/realization of the installation: historic and recent photos, panoramas, aerial photos and maps.

In this respect, other works of art, particularly novels and films, come to mind that have conveyed life behind the iron curtain in the German Democratic Republic—Ingo Schulze’s *Neue Leben* (transl. *New Lives*, 2005); Uwe Tellkamp’s *Der Turm: Geschichte auseinemversunkenen Land* (transl. *The Tower: Tales from a Lost Country*, 2008); the Oscar-winning *The Lives of Others* (orig. *Das Leben der Anderen*, Dir. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006); or the comedy *Good Bye Lenin!* (Dir. Wolfgang Becker, 2003). These narratives may also inform and complement the visitor’s experience of the virtual wall. The Berlin Wall Trail (*Berliner Mauerweg*) seems another promising complementary development. Begun in 2002 and completed in 2006, it features markers with short texts and photographs put up across the city and encircling West Berlin along a total of 160 kilometers around West Berlin. At 29 sites people who died at the Wall are commemorated. The practice reminds one of the successful *Stolpersteine* (literally “stumbling blocks”) which, in many countries and cities, mark the last residences of Jewish Holocaust victims and other persecuted minorities deported and killed during the Third Reich. The special achievement of *Virtuelle Mauer*, however, is that it allows a double perspective from the East and the West onto the Wall in a three-dimensional space as well as the possibility of a fourth—chronological—dimension, of experiencing the historical Wall and subsequent spatial developments at different points in time.

The Travels of Mariko Hōrō

Imagining Mariko Hōrō’s World

A place on the map is also a place in history.

(Rich 1986, 212)

For many Westerners a map determines one’s location and identity. Similar to the creation of *Beyond Manzanar* and *Virtuelle Mauer*, the virtual reality installation *The Travels of Mariko Hōrō* began with two maps, this time not depicting an Iranian garden and the layout of an internment camp, or a map of divided Berlin, but a map



Figure 13: Map of Venice, c. 1150 A.D. In: Giocondo Cassini, *Piante e Vedute Prospettiche di Venezia* (1479-1855). Venice: La Stamperia di Venezia Editrice, 1971. 162-63.

of Venice, Italy, and a Japanese *bankokujinbutsuzue*, a panoramic map of the world (figs. 13-14). However, quite unlike her approach in *Beyond Manzanar* and *Virtuelle Mauer* Thiel in *Mariko Hōrō* does not build upon other people's experiences. Instead, she uses the conceit of a fictitious female variant of Marco Polo and places her in the familiar, yet also distorted version of the Venice lagoon that metonymically represents the West. Venice represents the geographical meeting point between Asia and Europe, a contact zone where the perceived sensuality and exoticism of the East blends with the more restrained, and supposedly civilised West. The blueprint for the virtual Venice is provided by a 1346 woodblock print, or more precisely of its churches (fig. 13).²² Hōrō's world and her world view are structured in a *namban-bunka*-style, a Japanese art genre used to depict foreigners and foreign lands.²³ "What would



Figure 14: Japanese board game depicting entire world composed of islands, late 1800s.

Mariko think, if this is her only map of the West?" asks Thiel, and continues, "[t]he West must be composed of islands, some with buildings, some without, some buildings standing in the water..." (Thiel 2007, 15). Coming from an island nation herself, Hōrō's world is conceptualized around the assumption that all nations must exist on islands. This assumption corresponds to a mid-nineteenth-century Japanese map that depicts the

22 The original of the map probably dates back to 1150. Thiel surmises that as "Marco Polo lived from 1254-1324, if he had carried a map of Venice with him on his travels to China, it could have been this one" (Thiel 2007, 15).

