

EXILED IN LIGHT

An exploration of altered phenomenological perception

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This body of work is dedicated to my Grandmother, Mary Smith. You were an artist, but you were not given the freedom of my generation. Thanks for seeing the artist in me and reminding me to never give it up.

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Abstract

Imagine a prism through which light passes, breaking into diverse but related refractions. Each refraction is part of the whole yet also beautiful in its own right.

Exiled in Light explores such properties of phenomenological light as mediated by my art practice. It is the prism, and as light passes through, the beam fractures into conceptual wavelengths. Each wavelength illuminates a phenomenological concept: Envisioning, Engulfing, Decentering, Shifting, and Transporting. *Exiled in Light* considers these concepts as they relate not only to my practice, but also to prominent works by other phenomenological artists. The wavelengths shine brightly, reflecting, refracting, and diffusing amongst artworks by Olafur Eliasson, James Turrell, Yayoi Kusama, and J.M.W. Turner. Astrophysics and mythology are also explored as metaphors for my conceptual wavelengths.

Such phenomenological concerns have led me to experiment with durational, sensational, and spatial relations of light and darkness, which challenge the viewer's sense of self and perceptual reality. My art practice explores conflicting emotions and alternate perceptions of light and dark. Light is simultaneously poisonous and desirable; dark is simultaneously soothing and confining, creating a transformed world. This alternate world is sublimely beautiful. We are never in control but instead subject to the power of Nature.

Exiled in Light, as a written thesis, employs a science fiction narrative as allegory for the understanding of these phenomenological concepts and also as a "prequel" to the actual experience of my installations. The narrative leaves off where the artworks begin, as we take the place of the main character and embark upon a journey of phenomenological transportation and universal connectedness.

Introduction

Where We are Exiled in Light

Exiled in Light stems from research exploring the psychological relationship I have with light and darkness. Society mostly functions within traditional daylight hours and in spaces lit with sunlight, electric light bulbs, and screens. We rely on light in almost all activities, whether for the physical reasons of survival or the psychological reasons of well-being. Often we have polarized life-giving concepts of light against the perceived negativity and isolation of darkness. The historical relationship between light and humanity has shaped our perceptions throughout the ages. I am interested in shifting our psychological responses to light and dark through orchestrated phenomenological perception. As an artist, I create spaces for the viewer's perceptual awareness to "see themselves seeing." What might viewers discover when in a state of heightened sensory consciousness?

Positionality to light and dark is psychologically complex because visual perception is based on more than our eyes receiving information. The function of the eye is often the focus when it comes to talking about visual perception. However, scientific and psychological studies have shown that this is a simplistic view. Stuart Walton states in the book, *In the Realm of the Senses*, "As the brain receives sensations from the world around it, it processes them into perceptions, which are in turn the basis of human cognition. It doesn't just see, hear, feel, smell and taste external reality; it interprets it."¹

This relationship between cognitive perception and visual perception is often referred to as “inner” and “outer” light. Arthur Zajonc explains in his book, *Catching the Light*, that outer light is the light we absorb through our eyes, inner light refers to how our brain interprets that light in all of its complexities within the context of human experience. “Inner light transforms raw sensation into meaningful perception” and allows us to “Reimagine the universe to participate empathetically.” Empathetic sensation and perception are mutable and in context to the “inner light” of the mind. The empathy created through the connections of inner and outer vision is necessary for our imaginative understanding of sensory experiences. “Without a formative visual imagination, we are blind.”²

Our understanding of what we physically perceive is colored by our experiences and our internal interpretation of those connections in our minds. The contextual interpretation of our sensory experience of light and dark interests me. In particular, if we change that context then how would one interpret our sensory understanding of light? What if the light-loving experience was alienating? For instance, a photosensitive³ person is vulnerable to and alienated by the world of light in which everyone else thrives. For that person, light is toxic, representing sickness, pain, and fear. Yet, society is built around sensations of light to signify life, growth, energy, and freedom. Darkness is similarly polarized for a photosensitive person. It represents safety, comfort, and freedom and a defense against the light; yet it also carries historical sensations of isolation, restriction, fear, and depression.⁴ My body of work is driven by this antimony. Photophobia, as a result of photosensitivity, creates a sensory hyperawareness. When light feels dangerous, one is painfully mindful of the

effects of light on the psyche and body. Conversely, that same person is also mindful of their experiences in the dark as all of their senses remain heightened by their limited vision. I have created two site-specific installations that are spaces to explore the viewer's own contextualization and shifted awareness of light and darkness through immersive spectacle.

Exiled in Light, as a written thesis, expresses the core phenomenological concepts that are experienced in the art installations: Envisioning, Engulfing, Decentering, Shifting, and Transporting. Moreover, this text uses a science fiction narrative as an allegory for the alternate phenomenological experience of light and dark. Its sole character, "The Traveler," experiences various states of engulfing and transcendent perceptions of light and darkness. The Traveler is a "Photosen,"⁵ a photosensitive/photophobic person who lives a nocturnal lifestyle in a society ruled by light. As a result, they⁶ are ostracized from the rest of society. These experiences cause a shift in their phenomenological understanding of sensory experiences in the world. A painful catalyzing experience transforms and ultimately transports them to an alternate dimension. This new dimension, *Never(W)here*,⁷ is a liminal place of "in-between" where The Traveler discovers portals to strange worlds. Through these portals, they are offered a new phenomenological relationship with light and darkness. This neoteric psychological understanding leads to a sense of completeness and universality on microscopic and cosmological levels for The Traveler. As genealogical inspirations, I will refer to artists and writers whose works have shaped the concepts of the thesis through thoughts and musings of The Traveler.

Never(W)here and *Exiled in Light*, as two related site-specific art installations, pick up where the written thesis ends. This thesis' narrative description in the *Never(W)here* chapter is based on the installation artwork where the viewer enters a room painted entirely black and closed off to lighting sources. The viewer feels decentered in the darkness because they do not have a good visual sense of their body within the space. The only sources of light are slow, mesmerizing animations that are isolated within four digital screens set into walls around the room.⁸ Playing in seamless loops, the screens are evocative of windows or portals to alternate worlds of sublime light and dark visions. The vibrancy of illuminating color is emphasized by the emptiness of the black room. *Corpuscles* and *Veils* evoke a viscous world of membrane, cellular structures, and vascular ocean tides. Saturated and luminescent colors of blue, red, and magenta layer to dominate an inky black space, creating a sense of depth and chiaroscuro. *Solar* and *Black Hole* evoke visuals of macro worlds such as nebulas and the surface of the sun. *Never(W)here* gives us the experience of The Traveler at the point just before they are transported through the portals.

The *Exiled in Light*⁹ installation uses the same videos as overlapping projections playing upon cloth and clear plastic constructions arranged within the space of a room. The projections serve to immerse the viewer in a fabricated and sensory-driven architectural environment. They play upon and are interrupted by the viewer's body as they move through the space, making each person an integral part of the installation.¹⁰ It is as though the viewer has stepped through *Never(W)here*'s portals to be immersed into imagined dimensions of perceptual engulfment. An ambient soundscape of otherworldly composition accompanies the transcendent visions in both rooms and

serves to enhance the transportive experience for the viewer. These immersive installations are contemplative and trance-inducing in order to produce such phenomenological shifts of perception.

The viewer is an essential element for immersive installation art. As Claire Bishop notes in her 1995 book, installation art “addresses the viewer directly as a literal presence in the space” rather than requiring passive viewing from a distance.¹¹ This presupposes a viewer who has all of their senses heightened, and whose body is necessary to the completion of the installation as part of the work’s totality. As a viewer in the *Never(W)here* and *Exiled in Light* installations, one feels transported in the elements of engulfment. The vibrantly colored light from the videos interacts with the skin and clothing of each body, sometimes reflecting and sometimes diffusing. Even their shadows become part of the composition.¹² The viewer is incorporated into the visions and embodied in a world alternate to that of the everyday spaces of light.

In immersive installation art, an engulfing experience can serve to “heighten awareness of the relationship between itself, space, and viewer.”¹³ This component is important because it helps the viewer circumnavigate their space through interaction. This interaction is between their body and all objects in the space, including the space itself. Bishop points out that it is predicated on the concept, that the “subject and object are not separate entities but are reciprocally intertwined and interdependent.” If our bodies are actually intertwined with all other bodies (animate and inanimate) and the space they exist in, then we are one with our space. Engulfing experiences help us become perceptively sensitive and aware of that truth. The Traveler discovers this in their own sensual explorations of light and dark environments. The early chapters help

us understand The Traveler as they experience intense perceptual sensations from their world in new ways as a result of photosensitivity. We see through their eyes and take nothing for granted as The Traveler perceives their world not as a passive viewer, but fully active and submersed in sensation. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophies of phenomenology are important to the core concepts of this thesis and work. "It is rather, a space reckoned starting with me as the zero point or degree of zero spatiality. I do not see it according to its exterior envelope. I live in it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is all around me, not in front of me."¹⁴ This profound realization of perceiving "within the envelope", leads to The Traveler's full immersion, dissolution, and transportation into alternate universes.

When addressing our perceptions of light, it is important to consider how darkness relates to light. We often simplify light as an element that merely illuminates other "things," and darkness as an absence of light. Goethe's color theories changed how the art world understands this, that darkness is not an absence but an entity of its own. In this work, I am thinking of darkness as equal and balanced with light as an opposing entity. If light and darkness are seen as such, we can consider their meaning as bodies in tandem with each other and all other bodies. This dynamic, interactive relationship is central to my aesthetic theory and interest in self-obliteration. "There is no placement in engulfing blackness: I have no sense of where I am because there is no perceptible space between external objects and myself."¹⁵ Bishop is talking about the viewer's response to darkness in art installations. The artist's use of an engulfing darkness brings about certain shifted responses from the viewer that are a result of psychological decentering. Bishop goes on to explain, "This is not to say that in

darkness I experience a 'void'; on the contrary, encounters, when they occur, are sudden and all too present..." and "At its extreme, this lack of orientation can even raise the question of whether it is accurate to speak of 'self-awareness' in these circumstances. Entering such rooms can make one aware of one's body, but as a loss: one does not sense one's boundaries, which are dispersed in the darkness, and one begins to coincide with the space." Bishop attributes this development in art installations to interest in the writings of psychiatrist Eugene Minkowski. Minkowski maintains that darkness is "personal"; it "envelops" the body, "penetrates" the body. This co-mingling of the body and darkness allows people to experience a dissolution of ego into the space of darkness and become "confused with it, become one with it."

