Mythos
KUNSTTHEORIE

Sep. 2025 • https://mythos-magazin.de/kunsttheorie/conte_experiencing-the-sublime.pdf

PIETRO CONTE

Experiencing the Sublime in Immersive (Virtual) Environments

Contents

1. An artefactual sublime?

In 2011, James Elkins published a controversial essay with the self-explanatory title *Against the Sublime*, in which he called for nothing less than a moratorium on the use of the word "sublime." This historically bounded term, he argued, should be confined to describing specific works of Romantic and Late Romantic art. In other words, having become a seductive but analytically weak and vague concept, the sublime should be regarded as "damaged goods" and abandoned as a broad interpretive tool (Elkins, 2011, p. 88).

Elkins's proposal has gone largely unheeded. Art historians and theorists, along with philosophers working in fields such as aesthetics and ethics, continue undaunted to refer to the sublime as an inescapable notion that proves crucial to both creative and scientific research. More specifically, the debate on the possibility of an *artistic* (which also means artificial, that is, technical) sublime has gained momentum in recent years, especially with regard to Kant's philosophy. To take just one emblematic example, the Italian Society of Aesthetics has devoted a recent issue of its official organ, *Aesthetica Preprint*, entirely to "Kant's Theory of the Sublime and the Visual Arts."[1]

It is no coincidence that the volume opens with an article by Uygar Abaci, a prominent Kantian scholar who has inaugurated new avenues of discussion with his 2008 essay "Kant's Justified Dismissal of Artistic Sublimity," which has been the subject of considerable analysis and criticism from various perspectives. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on two issues that seem both particularly interesting and problematic. These correspond to key questions raised by Abaci to clarify why, from his perspective, "artistic sublimity" should be understood as an oxymoronic concept within the framework of Kant's philosophy. According to Abaci, Kant's conceptions of art and the sublime were developed with different concerns in mind: the former as

[1] The complete issue of *Aesthetica Preprint* 124 (2023) is freely available via open access at: https://mimesisjournals.com/ojs/index.php/aesthetica-preprint/issue/view/245.

beautiful art, the latter as natural sublimity. In this view, art and the sublime cannot go together for mainly two concurrent reasons.

The first reason is that the Kantian sublime is nonpurposive (*unzweckmäßig*) or even contrapurposive (*zweckwidrig*), insofar as it is represented as sheer magnitude. The *way* in which an object elicits the feeling of the sublime is what makes the judgment on the sublime an aesthetic reflecting judgment: it is the *subjectively purposive* way in which an object *without a purposive form* provides the occasion for the free harmony of reason and the imagination, even in their conflict. From this perspective, the problem is whether works of art can be represented as nonpurposive or contrapurposive sheer magnitudes, rather than as objects that bring their end in themselves. This may be what Kant had in mind when writing about the pyramids and the colonnade of St. Peter's Basilica as architectural examples of the mathematical sublime.

According to Abaci, the *intentional* nature of artistic production, on the one hand, and the *conscious* appreciation of the artwork's objective purposiveness by its audience, on the other, prevent works of art from providing pure instances of sublimity. The fact that the form of the artwork is determined by a human end is crucial in negating the possibility of any pure form of artistic sublime. When quoting from the 26th paragraph of the *Critique of Judgment*, however, Abaci seems to force Kant's text to fit his own argument, overinterpreting a famous passage or, at the very least, underrating its ambiguity. The original text reads as follows:

> If the aesthetic judgment is to be pure […], and if an example of that is to be given which is fully appropriate for the critique of the aesthetic power of judgment, then the sublime must not be shown in products of art (e.g., buildings, columns, etc.), where a human end [*wo ein menschlicher Zweck*] determines the form as well as the magnitude, nor in natural things whose concept already brings with it a determinate end (e.g., animals of a known natural determination), but rather in raw nature (and even in this only insofar as it by itself brings with it neither charm nor emotion from real danger), merely insofar as it contains magnitude. (Kant, 2000, p. 136 [§ 26, 5, pp. 252–253])[2]