23 Between the mid-1550s and the mid-1800s, when Japan literally shut itself out from the world, "few maps, books and prints [were] brought in by the Dutch or via trade with China, a few enthusiasts tried to understand the culture and the knowledge of the West. Japanese artists taught themselves oil painting and copperplate printing, investigated European perspective and other western artistic conventions, and incorporated these techniques into their own practice. In many artworks they attempted to recreate Europe, an exotic and unknowable universe, drawing on these reference materials but enhancing them out of their own, fertile imaginations" (Thiel 2007, 17).

entire world as composed of islands. While certainly symbolic in scope—the image was originally produced “for a board game, Sugoroku, that often uses ‘island hopping’ travels around the world as a theme”²⁴—the map is ‘translated’ into islands of the Venetian lagoon which the character of Hōrō takes “for the countries of the fabled Western World and the Buddhist Western Paradise” (Thiel 2007, 15) (fig. 15).

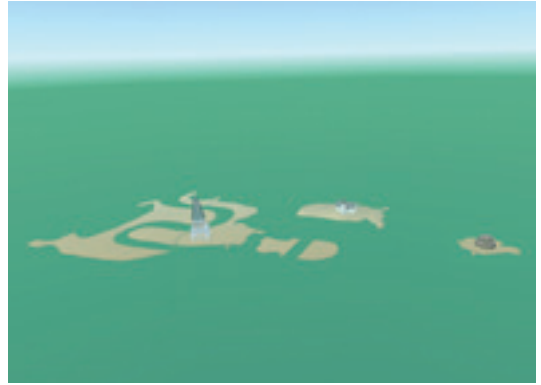


Figure 15: Islands floating in the Western Seas. Tamiko Thiel, *Travels of Mariko Hōrō*, 2006.

Thiel deliberately chooses Venice and the Mediterranean Sea as fictional location of her installation.

The Mediterranean—from classical antiquity to the Renaissance—had been the center of the (known) world for Europeans—“a body of water to gather around, a known space to travel over” (Clifford 1989). This center shifted to the west with the discovery of the Americas in new maps, such as the one created by the German cartographer Martin Waldseemüller (1507). In the thirteenth century the Venetian explorer Marco Polo traveled East, while Thiel’s protagonist travels West sometime between the twelfth and the twenty-second centuries. The phonetic and phonemic similarity with the name of the Italian explorer seems no coincidence. Her name is made up of the Japanized form of Mary, the mother of God in the Christian worldview, and the Japanese word *hōrō*, meaning ‘to wander’²⁵. The latter reference explicitly points toward her position as traveler, migrant or even exile in a strange and foreign world. The timelessness of the piece, which was created between 2003 and 2006, becomes evident in the context of the European refugee crisis which escalated since 2015. Contrary to the other two installations *Mariko Hōrō* has not found a permanent home in a specific museum but continues to benefit from its applicability and significance in various environments. It has been shown in Kyoto, Boston, San Jose, Munich, Wolfsburg, Ghent, San Diego, Seattle, Berlin, Venice, Regensburg, and Florence.

Tracing Mariko Hōrō’s Footsteps

Hōrō’s travels and her experiences are encapsulated in a series of what Thiel calls “Hōrō-grams” or 3D virtual spaces. These spaces are accessible by the installation’s users through church portals. The transformation felt upon entering

24 Thiel further explains that “travel has always been popular in Japan, pilgrimages to scenic places in Japan for instance but also often as fantasy (“Gulliver’s Travels” was the first western novel translated into Japanese), as it was always physically difficult, and at times even politically forbidden, for Japanese to leave their home islands” (Thiel 2007, 15).

25 In combination with the name Mariko the verb *hōrō* (to wander) evolves into ‘Mariko the Wanderer.’

might indeed not be limited to the virtual world, as many Orthodox and Catholic church interiors are built to present a form of other or virtual reality: once inside you leave the profane world behind and enter a symbolic heaven.