In the chapter titled *Never(Where)*, there is a scene where The Traveler crawls through a dark corridor towards portals emanating incandescent light. It is inspired by the plans for my installation of the same name, but also by James Turrell's art installations. Bishop talks about the battle between penetrating colors of light enhanced by absolute darkness in Turrell's works.¹⁶ Viewers experience sensory confusion leading to a sense of phenomenological decentering. "The possibility of locating ourselves in relation to space is diminished because this space is obscured, confused, or in some way intangible" causing the viewer to question their physical and psychological place in the world, to question where and who they are. "Turrell's installations are spaces of withdrawal that suspend time and orphan us from the world. Turrell describes the works as situations where 'imaginative seeing and outside seeing meet, where it becomes difficult to differentiate between seeing from the inside and

seeing from the outside.’” The experience of being dislodged from the regular world of perception, and instead feeling the decentering that leads to annihilation of the sense of self, is important to my works as well. It is this in-between space that *The Traveler* experiences in the *Never(W)here* chapter (as do viewers in the installations). The liminal world of suspended perception creates the space where one is open to “inside seeing” melding with “outside seeing”, dissolution of the self, and transportation through the portals into a pure oceanic connection with the powerful elements of light and dark.

Yayoi Kusama is another genealogical artist who is interested in these same concepts. In talking about Kusama’s installations in a 2017 book, Mika Yoshitake claims that the “works bring to the fore what Kusama called 'self-obliteration', a term referring to the manner in which dot patterns...would replicate endlessly and thus atomize the self into minute particles. 'The positives and negatives become one,' said Kusama. 'At that moment, I become obliterated.'”¹⁷ My own installation work uses engulfing elements in a darkened architectural space resulting in a sense of self-obliteration for the purpose of universal connectedness. The loss of self leads to immersion in the surrounding space. In the narrative of this thesis, *The Traveler* experiences the literal dissolution of the ‘self’ as their body is transmuted via a painful light engulfment. The experience opens them up for further self-obliteration and a sense of cosmic intermingling when they encounter the portals. The total absorption of self into light and dark through the portals is the final step on their journey to sublime universality.

In conclusion, the core concept of my practice is transformed sensory perceptions as a result of alienation from everyday understandings of light and

darkness, engulfment, and phenomenological self-obliteration. The *Exiled in Light* and *Never(W)here* installations provide an alternative sensory space removed from the “regular world” so that viewers can consider their own psychological perceptions of light and dark divorced from traditional narratives and associations. My work creates a shift in perception to a viewpoint where one is conscious of our perceptual complexities with light and darkness.

I.

“The Traveler”

Φως :: Light

Standing barefoot at a window in the dark room, I reach out one finger and pull aside the curtain for a peek. A bright narrow beam of light streams through the tiny opening. A white-gold blade, it cuts the air and lands on the floor near my foot. I move my toe an inch or so to the right of it. My heart thumps in my chest as I peer through the parted curtains. I know I have to go out there.

Closing my eyes, I imagine the warmth of the sun. Memory-feelings invade my mind. That sweaty, swollen heat seeping deliciously into skin and muscle. Languid limbs, golden and shiny, hair smelling sweet and musky. I remember lounging in the sunlight, eyes closed, the world filling with a hot orange glow behind my eyelids.

I open my eyes. A palimpsest of emotions is triggered by that slim slice of light. The stronger and the newest layer is fear. This feeling quickly smothers the old ones of happier days basking in the shimmering daylight. Anxiety buzzes through me; all my cells vibrate with it. I know what is coming from stepping out into that sun: a fatigue so complete it makes limbs lead-heavy. I wonder how long I can endure the light. How long before the pain burns through the body, lighting up neural pathways so that I can feel each branch? How long before the fever sets in: tender lips blistering, eyes hot and swollen, the back of my neck burning?

Letting the curtain drop back in place, I retreat into the dark room. The air is heavy and close, but the velvety darkness is soothing, and I relish the weight. My heartbeat slows; I breathe easier. The darkness is sweet to me, safe and loving. Here I am protected from the sunlight, enveloped by dark rich colors. Ambient light from windows in other rooms faintly leaks into mine. This dim light feels just right, casting soft gray shadows and giving me enough to see. I feel stronger, comforted by the dark.

I linger for ten minutes, but the pleasure does not last. Freedom is out there—in the sunlight. Freedom to feel the warm breeze, see the bright blue of the sky, listen to birdsong. How long has it been since I've had the ease of walking outdoors? A shift occurs deep inside me. The dark room shrinks, the walls close in, and the air suddenly feels stale and hot. The soothing darkness is now oppressive. Conflicting emotions of yearning and fear fight for domination.

Taking several steps forward, I stand before the door. This barrier, this protection, this blockade of dark wood. I place my palm against it, feeling the warmth

seeping through. I sigh, grab a mask, and winding a black shawl around my body, reach for the doorknob.

A few days have passed since this excursion into the daylight. The fevers have subsided. The blisters are plump and sharply painful, but I feel my strength returning. This bedroom is a dark sanctuary where I've recuperated from the FOSickness¹⁸. I'm sitting up against a mountain of pillows, a book fallen open into my lap. A candle flickers on the table next to me. I watch the shadows and warm light dance on the walls and daydream. Once, I loved being in the sunlight, yet all that has changed. The outside is a perilous adventure into an environment that is now alien and menacing. I wonder about this change in perception of light. What should I feel now that light induces sickness? Light is simultaneously poisonous and desirable. How do I reconcile that? Before the FOSdeaths, I never worried about being in the sun. Or, at least, I took it for granted. I enjoyed the sweetness and power of light without really questioning what it meant to me. Now that light has become toxic, it is all that I can think about.

The artist Olafur Eliasson once built an installation where he fabricated the sun.¹⁹ I remember being impressed with the grandiosity of the work. A massive, luminous orange orb hung over a cavernous hall. There were no windows, but the "sun" made the enclosed space feel open and warm. Eliasson creates artworks that invite us to think about our relationship with light. His works use the immersive spectacle of art to take us out of our everyday experiences, to give us perspective and make room for contemplation.²⁰

I wonder what those sun-lovers contemplated when they became part of the work. Museum-goers lounged and stretched out on the floor as though sunbathing. I

think about “bathing” in the sun, being cleansed by light. Feeling alive and fresh in the glow. How powerful that even the fake sun of an art installation elicited this response.²¹

It spoke to a particular relationship humans had with the sun, back before the FOSdeaths. For centuries, poets and artists have used light to evoke joy and wisdom. I think of the words used to describe wisdom; I play with them in my mind:

enlightenment, insight, illumination. Light is used as a metaphor for our creative understanding of the world. The living had a sweet connection to light back then. Light was life.

What would we think of Eliasson’s installation now?²² Imagine the horror this work would evoke for me today. My physical relationship with light has changed, so my psychological reaction to light changes too. We do not just passively receive light, we produce our own sensations about those perceptions and these are colored by our experiences.²³ Newer perceptions battle with memories of light in safer times. Desire for and aversion to light coexists for Photo-sensitives (or “Photosens”, as we call ourselves). We are alienated in a new world of sublime danger. We are never in control but instead are subject to the power of Nature. That which gives life now also destroys.²⁴

ΣΚΟΤΟΣ :: Storm

Lying in bed, I slowly awaken to the staccato sound of pattering rain. A low rumble of thunder vibrates through my belly. I feel a surge of exhilaration and leap from the bed. Pulling the cord to raise the wooden window blinds, I rejoice at the gothic view.

The world seems drained of color. It is muted and sullen, filled with gray tones and deep black shadows. The grass is a slick, dark bottle green. The red pickup truck in the alley appears a dull maroon. A quick flash of light bleaches everything for a split second, making the darkness that follows a dramatic chiaroscuro. The sky roils with a mass of thick gray clouds. They have a menacing black underbelly enhanced by bright white edges where the sun struggles to be revealed.

A few street lights have come on, cutting through the haze with a spicy orange glow. Other sparse lights in the city create a pattern of dots and dashes in different colors. A Neon sign flashes glowing words that contrast against the muted bricks of the storefront.²⁵

It is a beautiful day!²⁶ For this moment, I don't miss the blue skies and bright colors of a sunny summer day. The stormy gloom gives me hope. Opening the window, I lean out as far as I can. I don't mind being drenched in the rainy deluge. I think only of the relief from the dangers of sunlight. I rejoice at the prospect of moving through the daytime world uncovered, skin bare to the wind and rain.²⁷ I am protected from the sun by the thick layers of cloud cover. I rush to the door and fling it wide. The rain drives in hard, almost sideways. I pause, feeling that pregnant moment before I step out into the open.

Νύχτα :: Night

Without the bustle of people, you'd think the city would be silent. But in the dead of night, you hear the background noises behind the silence. There is a hum of

electricity. It is a low vibration and almost palpable in the air. I imagine how it would feel if I placed my hands on one of the wires hanging above my head. Perhaps I'd feel the prickly rush of electrified molecules coursing beneath the thick insulation. I imagine an electrical aura radiating through the air above me, branching like white hot nerve fibers across the sky.

