Introduction:
the lure of the virtual

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1.

This issue of the online journal IO is a selection of materials from a Summer School that was held in Lahti in 1998. “Virtuality” was very much on the agenda at that time and discussed in connection to new digital technologies. However as the contributions show, there was also awareness that the idea of virtuality is neither new nor relevant to new technologies only.

The virtual is, on the one hand, a modality – like the real, the actual and the potential. On the other hand, the theme of the virtual is related to questions of both perception and imagination. The virtual and virtuality thus hold a potential for art and aesthetics that goes beyond the topical challenges of new information and communication technologies. This is both important to hold in mind and reflected in this publication.

2.

As Wolfgang Welsch’s article (in this issue) shows, the virtual, like many other concepts and perhaps more than most of them, is not a univocal concept. In the discussions of the last decades that are reflected in this volume, three meanings of the virtual stand out.

First, “virtual” rather straightforwardly points in the direction of new electronic technologies; the word is then combined with nouns such as “reality”, “environment”, or “space”. This “electronic virtual” (a term used by Welsch) includes computer games, the internet, virtual reality (VR) and various digital modelling technologies.

Second, the hype that has surrounded these technologies (and which seems to have waned a bit, to the benefit of more analytic discussions) has taken advantage of the philosophical meaning of “virtual” established by the French philosopher Henri Bergson a century ago. According to Bergson, the “virtual” differs from the actual, the real and the potential and is a power, a creative force that is productive of reality without itself becoming actual or real.

Thirdly, the “as-if” meaning of virtual, discussed in this volume by Ilkka Niiniluoto, deserves attention. On this line, the virtual resembles the actual without being identical to it. The virtual is only seemingly something, and so the “as-if” is also a “less-than”. If the bergsonian virtual has contributed to the lure of the virtual, the as-if meaning gives it a more down-to-earth plausibility in the context of new technologies. Of course, it has at the same time inspired attempts to make models that resemble the actual as closely as possible, or even supersede it.

Since users of the word “virtual” often do not give a definition but rather take for granted a meaning that is all but “one”, the above and other meanings of the term have formed associative chains with both positive and negative values, hovering around the discourse. This has certainly contributed to the hype, hopes, confusion and fears accompanying virtuality. The first lesson to remember is therefore the necessity of being aware of the different meanings of “virtual”.

3.
The relevance of the virtual for aesthetics, both philosophical and practice-oriented or applied, has to do with the perspectives it opens upon perception, the body and the senses, imagination and creation.

While the most optimistic expectations regarding virtual technologies envisioned the possibility to equal real-life experiences, it seems both more realistic and fruitful to think of digital technologies as means on the one hand of complementing the limitations of *hic et nunc* -perception and, on the other hand, of understanding its character. Virtual technologies can then be seen as one chain in a long link of human inventions which have aimed to overcome and enlarge embodied, place-bound experience. As such it is neither “better” nor “worse” but, rather, different both in its resources and aims. Like all technologies, it can be used for conveying information and disinformation alike. Like all models, it is based on a selection and abstraction of certain features.

Through new electronic technologies, it is possible to model and in certain respects make available for the perceiver physical environments that are either remote or not yet realized. But we have to keep in mind that virtual perception is different from real-life perception both in how it engages the body and in how it engages the mind. In addition, a virtual environment is necessarily a model, thus lacking not only many qualities but also the boundlessness of the actual environment. Even if some of these differences might be overcome, others, of a more fundamental nature, remain.

If the relationship to the “real world” is one side of the theme of the virtual, imagination is another. Seen from this side, the creative potential suggested by the idea of the virtual lies in the capacity to produce things that are not real and even differ in decisive respects from what is (now) real, but that can make us think about the everyday world in new ways. Art is often virtual in precisely this way. In this perspective, resistance to common-sense rationality is fore-grounded, as for example in the computer art of Jodi, discussed by Søren Pold.

The social and political topicality of the virtual is by no means the least important reason for paying attention to it at present. One effect of the Internet is that information is not only at hand but is also easily interpreted, transformed and manipulated at various stages of transmission, not all of them evident to the user. Increasing access to and importance of such media in the collective construction of reality mean that the shared, constructed media reality gains relative weight in our thinking about the world and what it is like. Increasing awareness of the constructed character of social reality does not make the latter less important. Rather, the very fact that this constructed reality is shared and influenced by many gives it the authority of something that cannot be bypassed.

4.

The contents of this volume are organised in two sections: one addressing the virtual from a general and philosophical standpoint and the other focusing on specific, topical questions of virtuality in three particular lifeworld contexts.

The reader might proceed by first reading the texts on the left-hand side and then those on the right. But perhaps more importantly, it should be noted that the texts are arranged as sitting around a round table. This visual metaphor underlines that the texts engage in a dialogue, that they challenge and complement each other both across the table and with neighbours. The recommendation here is that the reader proceed counter-clockwise, going down on the left-hand side and then up on the right-hand side.

The contributions represent a variety of approaches and mirror many virtuality discourses: in philosophy (historical, analytic, aesthetic) as well as in cultural and social,
planning, media and psychoanalytic theory. Hopefully this may help the reader to a
deepened understanding and to developing further ideas and critical points related to the
theme.

5.

Let me finally briefly characterise the contributions.

In “Virtual to Begin With” Wolfgang Welsch deals with the relationship
between virtuality and reality, arguing that on a basic level reality, like the virtual, is always
constructed, that is, relative to a certain framework and lifeworld. Virtuality and reality are
intertwined, and taken-for-granted reality is just something we no longer think of as
constructed.