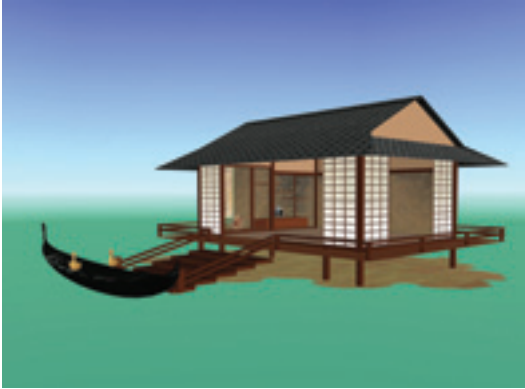


Figure 16: Mariko's home in the lagoon. Tamiko Thiel, *Travels of Mariko Hōrō*, 2006.

symbolology. The fact that Hōrō understands, i.e. “sees” Christian iconography only in terms of Buddhist imagery is conveyed in the blending of the two styles: the Stairs of the Giants in the Palazzo Ducale resemble the Western Guardian Kings of Buddhist cosmology; Asian-faced *avogadori* (Venetian judges in red robes) lead the way to a Court of Final Judgment. The mosaic of Christos Pantocrator, the primary icon of the Basilica San Marco, is placed at the center of a mandala surrounded by Christian saints (fig. 17).

Users always embark on their journey from Mariko's ‘home base’, a Japanese-style house floating above the water of the lagoon, where they board and then steer a gondola drawn by seahorses (fig. 16). Each time their journey ends in death, users are respawned on this island to explore Mariko Hōrō's world anew. Buddhist cosmological thought as well as a constant play of inside and outside are thus realized in the installation. A pavilion on one island takes users inside an underwater realm resembling the Piazza San Marco fraught with Christian



Figure 17: In the Court of Final Judgment. Tamiko Thiel, *Travels of Mariko Hōrō*, 2006.

Various Byzantine gestures of benedictions are fused in one multi-armed image—a foreign technique perceived as heathen in Christian iconography. Furthermore, the face of Christos Pantocrator is red and hairy with large blue eyes, thus echoing classic Japanese depictions of Westerners.²⁶ The effect is the creation of an experience that feels exotic to members of different cultures. Upon approaching Christ's

26 Thiel explains that “red is the symbolic color of the West in Buddhism, and the Westerners who made it to Japan after long sea voyages were also burnt red by the sun” (Thiel 2007, 12). In this scene Thiel also borrows the vibrant palette and energetic imagery of Tibetan Buddhism—for Japanese artists, the “Far West” of ancient times.

right or left hand, users will rise to heaven or fall to hell. Although predetermined paths connect certain scenes, in any one scene there can be more than one ‘portal’ which takes users into a different following scene, thus creating a play between determinism and free will. For example, the installation’s underlying Buddhist structure of cycles of reincarnation provides a second chance for those in hell. In heaven, the removal from the mandala of an Asian-faced Madonna with child equally results in the users’ rebirth and the continuation of the journey.

The final judgment scene provokes memories of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* that are combined with Buddhist concepts of cosmos. In *The Divine Comedy* time ends after the final judgment and is followed by the nine circles of hell, the first of which is limbo, a space that also exists within *Mariko Hōrō*. It may be accessed via a plain white clapboard chapel (typical in many regions of the United States) situated on an island with the shape of the mainland United States turned upside down. The portal leads users into a limbo state and exposes them to images of torment and horror accompanied by shrieks and laments: Ku Klux Klan members worship a burning cross; countless Kim Phúc figures running from the Napalm attack of Trang Bang, and equally countless—by now iconic—hooded figures from Abu Ghraib prison approach users (fig. 18). According to Thiel, the visual comprehension of the Abu Ghraib image proved to be among the most difficult in the piece, especially for American users. Her observation corresponds to a recent assessment by Ali Behdad, who writes:



Figure 18: The Limbo of Lost Souls. Tamiko Thiel, *Travels of Mariko Hōrō*, 2006.

Historical amnesia in the US is a cultural form of repudiation that works through projection and denial. For example, an average citizen may have a general knowledge of the violent and abusive acts committed by American soldiers in Abu Ghraib prison recently, but most have turned a blind eye to the facts, perhaps in an effort to show support for the American troops and not to appear unpatriotic. Forgetting in this case is a form of historical disavowal in which Americans consciously decide to keep certain knowledge at bay. (Behdad 2008, 290)

The limbo scene, which is entered from a specifically American location (geographic space and distinct church) and exudes images of abuse and torture, is explicitly critical of American hegemonic practices (such as the ones carried out during the Vietnam War, at Abu Ghraib prison, and at Guantánamo Bay detention camp).