I've been walking for hours. Occasionally, I walk past other Photosens. We rarely speak to each other. I think we've become accustomed to our solitary lives. Speaking would interrupt the joy of wandering freely in the dark city. I concentrate on experiencing the world around me: listening, touching, smelling, looking.²⁸

There is plenty of time before the sun rises, so I am safe. Stepping off of a crumbling sidewalk, I stop for a rest and lay back onto a patch of cool grass. I reach out my arms to run my hands over the blades. I feel them bend under my fingers and then snap back into place as I pass over. A swishing sound accompanies the movement. I find a rhythm and smile to myself at the music. Above, the wind rustles leaves in the trees. The thrum of cricket song is all around. It drones on, rising and falling in different sections like a symphony.²⁹ I imagine a tiny conductor orchestrating this performance and giggle to myself. The sweet, earthy odor of decaying leaves wafts through the air, and I turn my face to the soil to breathe it in.

Most of the streetlights along this part of the city have been shot out. The night sky looms darkly overhead. Stars scattered across the dome twinkle in the darkness. I remember when we couldn't see the stars. Before the FOSdeaths, the city was bright even in the dead of night. People loved light and feared the dark back then. For Photosens, it is now the opposite. Some houses are lit by flickering candles or dim

electric lights at best. Most houses were darkened after the deaths, and dark they remain.

I think of the philosopher, Goethe, and his theories of color. I remember reading that before Goethe, scientists considered darkness an absence of light. How did that affect our philosophical understanding? If light was life, then what was darkness? People fear the dark, using it as metaphor for death. Darkness represents the unknown, the abyss. However, Goethe theorized that darkness was not an absence but an active ingredient in the color spectrum.³⁰

This reminds me of the philosophy of the Yin and Yang.³¹ Darkness is an active complement to light, creating a counter-balance that must be acknowledged as essential rather than reductive. Artists use darkness to turn flatness into form and mediocrity into high drama. J.M.W. Turner's paintings are filled with vibrant colors of bright light contrasting with stormy blacks that are both beautiful and terrifying.³² He used darkness as a powerful contraposition to light to convey light's sublime power while also revealing the dramatic truth and beauty of darkness. Swirling loose brush strokes create atmospheric layers of luminous light and rapturous darks that give form while simultaneously creating movement of dizzying madness. One feels awe because Turner captures a natural power that reminds us of our small place in the universe.

After the FOSdeaths, Turner's paintings made sense to me in a different context. They were a foreshadowing of our time to come. A time when light is a sublime primal element that we cannot take for granted.³³

Λυκόφως :|: Twilight

The sky is a luminous violet fading into deep magentas and bloody oranges at the edge where it meets the cityscape. The birds sing a farewell hymn to the sun. Twitters and trills overlap the voices of melodious song birds. Darting out from the trees, they swoop and loop through the sky, creating a delicate webbed pattern of flight paths. I gaze through the dark visor of the FOSmask, my eyes drinking up the vibrant colors. I wonder what the colors are really like without the mask but dare not take it off.

I wish I'd paid more attention to twilight colors in the time before the FOSickness. All I remember are those cheesy sunset pictures on calendars and advertisements. How many sunsets had I experienced each day of my life? Busily hurrying through my daily nonsense, I rarely stopped to immerse myself in the experience of a sunset. While I enjoyed light, it was a passive reception. I never questioned what it meant to me. With the loss of light, I have discovered a more sensitive sensory awareness.³⁴ No longer passive, I am keenly aware of not only what I sense but how I am affected by the world around me, as I am part of that world and viewing it from within.

“my body is a thing among things; it is caught up in the fabric of the world”³⁵

I move quickly along a seemingly deserted street at the edge of the city. The houses and buildings are dark with boarded up windows. Weedy lawns are interspersed with poorly tended gardens. Other Photosens are cautiously stepping out

of doors. Twilight is a time of liminal space, an “in-between” when Photosens can catch the last bit of sunlight as it refracts over the edge of the earth. While not entirely safe, with the right protection we can experience a few moments of soft light and deep colors before it all descends into darkness.

There are few of us that survived the first wave of FOSdeaths. New survivors arrive periodically, but mostly we are a sparse and fractured community. When we were first banished to this section of the city, Photosens protested. Riots broke out in the night as we tried to cross over the barriers to our old neighborhoods, homes, and families. I can still hear the screams of agony as the authorities aimed flood lights at us. No need for bullets or tear gas. Stumbling out of the paths of the bright beams of light, I managed to find a dark space in an unlocked basement. Several of us hid there until it was safe. We emerged to find bodies littering the streets. It took weeks for our blisters to subside. No one tried to leave after that. I scavenged supplies to light-proof this house and made the best of it. I had to accept a life alienated from a world of light lovers.³⁶

I shake my head to rid it of those memories and focus on my destination. Today I am heading towards the end of the road where the city falls away into a tangled wood. Once, this was a maintained forest preserve where people picnicked and went for walks on sunny days. Now, it is ours. The overgrown canopy provides relief for foraging this time of the day. Stepping through the brambles and thicket, the light immediately changes. The green ground is muted with spots of dim light interspersed with long spiky shadows. Rather than the sharp contrast of shadow and light you see during the day, these shadows are softly pink and golden. The view is filled with mid-

tones and warm colors. A gentle breeze rustles the trees and causes the edges of my black shawl to flutter. Looking down, I see a large paw print in the soft soil. I step carefully onto it and think about my own footprints through the wood. I imagine about the creature that made this print and wonder at my own place beside it.

Striding quickly forward, I approach a spectacular tree. Tall and slender, it sways in the wind. Its leaves shimmy on the branches as the setting sun casts soft golden beams through the lacy patterns.

“Islands of light are swimming on the grass. They have fallen through the trees.”³⁷

I used to think that light “just” illuminated other things. Now I think of light itself as an entity that is forever changing its shape and character.³⁸ That change is caused by light’s relationship with darkness. Light does not merely act upon matter. It interacts with matter, activates spaces of emptiness, and is mediated by its partner, darkness. Conversely, light mediates darkness. The two are locked in an eternal collaborative dance with our senses. Our own perception is part of this dance and our eyes and mind interact with the play of light and dark.

A rustle in the undergrowth captures my attention. I peer through the tree trunks to see glowing eyes. A dark gray wolf stands frozen, peering back at me. This is her world, the nocturnal woods. Where is her pack? She, like me, is alone. I wonder how I can join her, see it all through her eyes. I imagine running free through the darkening woods, chasing the moon.³⁹ She steps forward, regarding me carefully, then bowing her head low to the ground, sniffs. There is communication in that movement. Although I do not understand with words, I feel as though something has passed

between us. The wolf and I, we recognize each other in the wolf-light⁴⁰ of the in-between. We are creatures who venture into the twilight, to find our place in the dark.

I sit on an old log and watch as the light patches fade to a muted pink, then gray, and into darkness. Taking off my FOSmask, I breathe deeply and look around. Charcoal tones of foliage barely show any hint of color, and the velvety shadows make it impossible to see far. When I look back, the wolf has vanished. I suppose that she is off on her hunt.

Sometime later, I am sitting at the edge of a small pond. The water is perfectly still, like a dark mirror. Reflections glimmer in the smooth oily surface. The tree canopy looms overhead, appearing like dark heavy clouds. Hundreds of tree trunks make me feel as though I am sitting in the midst of a silent crowd. I look up to see the full moon⁴¹ surrounded by a dull haziness in the navy sky.

A tiny spark of light flashes to my left, breaking my reverie. I turn to see the first of the night's fireflies. The birds have fallen quiet, but the cicadas pick up the song now, buzzing in ascending and descending rhythms. Another spark of light flashes, then another. Fireflies twinkle on and off, and I lose myself in their dance.

A moment of deja-vu brings to mind an art installation⁴² I experienced long ago. It was a darkened room made entirely of mirrors. The floor was covered with water, a black reflecting pool. Reflected infinitely in the mirrored walls, ceiling, and water were hundreds of small colored lights suspended throughout the space. The lights contrasted with the blackness of the space and appeared to float in the air.

It was difficult to perceive the edges of the room; this was disconcerting. I felt disembodied, disconnected from any known form of architectural space. I felt as though I'd lost myself; vanished into the seamless, boundless, weightless, cosmos.⁴³ Somehow this disembodying made me feel as if I had become one with the surrounding space. Through the decentering of my own body, I found self-obliteration. I became part of the work, immersed in such a way that I was as essential as those lights reflecting endlessly through the blackness. Alone yet simultaneously and completely part of everything. It was a profound moment. I felt my very presence as one tiny but significant speck within the limitless universe.

Ἡλιος :: Sun⁴⁴

Consciousness comes slowly. My thoughts feel thick and slow, like swimming through mud. It is dark, and I do not know where I am. I tentatively reach out and explore with my fingers. I find the sandy texture of dirt and rock. Slowly I realize that I'm lying on the hard ground. As my eyes adjust, I can see scattered forms in the darkness. An attempt to move engulfs me in a sudden and piercing agony. A scream bursts from my chest, my voice desperate and animal. My legs are pinned by something large and heavy. I steady myself and breathe deeply. As my mind clears, I remember.

They came for us just after nightfall. Bursting through the door, soldiers grabbed me roughly by the arms and dragged me outside. Any urge to fight left when I saw the high-powered lights they held. A press of a button could shoot a bright beam as

deadly as a bullet, at least for Photosens. Terrified, I became submissive, my body limp. Looking around, I could see others being forced from their homes and brought towards the street. Some cried, others shouted, demanding to be told what was happening. Our captors never spoke. They barely even looked at us. We were shoved together into the back of a truck. A door slammed shut and we huddled together in the darkness. We felt the rumble of the truck engine. I am not sure how long we drove; it felt like hours. The continuous drone, the bumps and jostling in the dark, worked to frighten us more. Some wept, with occasional moans or stifled screams. Sometime later, exhausted, I fell into a restless slumber.