Referring explicitly to this excerpt, Abaci (2008, p. 242) invites readers to "simply recall that the fact that the form of the work of art is determined by a human end was one of Kant's reservations for the applicability of pure judgments of sublimity to works of art." Yet, in my opinion, things are not as simple as Abaci claims. As is well known, the German adverb *wo*, which Kant uses in the relative clause "wo ein menschlicher Zweck die Form sowohl als die Größe bestimmt," can take on multiple meanings. In particular, it can indeed be used as a synonym for "if," "in case," "in the event that." This means that artefacts (and artworks as a subspecies) can, of course, exhibit purposiveness, but this is not *necessarily* the case. Most importantly, even if we were to claim that all works of art result from a conscious intention on the part of the artist, this does not mean that we, the audience, must necessarily be aware (or at least *constantly* aware) of this intention, or any intention at all. When enjoying art, we may simply disregard the artist's intentions—an idea that Abaci himself (2008, p. 248) alludes to when he refers to the albeit remote chance of "leav[ing] room for the autonomy of the work of art and of the audience of the work from the conscious intentions of the artist." Moreover, we may even disregard the purpose *of the artwork*, thus bracketing (if only momentarily) its artefactual nature. At the end of the day, the pyramids and St. Peter's colonnade are certainly built to serve a purpose or even many purposes, yet this purposiveness does not prevent Kant from judging them in terms of the sublime effect they can elicit in viewers.

[2] All references to Kant's *third Kritik* will follow the pagination of this edition, with the standard pagination of the Akademie edition indicated in square brackets.

2. Pictures vs. immersive environments

The second reason Abaci presents to support his argument is the representational character of art as depicting things beautifully. This is connected to the first issue just analysed, in that Kant argues:

> The presentation [*Darstellung*] of the sublime, so far as it belongs to beautiful art, can be united with beauty in a verse tragedy, a didactic poem, an oratorio; in a verse tragedy, a didactic poem, an oratorio; and in these combinations, beautiful art is all the more artistic, although whether it is also more beautiful [...] can be doubted in some of these cases. Yet, in all beautiful art what is essential consists in the form, which is purposive for observation and judging. (Kant, 2000, p. 203 [§ 52, 5, p. 326])

Thus, the artistic presentation of the sublime is indeed possible, but only *qua* representation. As such, it should be called beautiful rather than sublime. Kant expresses the same concept more explicitly in the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, where he maintains that "the idea of the sublime in thought by description or presentation [*Darstellung*] can and must always be beautiful. […] *The artistic presentation of the sublime* […] *ought to be beautiful* since otherwise it would be wild, crude, and repulsive, and, consequently, contrary to taste" (Kant, 1978, p. 146 [§ 68, 7, p. 243]; emphasis mine).

Grounded in 18th-century definitions of fine art—which emphasise the need for art (i) to depict a recognisable subject matter and (ii) to do so in a pleasing, beautiful manner—Kant's perspective remains rooted in the idea that sublime themes must be transformed by artistic genius into something that conforms to the standards of beauty (see Gracyk, 2012). Accordingly, Abaci contends that we can and must distinguish between two ways in which a work of art can be called sublime, "either in virtue of what the work of art represents and its mode of representation or in virtue of the object itself that is the work of art" (Abaci, 2008, p. 246). This is not a novel claim. A similar argument was advanced by Barnett Newman to explain the watershed nature of his art, which, as he stated in a 1963 interview with Lane Slate, consisted essentially in transforming painting "from the making of pictures to the making of paintings" (Newman, 1963, p. 253). Arthur Danto further elucidated this rather enigmatic "turn" in the history of art. In a brief yet compelling essay on Newman's distinction between pictures and paintings, the American philosopher writes:

> Newman thought he had resolved the problems that concerned the great guys who preceded him. They had been struggling to make beautiful pictures, whereas he considered himself as having transcended beauty and picturing alike. His achievement was to capture the sublime in painting. […] Since Kant was constrained to think of art in terms of pictures as mimetic representations, there was no way in which painting could be sublime. It could only consist in pictures of sublime natural things, like waterfalls or volcanoes. While these might indeed be sublime, pictures of them could at most be beautiful. (Danto, 2002, p. 189)

Danto's claim is similar to Abaci's in that both make direct reference to Kant and emphasise the idea that a *picture* of the sublime can hardly evoke sublime *feelings*. And yet, what is a picture? In addressing this question, Danto introduces a distinction that turns out to be crucial to the theory of the sublime: to assert that the pictures Kant had in mind could not be sublime because they were necessarily representational does not rule out artistic sublimity within his theoretical framework, particularly with regard to painting. Following Newman and Danto's logic,