The article starts with a useful historical overview of the concept “virtual”,
showing both the complexity and plurality of the notion and its pervasiveness. Welsch then
proceeds to an analysis of the relationship between electronic and non-electronic
experiences. The former do not, according to Welsch, simply replace the latter; rather
there is complementarity where an increase of electronic experiences leads to a
“revalidation” of non-electronic social, sensuous and environmental experiences.
Apocalyptic worries are therefore out of place: the electronic virtual does not replace older
modes of life and interaction but facilitates them. As a whole then, the article suggests that
it is both possible and worthwhile to deal with the electronic virtual and that ontologically,
the virtual is part of the real rather than opposed to it.

In “Virtual Worlds, Fiction, and Reality” Ilkka Niiniluoto discusses some
philosophical aspects of virtual reality (VR), focusing on perception. In a both broad and
concise way he analyses basic concepts such as reality and fiction, perception and
imagination, appearance and reality and, finally, verisimilitude and virtual reality.
Niiniluoto’s suggestion is that we conceive virtual reality in terms of a picture – thus
foregrounding the fact that even if virtual reality engages the senses it is unlike actual
reality in being intangible. In other words, while the perceiving body is flesh and blood, the
objects of virtual reality are “unreal” in the precise sense of being intangible. Much like
Welsch, Niiniluoto avoids the extremes of virtual reality enthusiasts and critics alike. He
notes, for example, that virtual reality is still more like dreams and phantasms than like
actual reality, and there is therefore no risk of confusion.

Arnold Berleant indirectly addresses the issue of the alleged alienating nature
of virtual or cyberspace by asking provocingly: “Is there Life in Virtual Space?” With life he
means human life, which implies sensibility and perception as well as emotional and moral
responses. Berleant’s view is that since cyberspace is a human creation and used by
humans, human presence “is integral to a cyberaesthetic.” Defending the principle
of “ontological parity”, Berleant also criticizes the idea that virtual space is less real than so
called real space, or in any other sense inferior to it. Like Welsch, he instead suggests that
we better think of reality as multiple.

Søren Pold’s article “Writing the Scripted Spaces” can be seen as belonging
to the category of cyberaesthetic mentioned by Berleant, more precisely, it deals with
writing (literature), games and electronic art. Writing and reading, coding and decoding
are, as Pold convincingly argues, basic to this medium as a whole: the image is, as it
were, only a surface phenomenon. He therefore criticizes the transparency ideal of virtual
reality and suggests instead that the computer be understood as part of a tradition of
writing, in terms of “imagetext”. – The relationship of this claim to Niiniluoto’s idea of virtual
reality as a picture might appear contradictory; both, however, emphasise that virtual
reality is a made model rather than an environment proper.
Using computer games and computer art as examples, Pold also brings to the fore the human presence in cyberspace – including its “inhuman” side. The latter is on the one hand caused by breakdowns and a demonstrated incomprehensibility on the part of the programme or machine. On the other hand, within the game as in real life, the inhuman is caused by humans. This is interesting since forgetting and resistance to sense-making are features traditionally associated with the messiness of the ‘real world’, whereas the computer world is not seldom accused of being too sterile and cognitively oriented.

Pold also points out the increasingly written nature of public space and the influence of the computer on culture at large. Based in a historical analysis of technologies of the word and of writing his text points to their present transformations where the user, through the feedback of the computer, “is being read by the space while he reads it”.

In “The Space of the Real and Virtual Space” Marina Gržinić questions the real as it is often taken for granted in thinking about media, politics and selfhood. She points out that the internet is increasingly understood as the new public space, where processes of both reception and communication take place. But in order to fully grasp the possibilities as well as the limitations of this space it is, according to Gržinić, vitally important to discuss the status of that space and of the agents that act there. The article is, then, an interpretation of the cultural and psychological implications of electronic technologies.

Using the example of the war in Balkan Gržinić first argues that “television has become the medium of fiction”, where the supposedly informed viewers are positioned as “social anti-matter” who are merely the passive recipients of broadcasting but lack a voice and initiatives of their own. The second part focuses on the position of the subject in virtual reality. The feedback of the system on the subject, Gržinić claims, produces a phantom body image that de-centres the subject. This in fact shows the position of the subject, of any subject, as de-centred. The disillusioning direction of the argument, that may at first seem pessimistic, finally appears as holding if not a promise then at least a challenge for critical thought. For at the moment when the subject is “forced to assume that s/he is not what s/he thought her/himself to be, but somebody-something else”, a moment of new subjecthood opens up – and it needs to be grasped.

Also M. Christine Boyer ends her article “Crossing CyberCities: Boundary Problems Separating the Regional Space of the City from the Matrix of Cyberspace” on a challenging note, stating that “the liminal space of CyberCities still waits to be imagined”. Her text deals with the relationships and interaction of real space and cyberspace models, or, as she more accurately writes, “virtual and actual reality”. The main concern is with the influence of models such as the net, the grid and Boolean logic on our worldview. For while the grid highlights key points and nodes it simultaneously marginalizes left-over, in-between spaces.

Combining social, ethical and political concerns with empirical evidence and examples, Boyer discusses four areas of cyberspace and the grid matrix: its democratic functioning; its effects on urban development; its effects on how we think and conceptualize thinking; and finally the influence of electronic writing in and on public space. Mostly critical, her article is also constructive in raising awareness of the limitations of electronic technologies and of the rich areas that technology as such leaves untouched.

Having come full circle, then, the articles of this volume suggest the need for inhabiting our realities fully, mixing and complementing them to the best of our human interests.