Thiel's Americanness and the fact that she studied—not experienced—the Japanese view of the West in her adult life could result in a reading of *Mariko Hōrō* as hegemonic, albeit critical, projection of alterity, the fabrication of an Other by a member of Western society. A closer look at Thiel's unique position (her multiethnic identity, family history and personal memories) forbids such a supposition of a hegemonic or colonial stance. Thiel's Buddhist grandparents became Christian ministers and missionaries in the United States where they and other Japanese Christians were confronted with the conflict between the American promise of "one nation under God, with liberty and justice for all" and the reality of Japanese American internment during World War II. Aware of the problems involved in face of such conflicts, Thiel—also in an attempt at reconciliation—fuses the cyclical, non-Western structure of Buddhism with the linear, determinate structure of Christian thought in *Mariko Hōrō*.

Mariko only sees what she expects to see, or, in other words, she is only able to describe the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, a practice echoing that of Marco Polo: his gaze into the depths of Asia made him a symbol of Western Man exploring, categorizing and analyzing the foreign cultures of the East; it turned the Venetian into a pioneer in the attempt to understand the Other. On the other hand, the exoticizing gaze "is a view through a half-silvered mirror" explains Thiel and continues: "The viewer means to describe new lands, new peoples, new cultures, but in reality he sees images of his own culture superimposed over a vague and exotic background" (Thiel 2007, 17). In the reversal of this common practice, that is the inversion of the gaze and the reversal of the gender of the explorer, Thiel's installation critically explores processes of cultural construction and transmission. Susan Koshy defines "the intersections of gender and feminism with Orientalism and Islamophobia [...] among the trickiest analytics to negotiate in the last two decades, not because of the silencing of the Other but because of the proliferation of voices of simulated Others." Thiel is no diasporic postcolonial feminist or (not yet) a media personality like the ones mentioned by Koshy, namely Irshad Manji and Azar Nafisi, but the character she created, Mariko Hōrō displays some of the characteristics mentioned. This is why I would like to reiterate and thus call to mind the important questions concerning transnational feminism raised by Koshy:

But does Orientalism, or even neo-Orientalism for that matter, offer an adequate critical framework for addressing the changed conditions of enunciation and the circulation of texts and images? Or rather, should their writing and videos prompt a reconsideration of the geopolitical conditions needed to sustain a transnational feminist project? It may now be time to think carefully about whether feminism travels well across borders, not because distances are as great as they were in the past, but precisely because they are alleged to have shrunk. [...] Transnational feminism, at the best of times a precarious

project that negotiates neoliberal universalism, cultural relativism, asymmetrical knowledge flows, the demand for authenticity, and its own commodification, may be short-circuited by its mediatization. These shifts invite us to reflect on the possibility or impossibility of transnational feminism in our time. (Koshy 2008, 302–3)

In her installations, yet especially with the figure of the traveler or migrant who could also be an émigré or exile in *The Travels of Mariko Hōrō*, Thiel includes her own biography. Like her protagonist she remains an Other between the spheres and between different cultural forms.²⁷ Users will never actually see Hōrō; a one-way white gaze on an exotic Other is, it seems, deliberately disabled. From Hōrō's perspective (which users are invited to share by *becoming* Hōrō)²⁸ everything that should otherwise be familiar seems strange, odd, and exotic. It is this particular position of the user that facilitates an experience that provides a decentralizing, deconstructivist view on the interconnection of imperialism and culture. The Other in Thiel's installation "is not a passive body appropriated by hegemonic discourse, but a social actor [...] in pursuit of his or her own agenda" (Ngai 2005, 61). *Travels* does not only ask how the Other is depicted, but what the role of the Other is in cultural translation, negotiation and knowledge production. In this sense, Thiel's installation allows for transcultural and transnational experiences of human existence.