> A picture creates an illusory space, within which various objects are represented. The viewer, as it were, looks through the surface of a picture, as if through a window, into a virtual space, in which various objects are deployed and composed: the Virgin and Child surrounded by saints in an adoration; stripes surrounded by squiggles in an abstraction. In the Renaissance, a picture was regarded as transparent, so to speak, the way the front of the stage is, through which we see men and women caught up in actions that we know are not occurring in the space we ourselves occupy. In a painting, by contrast, the surface is opaque, like a wall. […] We are not supposed to see through it. We stand in a real relationship with it […]. A picture represents something other than itself; a painting presents itself. A picture mediates between a viewer and an object in pictorial space; a painting is an object to which the viewer relates without mediation. (Danto, 2002, p. 191)

Then, Danto (2002, p. 192) concludes: "It was as though Newman had hit upon a way of being a painter without violating the Second Commandment, which prohibits images"—a statement that once again points directly to Kant's third *Critique*, and more specifically to the intriguing passage in the "General remark on the exposition of aesthetic reflective judgments" where the German philosopher asserts that "perhaps there is no more sublime passage in the Jewish Book of the Law than the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image, nor any likeness either of that which is in heaven, or on the earth, or yet under the earth, etc." (Kant, 1978, p. 156 [5, p. 275]). According to both Danto and Newman himself, it should indeed be possible to accommodate the artistic sublime, provided one discards the century-old notion of the image as a *beautiful representation*, a concept that, notably, applies for Newman (1963, p. 163) not only to figurative art, but also to a certain type of abstract art—namely, avant-garde European abstract art.

The fundamental issue thus becomes the identification of the characteristics that define an image as a representation, or, in Newman's words, a "picture." Reflecting on this notion of the representational image reveals three fundamental properties: mediateness, referentiality, and separateness (Pinotti, 2025). For something to be considered an image, it must be presented through a medium; it must depict something other than itself; and it must be perceived as distinct and separated from ordinary reality. These are the basic features that qualify images *qua* representations or pictures; and representational images are typically what we consider when reflecting on the possibility of the artistic sublime, especially within the Kantian theoretical framework. However, representational pictures account for only a portion of the image world. Consider, in particular, the images found in 360° immersive virtual environments accessed through head-mounted displays, which transform the viewer into an "immersant" (Davies, 1998) by challenging precisely those properties traditionally associated with pictures: they appear *non-mediated*, *unframed* (Conte, 2020), and *present* within the same space as the experiencer. These image-environments, which may allow the user to move through them and even interact with them, are often perceived and described as non-representational, in that they are intended to offer the experiencer a (virtual) reality, rather than a representation of reality.

When considering this type of immersive virtual environments, the question arises as to whether it is possible to experience certain images (if they are still to be deemed so) as sublime rather than merely as representations *of* the sublime. By asking this question, I align myself with Newman's concept of an artistic—and, more broadly, artefactual—sublime, which challenges traditional notions of form, beauty, pictorial distance, and contemplation. This, in turn, makes engagement with positions such as Emily Brady's necessary. Famously, her book *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy* provides four interconnected reasons to negate the possibility of artistic sublimity:

> 1. Most works of art simply do not possess the scale of the sublime, that is, the qualities of size and power which characterize actual sublime experiences. Their smaller size and scope means that they are limited in terms of sublime effect. […]
> 2. The formlessness and unbounded character of the sublime is something art has difficulty substantiating, given its various frames and forms, settings, and conventions. […]
> 3. Art lacks the visceral "wild" and "disordered" character associated with dynamically sublime things – at least where the natural world is concerned. […]
> 4. Artworks, on the whole, lack the capacity to evoke feelings of physical vulnerability, heightened emotions, and the expanded imagination characteristic of the sublime response. (Brady, 2013, 119–120)

I will attempt to challenge each of these theses by presenting examples that appear to contradict them. However, before doing so, I want to emphasise that Brady herself acknowledges certain exceptions. She maintains that two forms of art—architecture and land art—can indeed elicit experiences of the sublime. The reason appears to be that architectural and land art works possess a reality *in the flesh*: they exist as part of the same natural or urban environment in which we

live and move, and they are not, or at least need not be, unreal representations of something else. This grants them the power to make the experiencer feel genuinely confronted by something that they can engage with directly, or that seems to face them as part of their own lived world. In other words, as Margherita Arcangeli, Jérôme Dokic and Marco Sperduti (2018, p. 188) suggest, architecture and land art can create a sense of *immersion*, blurring the boundary between the self and the world. However, according to these authors, and contrary to Brady's hypothesis, the feeling of being immersed in and overwhelmed by a particular object or scene can also be elicited by artefacts other than architecture and land art—perhaps even by representational paintings—if "suitable conditions of presentation" are provided.