A high-pitched shriek startles me now. We've had an accident. I don't remember the crash, but it's the only explanation. I am aware of other bodies around me. Someone to my right is making horrible sounds, the gurgling and panting of a dying body. A final exhale and the sounds cease. I call out, but there is no answer. I shout over and over until my voice becomes thin and raspy. It is so quiet. Death surrounds me.

My legs are trapped beneath an overturned vehicle. The pain of my crushed limbs seems far away, almost as if I am detached and tethered to it by a slender thread. Most of my body is exposed to the night air. I smell blood, a musky, coppery scent mixed with the loamy dirt pressing against my cheek. Looking around, I can see shapeless lumps and the hulking shadow of the truck above me. Straining my eyes, I see a dark road and an open plain, but little else. No trees, no buildings, no shelter. My heart pounds, and I struggle to control panicked breaths. How much time has passed? I am overwhelmed by a feeling of dread. The world fades to black.

My eyelids feel so heavy that it takes determined concentration to open them. I pinch a fingernail into my palm, and the sharpness clears my mind. It is still dark. A bird twitters faintly, soon joined by another. Building slowly, avian voices create a chorus of sounds. Once this was sweet to me. Before the FOSdeaths, I would lay in bed during pre-dawn hours, listening to the birds. Now, it strikes fear deep into my core.

I am trapped.

I am alone.

The sun is rising.

Dawn is not as dramatic as sunset. Light comes gradually so that at first the change is barely discernible. Blackness becomes gray; vague forms begin to appear in the landscape. To my left, beyond the truck's looming structure, the sky is a pale blue strip. Above that, stars twinkle in a deep navy expanse. I watch as that misty blue slowly spreads, swallowing the stars. I can now see the crumbs of dirt beneath my face and hands. I try not to look around at the bodies revealed in the dim light. Nearby, a pool of blood has created scarlet rivulets across the pebbled ground. Closing my eyes, I count trembling breaths, long and slow. The birds are singing full force now. My terror rises and I fight to keep it down. Behind my eyelids, there is a soft glow. When I open them again, the sky has changed, become a delicate blue with soft streaks of tangerine luminosity. These colors, which used to seem so pretty, feel violent and threatening. I imagine the blazing orb following that aura.⁴⁵

Beyond the truck's shadow, the first ray of light appears as the sun peeks over the edge of the earth. I panic and struggle again to get free. My hands clutch and claw at the ground, but I cannot move. A prickling sensation begins deep in my chest,

spreading throughout my body. The prickling becomes sharper. I feel each branching vein as though thousands of tiny needles course through my bloodstream.

Only a few feet in front of me, a blade of white gold sunlight streams across the ground. The truck's shadow offers a flimsy barrier between that blade and my body. I look to the opposite side of the sky and imagine the star-filled darkness over the western edge of land. I will myself to fly like a bird. To keep flying, past the moon, out to the dark cosmos. I would fly past marbled planets, through colorful nebulae.⁴⁶ There I could find a darkness lit only with pinpricks of distant suns that cannot hurt me. But, I cannot escape.

The truck's shadow shrinks, and the blade of light inches toward my splayed fingers. A heavy heat begins at the back of my neck. It spreads like molten lead over my head and down my body. I am so hot, I feel as if I can burst into flames. I breathe fast, gasping for air. The prickly feeling grows to a buzzing so intense I feel as though I may shake apart. How is it possible to be aware of each cell in my body?⁴⁷ Cells that pulsate faster and faster. The buzzing grows louder, drowning out the morning birdsong. The edge of light creeps nearer.

Something is happening. My fingers are strange, the edges blurring and diffusing. I watch, transfixed, as tiny particles break apart from my hands and float away like pixels in a disintegrating video. More pixels drift away from my face, my arms, my body. I am crumbling, diffusing, disintegrating into the very air.⁴⁸ The world around me seems impossibly bright, blindingly white. Even the truck's shadow is barely perceptible. The buzz of sound builds to a high-pitched whine until the light bursts past the faint shadow edge. I burn; I shiver out of this shadow, into this sun.⁴⁹

II.

“Never(W)here”

I open my eyes to darkness, sweet soothing darkness. A darkness so complete, it is unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. I raise my hand to my face and hold it at the tip of my nose but can see not even a ghost of movement or shape. Pressing a hand gently against my eyes, I flutter my eyelashes against my palm. Yes, my eyes are open, but I can see absolutely nothing. One might assume that this is a frightening moment, thinking perhaps that I’ve gone blind or am dead. However, I am so relieved to be free of the agony of light that I feel only comfort.

“Creating the sense of being in a galaxy millions of light years away, where one’s body disappears in total darkness.”⁵⁰

I am lying on a flat surface but can see nothing to orientate myself in the space or to recognize what the surface is made of. I tentatively stretch my hands out to explore, sliding my fingers along the horizontal plane. It is perfectly smooth, neither cold nor warm. No cracks, divots, or edges; only a continuous expanse. I rest my palm flat against its surface and notice a strange sensation. While it is solid, it also feels insubstantial, as if my hand may sink into the floor. I press carefully and feel a faint buzz, a soft vibration.

Running my fingers across my face, over my head, and down my body, I find that I am whole and shockingly uninjured. I clearly remember being trapped under the overturned truck but do not remember being freed from it. I sit up and reach my arms hesitantly into the air. I find nothing but open space. Without a visual sense of form or of the space in which my body exists, I feel unmoored.

I drop my hands back to the floor, and that gives me some sense of stability. I turn to look behind me, hoping desperately to perceive an object or some architectural feature to give an understanding of where my body ends and another space begins.⁵¹ But I can see nothing, hear nothing, and feel nothing other than the strange floor. I sit for a time, waiting to see if my eyes will adjust, but there is only the darkness. Finally, I decide to discover my space through touch. Crawling slowly forward, I move carefully across the sleek floor. Each time a palm is placed down, I feel a soft buzz and this comforts me.

I stop when I reach a vertical barrier. I can only guess it is a wall. I crawl along the expanse of the wall until I reach its end. There is a doorway here. The wall then makes an abruptly sharp turn and continues forward. This must be a passageway, a

corridor of some sort. Crawling forward, I make my way through it, towards what, I know not. The corridor is narrow, giving me just enough space for my body. The “aliveness” of the space is all-encompassing. The vibration of the floor and walls surrounds and envelops me as I crawl forward through the black.

There! There is something ahead of me. It disrupts the darkness: a soft glow of slowly changing colors. The glow is barely discernible and strangely does not illuminate anything in its vicinity. It is disconcerting to have such complete blackness between myself and the glow, like we are floating separately in an abyss.⁵² I want to know about that glow. In this absolute darkness, the soft emanation is inviting. I cannot resist.

As I move closer, the dim glow takes on the shape of a rounded rectangle, which I can only guess is a doorway. I finally reach it and tentatively stretch my hand out, noticing a slight change in the faint light as my hand passes through. I cannot actually see my hand, but I can perceive a misty shadow where I know my hand to be. I wave my hand back and forth until I touch a vertical solid surface on each side. So it is a doorway. Sliding my hands up each vertical edge, I feel the same slick buzzing surface.

I cautiously rise to my feet. Taking a step forward is precarious. I do not know exactly when my foot will touch the floor.⁵³ When it does, I shift my weight and lift the other foot to slide it forward, arms outstretched. Placing my palms on each side of the doorway, I take a deep breath and step through.

Luminescent colors swirl slowly within four rectangular frames⁵⁴ evenly spaced around me. The vibrancy of color and light is emphasized by the dark emptiness of the room. I think of it as a room only because I try to make sense of what I see. I still

cannot perceive any form of surface, but from this view, each frame appears to float in the shadowy space along a plane that is perpendicular to the other. It is as though each is a window embedded in an invisible wall.

I take another step across the black floor. The darkness makes me feel disoriented each time I lift my foot, so I continue to take small sliding steps, slowly inching forward to the nearest frame of colors. The light seems strange. It does not spread out to illuminate anything around it. It is as if the darkness holds back the light, keeping it to the boundaries of each frame. The darkness is absolute, as is the light. They act as separate bodies in tandem. Each is an entity in balance with the other.

I step close to the first frame. I feel as though I am peering through a window at a luminous sea of sunlight.⁵⁵ Gold, orange, and red light roils with bursts blooming like slow-motion solar flares that morph and dance. The waves slowly spread into delicate layered mists sliding over one another. The mists intensify into undulating liquid fire before coalescing into hundreds of minuscule oval structures. One moment the vision is evocative of the microscopic interior of organic cells, and others, a gaseous nebula or the surface of the sun. Light flows as plasma into black space, then curls back again to swirl and churn. The slow organic movement is mesmerizing. Darkness and light fight each other, one never gaining ground as they lock in an eternal embrace.

A painting, *The Morning After the Deluge*,⁵⁶ comes to mind. When I first saw that painting so long ago, it stirred a feeling of awe; radiant light, glowing and alive with turbulence, fought with a billowy darkness, cradled by singed oranges and burning gold. The painting awakened a new reverence, not only for light's power, but for the

equal opposition of the dark in its partner *The Evening of the Deluge*. The primordial eddies of raging light and darkness swirled in a sublime dance of dreadful beauty.

“Yellow seeping into white just as sunlight dissolves into a thinning sky.”⁵⁷

Reaching out, my fingers seek the dark space to the left of the window frame. Not able to see a glimmer of reflection in that ebony surface, I wondered if my hand would find nothing, but that is a visual trick of the darkness. It, like the rest of the room, has form. I feel the same strange humming in the slick surface of the wall. Dragging my fingers back over to the frame’s edge, I cannot see my hand until it moves directly in front of the window. There the light faintly illuminates the form of my hand as the fiery colors play upon my skin. I jerk my hand back reflexively, yet I cannot help but rejoice at finally seeing a part of my own body. I reach out again and watch my hand materialize as it enters the space of light. It looks otherworldly in the solar glow. My skin captures the sensuous red and gold movement like a movie screen. Fiery waves roll across my skin, flicking in and out of darker surges. The light envelops me, transforming my hand into a mirror of the vision.

