

*Image Description: A split screen, as if we are looking into the two eye holes of a VR headset. Inside the headset is a 'futuristic' virtual club space. Signs hovering near the ceiling name this club 'More Than Real'. The club is dark, and filled with non-descript bright pink avatar silhouettes, representing the other virtual attendees. These silhouettes are homogeneous, only two body types are represented: both slim & tall, one in a skirt and bob haircut, the other with short hair and trousers. This is not 'More Than Real' enough for us.*

## 'CLUB XXY (Untitled)' Project Overview

**"This is why in order to reimagine the body, one must imagine space. Revolutionary change manifests through a reconsideration of the spatial, in negotiation of spatial limitations and identification of how to overturn, dissolve, break through these boundaries."**

**"Usurp the body. Become your avatar. Be the glitch."**

**Russell, L. (2020) Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto, (Brooklyn: Verso)**

'Club XXY (Untitled)' is the working title of a [web documentary](#), and [interactive 360 film](#), which is the output for a research fellowship into sites of [expanded performance](#) [See more in 'About this projects funding'].

Tessa Ratuszynska is an artist looking at Multi User VR platforms as a new site of performance, liveness and togetherness. Their research ultimately asks the question; what is 'performable' inside virtual spaces currently calibrated to a white, cis, male, ableist conception of an ideal user?

Tessa is conducting interviews with club promoters and organisers across the UK (with a focus on Bristol and Glasgow) whose work centres and affirms the experience of minoritised communities including; BPOC, Queer people, D/disabled people, survivors of sexual assault, working class communities and the many at the intersections of these identities. These interviews are being used to critically reimagine social VR spaces as equitable, safe, and radical. Tessa is also interviewing technologists, academics, architects and historians to draw out wider issues of inequality in technology, architecture and a society that encourages the performance of one kind of body, and by virtue of this, create disabilities, invisibilities and hypervisibilities in others.

A 360° scroll around web documentary collates these interviews inside mock-up virtual environments, imagining how radical club spaces might operate if re-envisioned virtually. Tessa is collaborating with multiple artists with lived experience of marginalisation in order to create the visual and sound elements of this experience.

**"We are faced with the reality that we will never be given the keys to a utopia architected by hegemony, instead, we have been taken with building the world(s) we want to live in, a most difficult yet most urgent blueprint to realize."**

Russell, L. (2020) *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, (Brooklyn: Verso)

Power relations are coded into the fabric of RL\* & virtual worlds by virtue of who they are built by and for. This speculative design project explores new visions of Social VR made to subvert, queer and abandon the assumed body of the VR user as white, male, cis, non disabled and heterosexual. Breaking this mould and attempting to imagine others.

It also explores the potential of Virtual Reality to expand radical club space practices beyond their RL confines.

How might radical club nights look if they did not have to be housed inside existing venues - with all their cultural weight and inaccessible structure? Where users do not have to enter in a body confined to the corporeal - but in avatars of infinitely expansive shapeshifting pixels? What could avatars look like? How could they move? How would users communicate, talk and touch inside virtual worlds designed around alternative visions of ideal users and communities? How would these spaces operate if they did not have to conform to the capital, cultural, or corporal confines of the RL world?

Club XXY imagines social VR club spaces of the future, which are built by, around and for marginalised bodies; centering their safety, access and affirmation. Through interviews with space makers whose work centres minoritised audiences, this project aims to integrate existing RL radical and constructive practices into conversations about virtual platforms.

## What is Social Virtual Reality (Social VR)?

Visions of the future in literature, film and television have often imagined the end point of the internet as a kind of virtual utopia, where users come together embodied in digital avatars, freed from the limitations of RL bodies and spaces.

A virtual social media or chat space, accessed through a VR headset, was projected to be the profitable driving force of VR technology, due in part to social media conglomerate Facebook's multimillion acquisition of the headset technology 'Oculus' in 2014.

Inside social VR users' bodies are represented in real time by avatars, which respond to the motion of the user's headset and hand held controls. Via the headset and controls, users see, hear and interact with environments, objects, and each other. Social VR allows live users from all over the world to come together in virtual venues and landscapes, often generated by users themselves; to play games, to prototype ideas and to host virtual meetings and events. In a 2014 facebook post, Mark Zuckerberg describes the future of social media as "sharing not just moments with your friends online, but entire experiences and adventures".

Despite industry enthusiasm and investment, Social VR has never lived up to early projections. At home headset sales failed to meet expectations, and both early and existing iterations of Social VR apps have been widely criticised for being exclusionary, racist, sexist and ultimately violent spaces. Whilst claiming to be 'new worlds', where anything is possible, where users are free to explore identity and self express through their avatar, many users' experiences indicate these 'new' worlds very much uphold, highlight and excentuate the power dynamics and exclusions of the RL world. Rebuilding that same inequity into the very hardware, coded structure and game mechanics of these virtual environments.