3. Sublime immersions: From Descent into Limbo to Eurydice: A descent into infinity

The notion of immersion holds promise for elucidating the nature of the experience of sublimity and how it can be elicited. Not by chance, at the end of their article, Arcangeli, Dokic, and Sperduti highlight virtual reality—the most recent form of immersion—as a strong candidate for prompting the experience of awe, which is well known to resemble, and in many respects overlap with, the experience of sublimity. Recent empirical studies in this area indicate that virtual reality offers an ecologically valid paradigm for investigating the mental phenomenon traditionally termed the sublime, as well as its concomitant emotional states.

Yet the history of the sublime reveals that the sense of being overwhelmed while facing the incomprehensible vastness or power of something has been associated with immersion long before contemporary virtual reality technology "encapsulated" users in visually sealed-off image-environments. By contrasting Kant's interest in the psychological mechanism of the sublime as a movement of the mind with Edmund Burke's understanding of sublimity as "a psychophysical response occurring at the intersection of external stimuli and the body," Yaeri Kim (2020, p. 125) suggests that, historically, the sublime has been sought through "new visual and architectural techniques" that create a "virtual sense of infinity within the confines of paintings and structures." This aligns with the traditional hypothesis that the sublime is evoked by experiences that transcend the bounds of perception and imagination and disrupt the mind's cognitive resources.

Thus, while the Romantic conception of the sublime emphasised immersion in the natural environment, some contemporary reflections on art and artificially mediated environments—such as video games and virtual reality—envisage the possibility of sublime immersion into artefactual works. Returning to Brady's four theses against the possibility of an artistic sublime, the question becomes: can we nonetheless have an immersive experience with artworks that: 1) regardless of their ontological smallness, phenomenologically challenge our perception of scale; 2) convey a sense of formlessness and unboundedness; 3) evoke feelings of wilderness and dynamic power, and thus 4) make us feel vulnerable when confronted with them?

To address this issue, let us consider two cases that can meaningfully be brought together to serve as paradigmatic examples of immersive experience in art. The first is Anish Kapoor's *Descent into Limbo* (Fig. 1). The work was first presented at the IX edition of Documenta in Kassel in 1992. Visitors entered the installation through a small door that led into a free-standing room made of concrete and stucco, approximately 20 feet square. In the centre of the floor was a circular pit, its sides painted black so that it appeared solid at first, concealing its true depth. The pit was 2.5 meters deep but gave the illusion of a depthless void. As noted in the project description available on the artist's website, Kapoor's aim was to create "a space full of darkness, not a hole in the ground." To achieve this, he sought to produce an effect not simply of black, but of darkness—a well-known stimulus for the experience of the sublime.