“We eat light, drink it through our skins.”⁵⁸

This light does not trigger the sickness and dread that comes with photosensitivity. It feels more like a living thing. Vibrantly buzzing, the light gives me a sense of connection, like the electrical charge of being close to someone you love.

I reach further to touch what I think is a window, expecting the smooth, transparent barrier of glass. Instead, my fingers dip into shimmering movement. Reverberating waves travel through my fingers and up my arm. The electrical flux

travels throughout my body, branching endlessly until I am full of the throbbing hum. Each cell in my body pulses. I am engulfed with the rhythm of the golden current.⁵⁹ I feel my heartbeat join the pulse and then a soft, expansive swell like letting out a long-held breath. I drag my hand slowly back and forth through the eddies, feeling the swirling motion tug at my skin. Tiny bits break away from the tips of my fingers and flow through the window, following the tidal motion of the solar sea contained within the frame. The particles slowly spin and dance until they merge with the golden streams.⁶⁰ I feel flashes of oceanic connection as each of those particles is swept up with the cadence of the light flow. My body disintegrates, but I am not afraid this time. I do not fade away.⁶¹

As I fall into the red and gold light, I know that I am me.⁶²

I am movement.

I am the dark.

I am the light.⁶³

¹ Walton, Stuart, *In the Realm of the Senses; A Materialist Theory of Seeing and Feeling*, 2015, p.14.

² Zajonc, Arthur, *Catching the Light; The Entwined History of Light and Mind*, 1993, p. 6.

³ “Research on Photosensitivity among People with Lupus.” Lupus Foundation of America. Accessed April 27, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3aMxcq4>

Photosensitivity is an abnormal reaction to light in individuals suffering from autoimmune disorders (such as Systemic Lupus.) People can have mild to severe reactions such as rash, blisters, joint pains, weakness, fatigue and fever. This can result in increased autoimmune activity and extreme sensitivity to ultraviolet rays from sunlight or artificial lights such as fluorescent light.

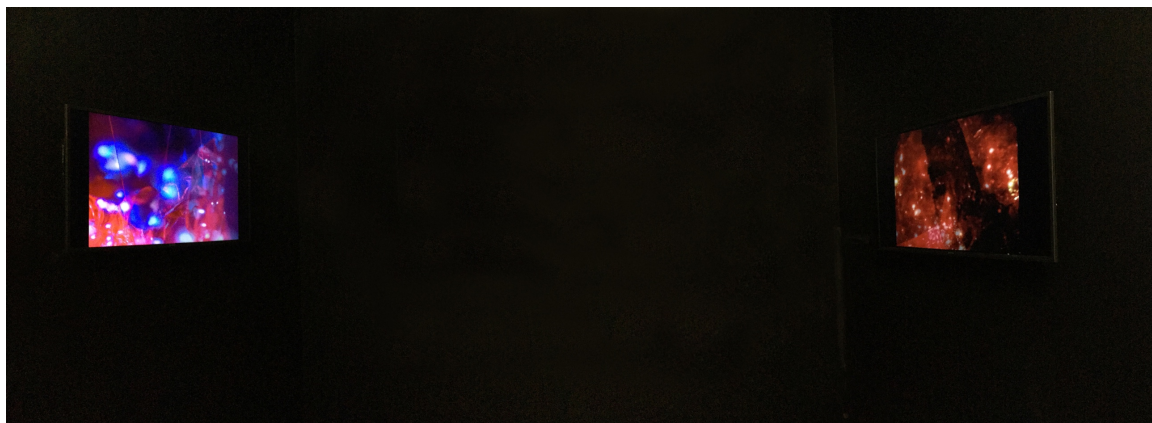
⁴ This assertion is built upon my personal experiences with and research into autoimmune photosensitivity. In fact, the chapters in Section I are based on real life experiences with photosensitivity, albeit exaggerated and altered to fit the fictional narrative. While I am not trying to cause viewers to change their love of light, I am interested in using a flipped narrative of the context of light as a vehicle to give the viewer space to be aware of and explore their perceptions.

⁵ “Photosen” is a fictional term created for the purpose of this allegory. It refers to fictional people who have an autoimmune illness of unknown origins. This disease causes individuals to be so sensitive to light that it is fatally toxic. Those few who survive the initial onset of the disease remain photosensitive and must become nocturnal.

⁶ I feel it important that The Traveler be gender-neutral. I do not want them to be viewed through the lens of a perceived binary gender, rather they represent every individual immersed in my artworks. The use of “they/their” pronouns is meant as a gender neutral singular. Since, at the time of this writing, this is still a new language concept in our society, I have noted it here.

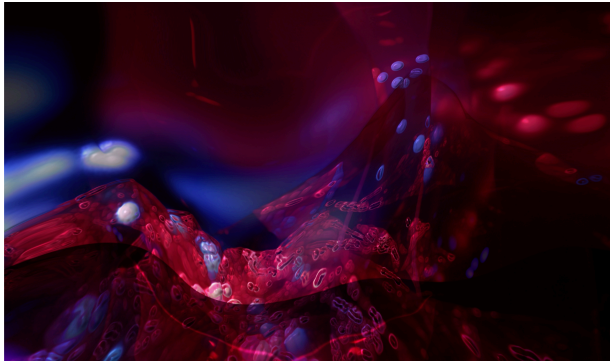
⁷ The title is an homage to Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere*, a magical realism tale of transportive alternate dimensions set in the dark underground. As a title for the thesis chapter and art installation, Never(W)here is a play on the words Never Where and Never Here. It symbolizes a liminal space of the “in-between”. It is a transitory space in between the polarized worlds of light and darkness. It is a place of self-obliteration that leads to universal connection found in the empathetic transportation through the portals.

⁸ Still images of Never(W)here Installation

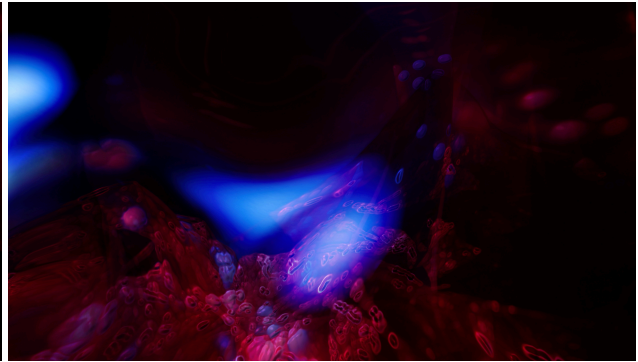


Xanos, Valerie, *Never(W)here*, Art installation - Digital videos/screens, 2017

Still images of the *Never(W)here* and *Exiled in Light* videos:



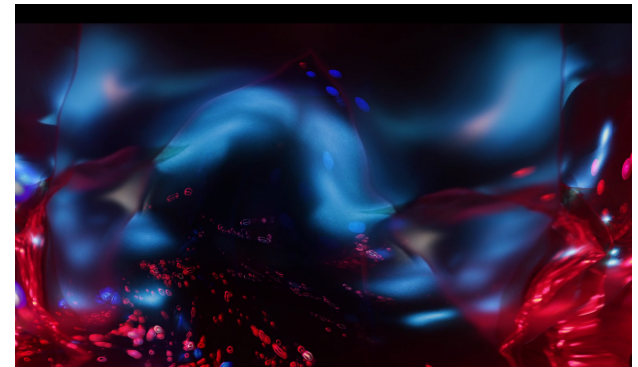
Xanos, Valerie, #1 Still of Digital Video
"Corpuscles", 2017



Xanos, Valerie, #2 Still of Digital Video
"Corpuscles", 2017



Xanos, Valerie, #1 Still of Digital Video "Veils",
2018-2019



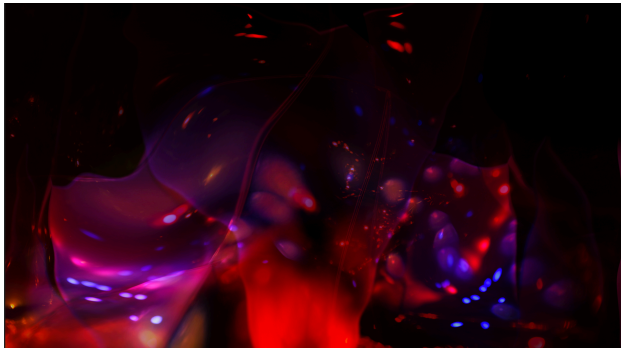
Xanos, Valerie, #2 Still of Digital Video "Veils",
2018-2019



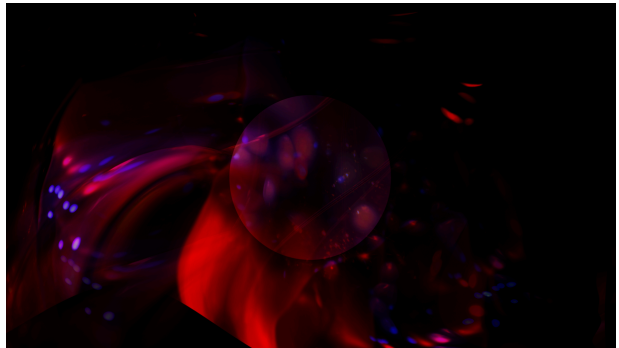
Xanos, Valerie, #1 Still of Digital Video "Solar",
2018-2019