Conclusion

The installations discussed in this article translate issues of vision, memory, exclusion, violence, and identity into a universal language. In them, memory does not designate a storage medium but becomes an experience of the user and art museum visitor. As experiential digital artworks that intervene in socially relevant processes Thiel's installations belong into the canon of politically critical and socially engaged twenty-first century visual art. *Beyond Manzanar* represents a "powerful kind of memorial" as Marita Sturken has called successful forms of historical re-enactment (Sturken 2001, 46). It not only conveys visualized memories of the Japanese and Iranian American past and present, but manages to project their wider transnational significance 'indelibly into our future'—especially in the light of the European refugee crisis unfolding globally since 2015 and calls to exclude or deport Muslims. With her 2008 installation *Virtuelle Mauer* Thiel provides an immersive experience of living 'in the shadows of the Wall' that brings

27 Cf. the descriptions of Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* that could be read in much the same vein (Said 1994, 437).

28 Thiel explains that while "users will never actually see Mariko, except perhaps in a mirror [...] they will be Mariko, seeing the exotic and mysterious Occident through her eyes and her experiences" (Thiel 2007, 1).

up transnational connotations, such as the border condition (and often physical walls) between Palestine and Israel, Mexico and the USA, North and South Korea, Pakistan and India. *The Travels of Mariko Hōrō* moves the question of agency to the forefront by constructing the Other as an agent able to control and convey his or her own experiences and agenda.

I would like to conclude with Seyla Benhabib who has pointed out that while jurisdiction may frame the limits of our actions, “cross-cultural understanding is furthered primarily by processes of understanding and communication within civil society” (Benhabib 2002, 81). All three installations may serve as tools to start such processes of cultural communication and resignification. In general, artistic expressions seem ideal in initiating such processes. And it is our task as art historians and American studies scholars, “trained in analyzing cultures, exploring cultural contacts, and examining intercultural relations” (Hornung 2005, 70) to take stock of these and other interventionist artworks, which socially engage their viewers beyond mere activism towards a sustainable social practice.

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MANZANAR, BERLIN, VENECIJA: UMETNIČKE ISNTALACIJE TRANSNACIONALNE VIRTUELNE REALNOSTI

Apstrakt:

Manzanar, Berlin i Venecija su poznate turističke destinacije u kojima posetioци žele da nauče i dožive istoriju mesta. Posebno Manzanar i Berlinski zid proizilaze iz efemernosti struktura koje je napravio čovek, kao i prošlosti od koje se ne može lako kreirati jedinstveni narativ, već narativ ispunjen komplikacijama i tenzijama. Zbog destrukcije, uklanjanja i – u slučaju venecijanskih laguna – opasnosti od poplave i erozije, ova mesta se sve češće prevode u prostor virtualne umetnosti. Tekst razmatra radove savremene umetnice Tamiko Til (*Tamiko Thiel*) koja je, osim što je rekonstruisala ova mesta u virtuelnim 3D instalacijama *Beyond Manzanar* i *Virtuelle Mauer: Re-Constructing the Wall*, postavila ove lokacije u transnacionalnu perspektivu. *Beyond Manzanar* uspeva da prenese osećanje zatvoreništva koje nije povezano isključivo sa japansko-američkim iskustvima; *Virtuelle Mauer* omogućava impresivno iskustvo života u senci Berlinskog zida koje može biti primenjeno i na druge srodne kontekste. Na kraju, u instalaciji *The Travels of Mariko Hōrō* Tamiko Til ističe pitanje mogućnosti posredovanja Drugog. Tekst iscertava način na koji je Tilova kreirala društveno angažovane umetničke radove o kulturnoj translaciji i pregovaranjima koja imaju potencijal da budu prevedeni u društvenu praksu.

Ključne reči:

Tamiko Til, japansko-američka internacija, umetnost virtualne realnosti, Berlinski zid, orijentalizam, transnacionalizam