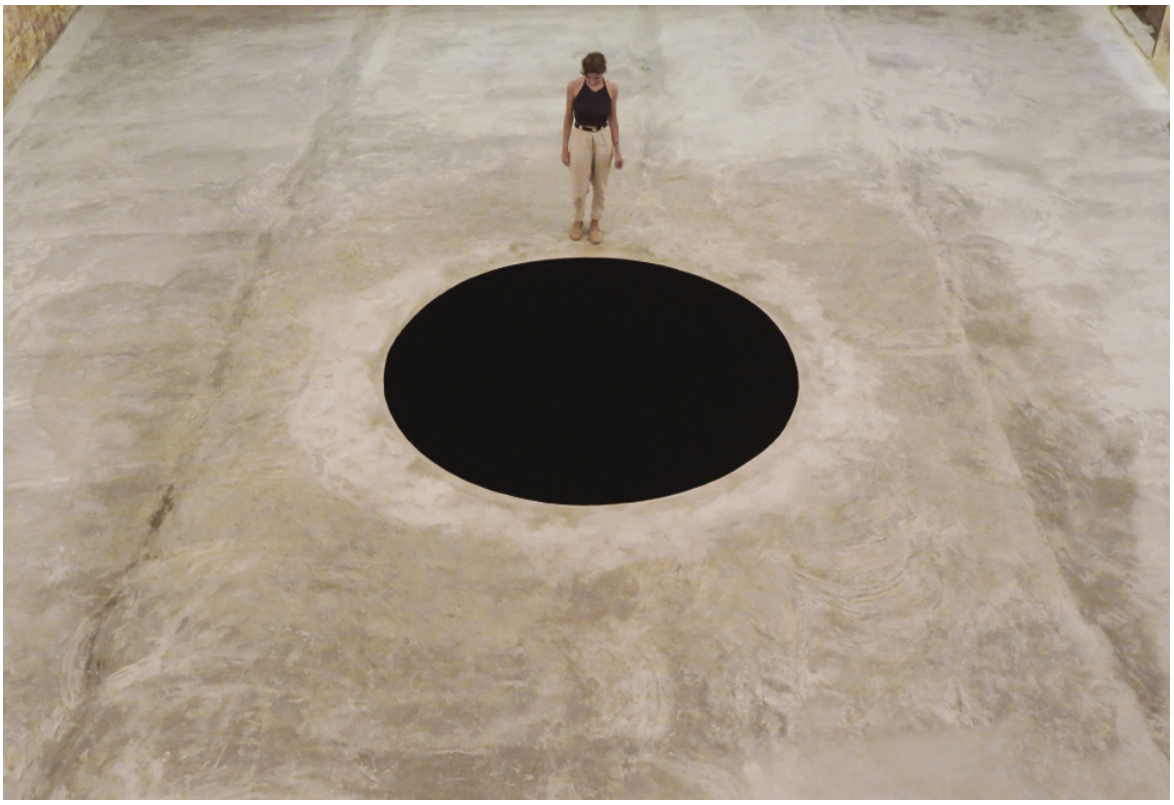

Fig. 1 – Anish Kapoor, *Descent Into Limbo*, Galeria Continua, Havana (2016).
Photo by Paola Martinez Fiterre

In the most recent versions of the installation, this effect was amplified using Vantablack, a special material that absorbs 99.8 percent of all light, to which Kapoor secured exclusive artistic rights for use in painting and sculpture in 2016 (a move that caused immediate friction in the art world, with many decrying Kapoor's actions and claiming that he was stealing from the artistic community).

Thanks to its unsettling, almost bewitching properties—and in stark contrast to the ascending movement of the souls in Limbo rescued by Christ in Andrea Mantegna's 1492 painting *Discesa al Limbo*, a clear source of inspiration for Kapoor—*Descent into Limbo* appears to draw viewers downward, immersing them in the dizzying void of the black hole. This metaphorical descent became strikingly literal when, during a 2018 reinstallation at the Fundação de Serralves in Portugal, a 60-year-old museumgoer, testing for himself whether Limbo truly lay at the bottom, fell into the work, sustaining injuries and damaging the piece in the process.

Paradoxically, one might argue that this incident marked a near-perfect realization of Kapoor's poetics. The artist's fascination with the void resonates strongly with both Burkean and Kantian conceptions of transforming a finite space into the experience of a seemingly limitless dimension. This fascination has taken various forms throughout Kapoor's career, from *Void* (1994), in which a bowl, when approached directly, literally envelops the viewer's field of vision, to the major works presented at his 2015 solo exhibition at the Château de Versailles, such as *Monadic Singularity* or the renowned *Sky Mirror* series, which clearly evokes the notion of infinity. Other notable examples include *Dirty Corner* and the mesmerising *Descension*, which once again makes use of Vantablack to convey the impression of an endlessly spinning water vortex. Transforming the limited into the limitless, all such installation experiences unmistakably evoke the idea of immersion—and with it, the sublime. Let us shed more light on this aspect.