Xanos, Valerie, #2 Still of Digital Video "Solar",
2018-2019

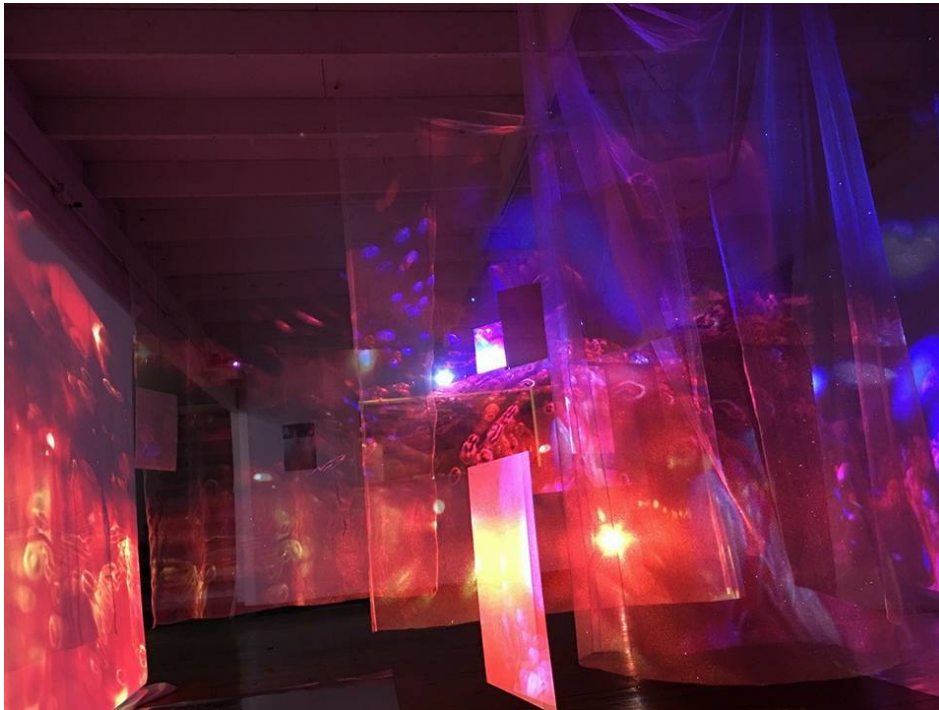


Xanos, Valerie, #1 Still of Digital Video,
"Black Hole", 2020



Xanos, Valerie, #2 Still of Digital Video,
"Black Hole", 2020

⁹ Still images of the *Exiled in Light* installation:



#1



#2

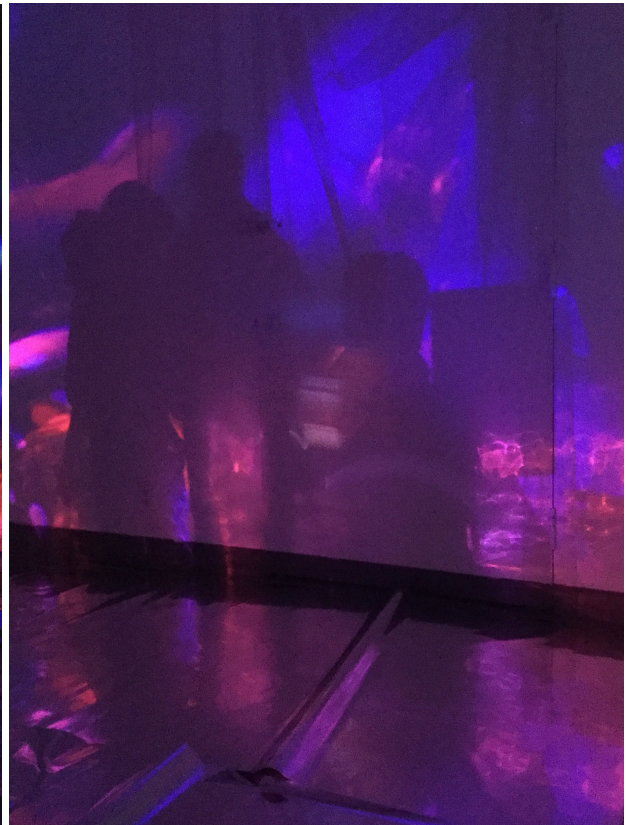
Xanos, Valerie, *Exiled in Light #1 and #2*, "Light Matters" Exhibition at Chicago Art Department, Art installation - Digital video projections, plastic, mylar, & fabric, 2018

¹⁰ Images of viewers immersed in the *Never(W)here* and *Exiled in Light* installations, 2017.



¹¹ Bishop, Claire. *Installation Art: A Critical History*. New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 6.

¹² Images of viewers immersed in the *Exiled in Light* installations, 2017 & 2018.



¹³ Bishop, Claire. *Installation Art: A Critical History*. New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 50.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Basic Writings*, edited by Thomas Baldwin, 2004, pp. 295 – 309.

¹⁵ Bishop, Claire. *Installation Art: A Critical History*. New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 82 - 84.

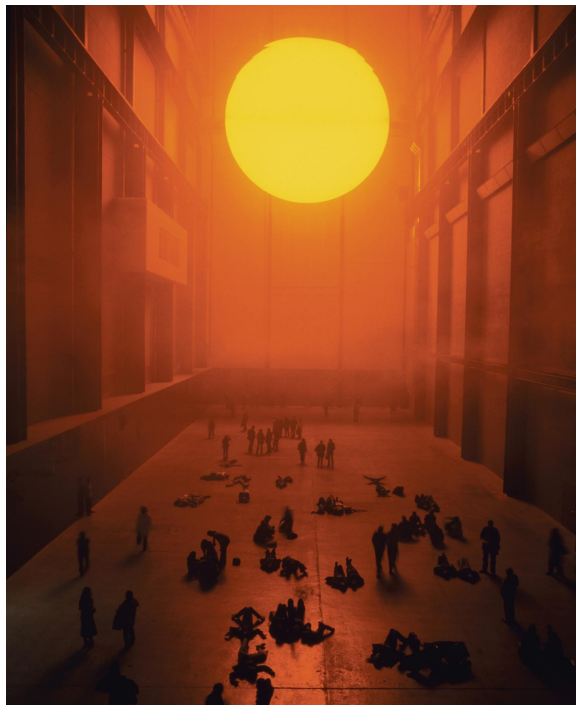
¹⁶ Bishop, Claire. *Installation Art: A Critical History*. New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 85.

Referring to James Turrell's work with darkness and spaces of light, Bishop states: "the terrain between our body and this space of light is unfathomably dark. In his series of 'Space-Division Pieces' such as *Earth Shadow* 1991, a dark room is lit only by two dim spotlights; the room appears to be empty but for a glowing rectangular shape on the far wall. When we advance towards this rectangle, its colour seems opaque and yet too evanescent to be solid. If we try and touch this coloured block of light, our tentatively outstretched hands pass through the anticipated surface to an unbounded volume of coloured fog – a revelation that is both unnerving and exhilarating. Standing before such fields of colour, our bodies are immersed in a rich, thick atmosphere of colored light almost tangible in its density."

¹⁷ Yoshitake, Mika, *Yayoi Kusama – Infinity Mirrors*, 2017, p. 25.

¹⁸ Φως (Fos) is the Greek word for "Light". It is used here to create a new language about the changed conditions of The Traveler's experience and their relationship with light. "FOSickness" is a fictional term created for the purpose of this allegory and is used to describe the disease suffered by The Traveler. Fos is used for other related fictional words such as "FOSdeaths" and "FOSmask."

¹⁹ *The Weather Project* is a poignant artwork for The Traveler to reminisce about because it gives us a glimpse into their shifted perceptions about the sun. This artwork, meant to evoke the light and power of the sun, creates different reactions for The Traveler as a Photosen. Their experience with FOSickness creates an altered context for their relationship with light. They shift from feeling the joy of light to a narrative of toxicity. If The Traveler were to experience *The Weather Project* as a Photosen, it would not only be physically toxic but psychologically terrifying.



Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, 2003.

²⁰ Olafur Eliasson's immersive approach creates a phenomenological situation that helps the viewer create connections that might not happen in everyday settings. *The Weather Project* uses light, color, and shape in an indoor space that allows viewers to experience the sun in an altered setting (indoors). Viewers react to the work by understanding the installation light in context to their memories of experiencing sunlight. Although they are aware that it is an artificial experience, their memories allow them to react as though it is a natural experience of the actual sun. Eliasson's *The Weather Project* is

relevant to my installation works, as I aim to take the viewer out of their everyday experiences in order to explore their psychological relationship with light and darkness in an immersive setting. Viewers are given space for contemplative meditation. They are not only physically immersed in the work but also psychologically immersed in a moment of being mindfully present through memories of sensual experience.

²¹ Bishop, Claire, *Installation Art*, 2005, p. 57.

Bishop writes about Robert Irwin, whose installation art “makes you perceive yourself perceiving.” Bishop goes on to describe phenomenological “installation art as a way to free the viewer’s perceptual experience and allow that act of seeing itself to be felt.” This is a direct reference to Merleau-Ponty’s writings in his 1964 book *Eye and Mind* about perceiving from “inside the envelope”, which is addressed further in the thesis. As for The Traveler, they are contemplating how their perceptions have been changed by photosensitivity. They have gained an awareness of perceiving from “inside the envelope” of phenomenological sensation. This causes them to further contemplate their relationship with light and dark and how that has changed through the alienation of exile.

²² As a result of the FOSickness photosensitivity, The Traveler thinks about how they would perceive *The Weather Project* differently than before. Their shifted understanding of light and dark affects how they relate to the project. The alienation of light that they experience causes them to react to the project with horror and dread instead of the warmth and comfort viewers felt at the time before perceptions of light shifted.

²³ Crary, Jonathan, *Techniques of the Observer*, 1992, p. 75.

In *Techniques of the Observer*, Jonathan Crary writes about Arthur Schopenhauer’s influence on modern aesthetics and art theory through an articulation of an autonomous artistic perception. He maintains that Schopenhauer “rejected any model of the observer as passive receiver of sensation and instead posed a subject who was both the site and producer of sensation.” I was thrilled to consider the idea of the viewer being both “site and producer of sensation” as that is exactly what I count on for the viewer’s experience of *Exiled in Light*. As a “producer of sensation” the viewer processes both “inner” and “outer” light to create a contextual and empathetic understanding of their psychological relationship to light and dark. The use of light itself as subject is vital, because I am asking the viewer to focus on their experiences of light and darkness in order to consider the sensory responses and psychological relationships to them as they are also the “site of sensation.”

²⁴ Zajonc, Arthur, *Catching the Light; The Entwined History of Light and Mind*, 1993, p. 6.

The Traveler’s understanding of the “inner light” of their mind and photosensitive experiences affects their response to the “outer light” perceived by their senses, thus changing their perceptions.

²⁵ The chapter, *Storm*, is inspired by real life experiences in heavy storms as a photosensitive. It is also inspired by the movie *Blade Runner*. *Blade Runner* contemplates concepts of “the other” through the replicant characters. It asks such questions as, who is accepted by society? How can one pass for an acceptable member? What is human? These are issues are felt heavily by The Traveler as an exiled photosensitive living in a world ruled by light. The aesthetics of the storm scene of the thesis as well as the aesthetics and colors in the installation videos are inspired by the movie’s creation of “nocturnal” moments during the day. It is gloomy and raining throughout the film and light is used as an attempt to penetrate and battle that gloominess. For The Traveler, the gloominess is a comforting environment to be themselves in the “alternate” world of daytime.

²⁶ This exclamation shows what The Traveler needs in order to be comfortable in a daytime environment. It expresses their views of what a beautiful day is to them, that which is a shifted perception from a sunny day to the overcast day.

²⁷ Bishop, Claire, *Installation Art*, 2005, p. 50.

Bishop declares that for installation art, "Perception is not simply a question of vision but involves the whole body. The Inter-relationship between myself and world is a matter of embodied perception... because what I perceive is necessarily dependent on my being at any one moment physically present in a matrix of circumstances that determine how and what it is that I perceive." The Traveler experiences this altered whole body experience when they have a chance to go outside during daylight hours under the cover of the storm. A temporary liminal space has been created by the intense cloud cover so that they can experience daytime freedom with their whole body despite circumstances. This thesis reiterates the concept of embodied perception throughout the story and as it is experienced in the installation artworks.

²⁸ Throughout this chapter, The Traveler is immersed in their surroundings. They perceive themselves perceiving. *Night* is a chapter where we get to see The Traveler in their comfort zone. They experience the world with a heightened empathetic connection. They are hyperaware of multiple sensory perceptions and intensely focused on experiencing the nocturnal world from a viewpoint of "embodied perception." We see this again in the *Never(W)here* chapter as they accept the engulfing, decentering, shifting, and ultimately transporting experiences as ways for them to embody perception. This is a foreshadowing of the same invitation to viewers in the artworks, *Exiled in Light* and *Never(W)here*, who experience light in an altered setting that helps them question their own circumstances and context.

²⁹ The soundscape that accompanies the *Never(W)here* and *Exiled in Light* installations is composed of layers of cricket song and other natural, electric, and machine made sounds. They have been slowed down and layered so that one hears ambient veils of sound weaving in and out of space. The result is an otherworldly style that emphasizes the engulfing quality of the installation. This choice reflects the experiences of The Traveler as she perceives her altered world "inside the envelope."

³⁰ Robinson, M.S, and Rosalind Ormiston. *Bauhaus Masterworks: New World View*. Fulham, London: Flame Tree Publishing, 2017, p. 107.

The Traveler is thinking about their own changed perceptions of darkness and color. Their reference to Goethe's views of darkness being an active ingredient as opposed to an absence is vital here. They think about darkness as an element equal to light in constant tense juxtaposition. Darkness as an active ingredient empowers The Traveler in their own world in opposition to their exiled experience in the world of light. Darkness is not an absence, rather it is an element of power in their natural nocturnal space.

³¹ The Yin Yang are inseparable and contradictory opposites that are complementary, interconnected, and interdependent in the natural world. Natural dualities (such as light and dark, fire and water, expanding and contracting) are thought of as physical manifestations of the duality symbolized by yin and yang. A paradox of simultaneous unity and duality.

³² Ormiston, Rosalind. *J.M.W. Turner – Masterpieces of Art*. Flame Tree Publishing, Ltd., 2014, pp. 101, 104.



Turner, J.M.W., *Snow Storm – Steam Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*, c. 1842



Turner, J.M.W., *The Slave Ship: Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying –Typhoon Coming On*, c 1840

³³ Ackerman, Diane *A Natural History of the Senses*, 1990, p. 268.

“Cezanne’s diseased eyes allowed him to see differently and therefore paint differently, allowing us to see differently.” Ackerman is referencing Merleau-Ponty’s writings about Cezanne in *Eye and Mind*. This moment for The Traveler is much like Cezanne’s alternate view due to his poor eyesight. Ackerman contends, as do I, that this altered perception allowed Cezanne to “see” what we cannot. He gifts this shifted sight to us through his paintings. The Traveler perceives differently since light is toxic to them. They view their environment and Turner’s paintings differently now that their own perceptions have been altered. This shifted perception is gifted to viewers who experience the *Exiled in Light* and *Never(W)here* installations, giving them a meditative space in which to contemplate it.

³⁴ Ackerman, Diane *A Natural History of the Senses*, 1990, p. 15.

“Perceptions are the brain’s educated guesses about what the combined senses are telling it, and as such they will almost always depend on interactions between different modalities.”

When The Traveler says “I have discovered a more sensitive sensory awareness,” they are expressing a key concept to my work about how we understand and are aware of our own perception. Ackerman tells us that these perceptions are more than sensory information; rather, they are based on interactions of multiple sensory data processed in the brain in context to that particular person. This concept also reiterates those theories presented by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, James Turrell, Jonathan Crary, Arthur Zajonc, and Bruce Watson of the “inner” and “outer” light of our perception.

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Basic Writings*, edited by Thomas Baldwin, 2004, pp. 295 - 309

The Traveler is forced by their hyper-awareness and exile to see themselves “inside the envelope.” With this realization, they encounter increasingly intense sensory engulfment that reiterates these philosophies and leads to their physical dissolution and transcendence where they experience true immersion and universality.

³⁶ The Traveler’s alienation living as a Photosen in a world of light is important because it is through this alienation that they reach new understandings about phenomenological perceptions of light and dark.

³⁷ Woolf, Virginia; *The Waves*, 1931, p. 9

The Waves was influential to this writing in multiple ways. Woolf’s sensually descriptive metaphors fit well with my concepts of phenomenology and envisioning. Her use of the narrative to convey deep philosophy is very much what I am aspiring to do through the musings and allegorical experiences of The Traveler. This particular quote, “Islands of light are swimming on the grass. They have fallen through the trees,” is important because it conveys the idea of light, not as merely an element that illuminates objects in our environment, but as an entity unto itself. Light is an “island” of shape created by the

shadow of objects with which it interacts. Each is working in opposition to each other, which defines their separateness, but also defines their related role in the connected universe.

³⁸ This is an important part of The Traveler's philosophical revelations. It is also a reference to the videos in the installation. The movement of the projected videos are paced so slowly that at times it is imperceptible unless you are watching for at least 8 seconds. They are seamless loops that show the endless morphing of light and shadow in the micro and cosmic worlds they evoke.

³⁹ I am inspired by Octavia Butler's 1993 *Parable of the Sower*. A sci-fi novel set in a dystopian world, the *Parable* tales are part of the genealogy of my thesis project. *Parable of the Sower* expresses a theme of empathy. Butler's work is also about Lauren's exile, both political and social, and how this exile changes her. The main character, Lauren, is "afflicted" with hyper-empathy, a condition that causes her to feel the pleasure and pain of others. Her sensory understanding of the world cannot be separated from her actual sensations experienced through this connection. Empathy is an important concept to my art installations because it connects to the sensory hyper-awareness that occurs with photosensitivity. In that empathetic connection, there is the possibility for universality too. The Traveler experiences an empathetic connection to the wolf as they are creatures alike to each other.

⁴⁰ Λυκόφως (Lykofos) translates directly as "little light" in modern Greek, and is used to reference the time of twilight. I use it as a play on words in the Greek language. If you break down the words that make up lykofos, "fos" means "light"; and one can use "lykos" to translate as "wolf." I refer to twilight as "wolf-light" for metaphorical purposes. Wolves are sometimes diurnal, mostly nocturnal animals who first step out to hunt in the twilight hours, much as The Traveler does. In mythological fables, the wolf is deeply connected to the moon and even hurt by the sun, as is The Traveler. The lone wolf, lost from the pack, is representative of The Traveler as they struggle to find their foothold as a nocturnal creature in a world of light. Twilight is a time of liminal space in both the physical light and dark and the psychological light and dark. This foreshadows The Traveler's arrival in the *Never(W)here* room, another liminal space.

⁴¹ The full moon is used here to evoke a form of light that is natural for nocturnal creatures. The light of the moon, a diminished reflection of the sun, does not hurt Photosens. The safe light of the moon is a joy to a Photosen who both fears and longs for sunlight. The moon's presence in the darkness of night evokes dichotomies of light and dark in philosophy, psychology, and mythology. For these reasons, the circle shape of the full moon is used in the designs of the fabric and plastic architectural disruptions which compose the *Exiled in Light* installation. The moon's reflective light is echoed in the reflective qualities of the installation disruptors.

⁴² Yoshitake, Mika, *Yayoi Kusama – Infinity Mirrors*, 2017, p. 30.