Looking into Kapoor's *Descent into Limbo* is, or at least can be, a dizzying experience, or more precisely: a "radical limit-experience," as Arcageli and Dokic (2021) name it. Such experience is defined as the subject's feeling

> that her perceptual, imaginative and intellectual capacities can barely cope with the apparent vastness of the object. As a result, at least while she is focusing on the object, she feels indefinitely smaller or less powered and gifted than it. [This] feeling of self-negation is not to be understood merely as the feeling of being very, very small. [Rather, it is] best interpreted as the metaphorical expression of the subjects struggling to find their place in the vastness of what they experience. They feel that such a place can hardly be found, not that it is determinate but tiny. Of course, we might have the impression of literally shrinking when we are confronted with the "towering statues" of the Alps, their huge spatial and temporal extensions, but what characterizes the type of limit-experience involved in experiences of the sublime is the point where we feel like wholly disappearing from the world. To the extent that what we experience feels so real but we do not know where we fit in the picture, we feel that we do not belong to the real world anymore […], that we are not here, that we have fallen out of this world. (Arcangeli, Dokic, 2021, p. 154)

Descent Into Limbo can therefore be taken as an emblematic example of an artefact that, despite having a defined form and clear physical limits, elicits in the observer a feeling of formlessness, boundlessness, and limitlessness, thereby disrupting her perceptual, imaginative, and cognitive resources. Sublime experiences, understood as radical limit-experiences, challenge us as human beings: their properties are "self-relative" (Arcangeli, Dokic, Sperduti, 2018, p. 188).

The second example I would like to focus on involves a different medium: virtual reality (VR). As is well known, VR is heralded as the ultimate immersion machine due to a triple illusion it induces in the experiencer: *place* illusion (the sense of "being there," that is, of being present in a different, simulated environment); *body ownership* illusion (the impression of "inhabiting" digital bodies that may differ significantly from one's own); and *plausibility* illusion (VR's ability to elicit responses similar to those one would have in the physical world). Regarding the topic of this essay, the key question is whether VR, given the renowned immersive power conferred by these three illusions, can provide adequate conditions to elicit an experience of the sublime.

Basically, virtual reality makes two things possible:

1) It allows users to experience a digital "something" (an object, a scene, or an event) from a *first-person perspective*. This is of fundamental importance to the issue at stake. Just think of Friedrich's classical *Rückenfigur*, which is primarily understood as a figure of empathy—that is, an invitation for the viewer to step into the frame and into the character's shoes. However, as Regine Prange (1998) has shown, this very same *Rückenfigur* also prevents us from truly empathising with the figure, since the presence of, say, the Wanderer makes it impossible for us to see what he himself is supposed to see. VR would overcome this problem by avoiding the mediation of the *Rückenfigur* and instead placing the observer directly *into* the depicted scene.
2) It allows users to switch—using phenomenological vocabulary—from "presentification (*Vergegenwärtigung*)" to "presentation (*Gegenwärtigung*)." The immersant has the medium-specific experience of intending the image-world as if it were, in a way, a second world "in the flesh." In the case of the sublime, this can generate psychophysical responses resonant with the affective structure of both the Burkean and the Kantian sublime.

Thanks to these two qualities, VR makes it easier for users to experience something as sublime, as it places them "there," immersed in an (artificial) environment that may or may not resemble the natural world. It can, in fact, attempt to reproduce physical reality, as demonstrated in an experiment conducted by Alice Chirico and colleagues (2021), in which fifty participants' emotional responses were compared after viewing an immersive video based on Vincent van Gogh's *The Starry Night* and a photorealistic video of the real location it depicts (Saint-Rémy-de-Provence in France, where Van Gogh famously painted *en plein air*). The results showed no

significant difference in the capacity of art-based and nature-based stimuli to evoke the experience of the sublime.

Yet VR may also *not* aim to mimic reality in the flesh. It has the potential to immerse us in digital environments that look completely different from our physical surroundings. *Eurydice: A Descent into Infinity* (Fig. 2) is an award-winning VR experience by Dutch artist Celine Daemen. It offers six degrees of freedom (meaning the user can move freely along the three spatial axes) and was created using photogrammetry, then reworked with computer graphics (CGI) featuring a point cloud aesthetic. This technique gives the impression of volume without relying on photographic textures to render surfaces.

Fig. 2 – Celine Daemen, *Eurydice: A Descent into Infinity* (2021)

The experience begins with a female human figure emerging like a swirling fog of dots suspended in darkness. As you draw near, she dissolves into nothingness. Then, a door materialises, beckoning you to embark on a relentless pursuit of a shadow that forever slips through your grasp. You glimpse it again for a moment—then it vanishes once more. In the attempt to catch it, you plunge into the abyss, descending into the very depths of the underworld.