Yayoi Kusama created this work based upon a childhood dream of fireflies in a darkened wood. Kusama's installation is a strong genealogical link for *Exiled in Light*. On page 31 of her 2017 book, *Yayoi Kusama – Infinity Mirrors*, Mika Yoshitake writes about Kusama's light installations in dark rooms as evocative of the phenomenological concepts of Merleau-Ponty's envelope theory: "I do not see [space] according to its exterior envelope, I live it from the inside. I am immersed in it. After all the world is all around me, not in front of me."



Kusama, Yayoi, *Infinity Mirror Room - Fireflies on the Water*, 2000.

⁴³ Yoshitake, Mika, *Yayoi Kusama – Infinity Mirrors*, 2017, p. 30.

In referencing Kusama's concepts around self-obliteration, The Traveler paraphrases Yoshitake's understanding, "The viewer all but vanishes in the stillness, suspended in a seamless, boundless, weightless, cosmos."

⁴⁴ This chapter, *Sun*, expresses a perceptual shift regarding sensory awareness and a psychological epiphany of light and dark. This is also about a physical shift from one space to another through engulfment. The Traveler experiences a catalytic moment that sends them on a metaphysical journey to alternate dimensions. This pattern of physical disembodiment and engulfment metaphorically represents what the *Exiled in Light* installation does for the viewer.

⁴⁵ The *Sun* chapter serves many purposes, one of which is to help the reader/viewer empathetically experience light through the understanding of a Photosen.

⁴⁶ This scene connects to the videos in the *Never(W)here* installation and is evocative of such a journey through the cosmos.

⁴⁷ This scene connects to the videos in the *Never(W)here* installation and is evocative of such a journey through portals into micro worlds of cell and membrane.

⁴⁸ This scene is a reference to concepts of self-obliteration through the experience of engulfing, shifted perceptions.

⁴⁹ Woolf, Virginia, *Waves*, p. 11 "I burn, I shiver," said Jinny, "out of this sun, into this shadow."

⁵⁰ Yoshitake, Mika, *Yayoi Kusama – Infinity Mirrors*, 2017, p. 31.

⁵¹ Bishop, Claire, *Installation Art*, 2005, p. 82 – 84.
This is a reference to Introduction, page 9, paragraph 2.

⁵² Bishop, Claire, *Installation Art*, 2005, p. 84 – 85.

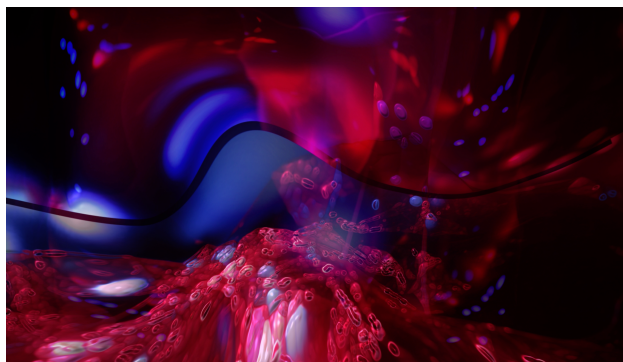
A reference to the decentering that occurs in darkened spaces as discussed in this thesis' Introduction.

⁵³ Lindner, Vicki, and William Coupon. "James Turrell." *Omni*, 1995, p.105-107.

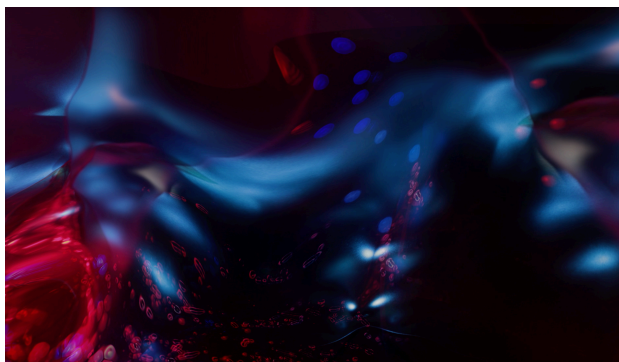
In an interview, *Omni* asks Turrell to speak about viewer disorientation (decentering) in his light work, *City of Anhrit*, where "people fell and had to crawl out on their hands and knees." Turrell answered, "Looking at the Jacob's Ladder, the veils it formed, the Varga, or rain that evaporates before it hits the ground, I'd ask myself, How, where, do you see this? Is it something you see way out there, or in here? Something you can go through, or enter? Can it be worked in the near space, or between you and me, so that I can't see it even though we're in the same physical space? I play with the idea of the picture plane; I have pieces you enter only with vision, others you enter that are all around you, and some you pull over your head like a T-shirt so the inside seeing behind the eyes is affected." The Traveler has a similar experience in *Never(W)here*. They cannot see themselves in relation to any picture plane in the space since all visual information is erased by the blackness. This affects how they perceive their own body in relation to the glow and the portals. As a result, they experience a decentering effect and that opens them up to a more sensitive perception and alternate experience of the light and dark as "bodies" to which they do not yet know how to relate.

⁵⁴ The frames in this scene are reminiscent of the window-like video monitors in the *Never(W)here* installation. They evoke the sense of a portal to alternate dimensions.

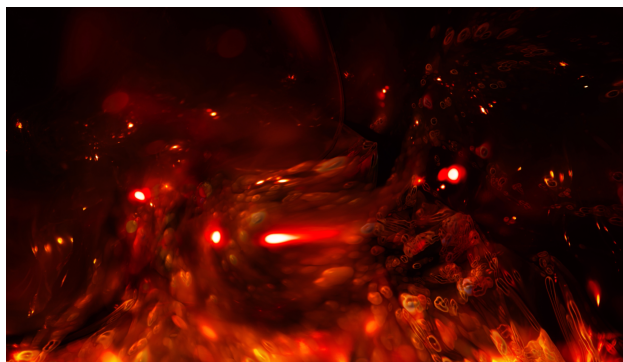
Still images of the *Never(W)here* and *Exiled in Light* videos:



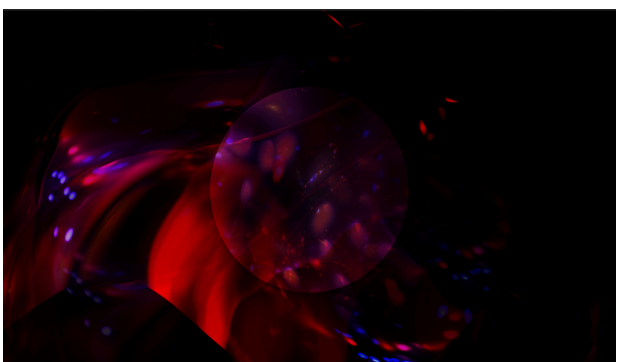
Xanos, Valerie, #3 Still of Digital Video
"Corpuscles", 2017



Xanos, Valerie, #3 Still of Digital Video
"Veils", 2018-2019



Xanos, Valerie, #3 Still of Digital Video
"Solar", 2018-2019



Xanos, Valerie, #3 Still of Digital Video
"Black Hole", 2020

⁵⁵ View of the *Solar* "portal" in the *Never(W)here* wall.



⁵⁶ Ormiston, Rosalind, *J.M.W. Turner – Masterpieces of Art*, 2014, p. 121-122



Turner, J.M.W., *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) - The Morning after the Deluge*, c.1843



Turner, J.M.W., *Shade and Darkness - The Evening of the Deluge*, c.1843

⁵⁷ Watson, Bruce, *A Radiant History from Creation to the Quantum Age*, 2016, p. 117.

Watson writes that J.M.W. Turner was known as the “painter of light.” He quotes the critic John Ruskin as saying “If...you had paused but so much as one quarter of an hour before the picture, you would have found the sense of air and space blended with every line, and breathing in every cloud, and every colour instinct and radiant with visible, glowing, absorbing light.”

⁵⁸ Watson, Bruce, *A Radiant History from Creation to the Quantum Age*, 2016, p. xi of Introduction.

Quoted by James Turrell

⁵⁹ This experience echoes the first transportation catalyzed by sunlight. While that experience was painful, this is not. The Traveler is no longer exiled in the world of light. Rather, they are in a place where light can no longer hurt them. They have found a position in an alternate world of universality and therefore accept the dichotomous powers of light and dark.

⁶⁰ Yoshitake, Mika, *Yayoi Kusama – Infinity Mirrors*, 2017, p.26 - 27.

Again, Kusama's focus of the "paradoxical pursuit of self-obliteration to the point of profound connectedness" connects with my own installations of the *Exiled in Light* and *Never(W)here* artworks. This is expressed in the narrative as The Traveler attempts to touch the "windows" in the *Never(W)here* room, and discovers that they will yet again disintegrate and be transported. They will "atomize the self into minute particles" and join with the universe in alternate dimensions of sublime light and darkness.

⁶¹ Bishop, Claire, *Installation Art*, 2005, p. 82

Bishop writes about self-obliteration leading to immersion in universality. "One does not sense one's boundaries, which are dispersed in the darkness, and one begins to coincide with the space." When this occurs, "Ego is dissolved as a discrete entity into its environment." This engulfing experience allows the viewer, after perceived self-obliteration, to realize their profound connectedness to their environment. They are offered a chance to be aware of their place inside and part of the space, not just as a passive visitor to the space.

⁶² Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Basic Writings*, edited by Thomas Baldwin, 2004, p. 309.

"What is depth? What is light? τι το ον? (what is being?) What are they – not for the mind that cuts itself off from the body but for the mind that Descartes says is suffused throughout the body? And what are they, finally, not only for the mind but for themselves, since they pass through us and surround us?" The Traveler ultimately discovers "τι το ον" as they are disembodied only to be completely embodied in the light and dark of universality.

⁶³ Ackerman, Diane *A Natural History of the Senses*, 1990, p. 259 "not to vanish but to sublime from one beautiful state to another"

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