Unveiled at the Venice Biennale in 2022, the piece masterfully combines user movement tracking with a multisensory environment that cloaks the floor in gravel cushions, grounding the body amid a paradoxical, harmonic dissonance between physical and virtual realms. Gravity loosens its hold—we know we are not truly falling—and our bodies lighten, as if shedding their flesh, transmuting into pure spirit with every step downward. The soundscape—a haunting oscillation between the delicate splash of water and the sharp crackle of embers—contributes to conveying a feeling of being enveloped in and by the space. The labyrinth of tunnels through which we pass is sometimes interrupted to reveal dizzying precipices. We are drawn into the void and continue to descend, sometimes hurrying, sometimes slowing down. But each user has their own version of this interactive work: one can continue in an infinite descent, as the work's title suggests; stop at the edge of the abyss; or try to return to the surface. Triggered by the illusory na-

ture of the space around us, the sense of vertigo makes it clear that our brain is tricked into reacting as if it were in the presence of the same elements in physical space. Burke's (1998, p. 67) observation regarding landscape paintings can be extended to this VR experience: even though the viewer—or, in this case, the person immersed in the experience—is clearly aware that there are "scarce any things which can become the objects of our senses that are really, and in their own nature, infinite," the impression of infinity resulting from the inability "to perceive the bounds" is sufficient to produce "the most genuine effect" of the sublime.

Moreover, Studio Nergens's work also transforms the physical sensation of vertigo into a spiritual experience of disorientation that both frightens and attracts us: a "radical limit-experience" through which we lose ourselves in the work to the point that we are left at the edge of complete uncertainty about our very identity. Am I really Orpheus? And is the dark figure we are chasing truly Eurydice? Or is it perhaps the exact opposite? Or, finally, could it be that we are simply ourselves, trying to find ourselves? If the latter is true, then the story of Orpheus and Eurydice becomes an allegory that speaks to each of us as human beings. Daemen's own description of the work seems to point precisely in this direction:

> The ancient character of Eurydice will take the audience on a sensory journey into a place we fear and yearn for at the same time. I imagine death to be the opposite of reality as we know it. For me, Eurydice is like a seductive emptiness that calls to us, that awakens in us the desire to let go of this reality, a desire from which at the same time we are desperately defending ourselves.
> Am I part of this chaos? And is this "nothingness" the core of our being, of our soul? Or is it an inhuman place and my place is with my feet firmly on the earth? Is our deepest identity that of the thoughts and observations that fill our consciousness or the emptiness or nothingness that lies between these things? (Daemen 2022)

Beyond any distinction between nature and cultural products, the sublime appears to be linked to a sense of immersion, of *presence*: an artefact that can induce this sense of presence can also overcome the traditional limits that make it impossible for an artwork to elicit sublimity experience. Here we are back to Barnett Newman, who during a trip to Akron, Ohio, in August 1949 happened to visit the Indian mounds in the southwestern corner of the state. In some notes entitled *Prologue for a New Aesthetic* in an early draft, he attempted to capture and analyse his awed response to the site. Confronting the earthworks, he experienced a staggering epiphany of self against undefined and disorienting space: "Looking at the site you feel, Here I am, here… and out beyond there (beyond the limits of the site) there is chaos, nature, rivers, landscapes… But here you get a sense of your own presence… I became involved with the idea of making the viewer present: the idea that 'Man is Present'" (Newman, 1971, p. 73).

In a way, Newman's intention to make the viewer feel as if they are standing not before a mere representation but before the "real thing" is being reimagined—and remediated—by some contemporary artists whose work centres on the notion of immersion. In both cases, one feels "there," in the presence of an artificial creation that, however limited, successfully challenges our perception of scale and conveys a sense of formlessness and infinity. It evokes feelings of unfathomable greatness and power, making us feel small and vulnerable, yet also proud of "being there," standing before the sea of red of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, the mysterious darkness of *Descent into Limbo*, or the vertiginous labyrinth of *Eurydice: A Descent into Infinity***.** In the history of philosophy, visual culture, and the arts, there is only one word that, notwithstanding Elkins's moratorium, can sum up this description: *sublime*.

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