The 2020 pandemic has illustrated however, that in times of forced separation from our communities and each other, the kind of text, image and telephone based interactions of existing social media were not enough to sustain us. The drastic uptake of more embodied virtual social experience apps such as Zoom and Houseparty, adopted not only to connect with friends, loved ones and colleagues, but wider communities; for dancing, socialising, dating and to share live experiences with virtual strangers, demonstrate that in times of physical distancing, we crave liveness, presence and embodiment from our virtual social lives. Social VR technology undoubtedly meets a pressing need.

## Why Clubbing in VR?

In their absence, the importance that community spaces, pubbing and clubbing hold in the lives of many has been made painfully clear. In particular for those for whom the spaces and conditions the pandemic confined us to, do not represent the safest or most affirming. For example the reality of many forced to return or remain in the 'family' home, into monogamous "established" partnerships, and into the conditions of working from home which blur the line between domestic, private and professional spaces and identities.

For queer communities, communities of colour and other minoritised lives, club spaces have long served as the respite from a world otherwise indifferent or at worst hostile to their existence. As places to create worlds, environments, relationships and a culture that can (at least attempt to) exist, escape and expore outside of a homogeneously white, ablist, cisgendered, heteronormative and capitalist society.

### About the Artist

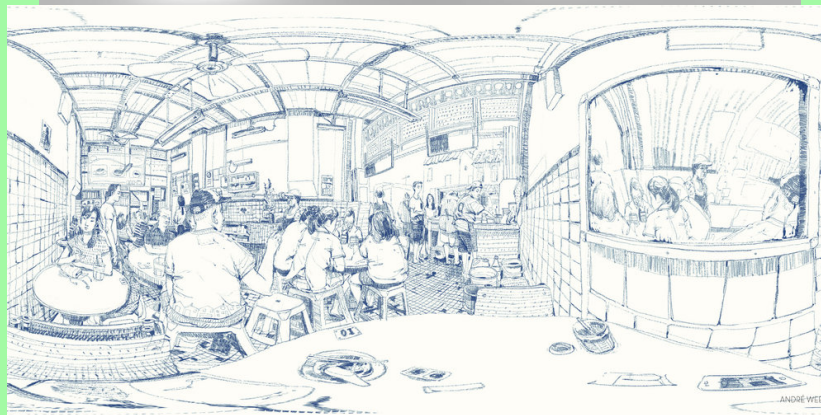
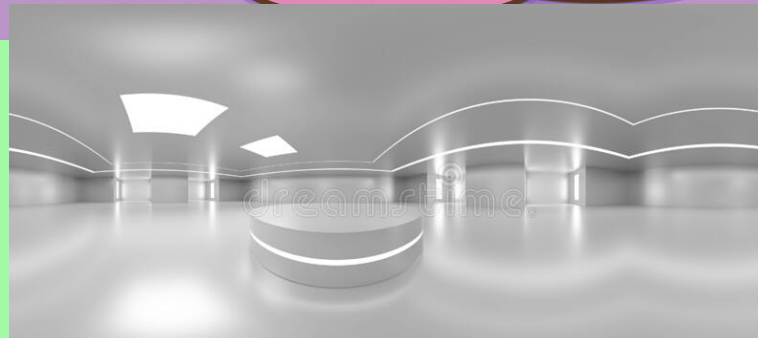
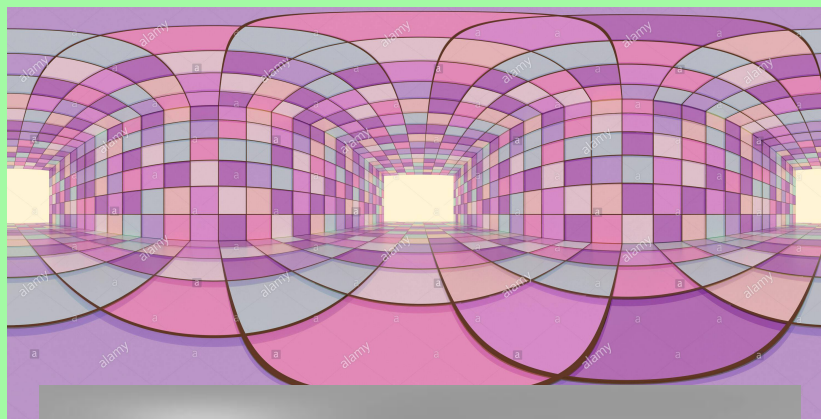
Tessa is an artist, researcher and producer making work at the intersection of Documentary, Virtual Reality and Installation. They have a background as a curator, producer and host for VR and Immersive exhibitions, with organisations like Limina Immersive, Submerge Festival, Sheffield Doc Fest & Glasgow Short Film Festival. They produce VR in collaboration with artist Jane Gauntlett and with the Bristol based collaborative project 'The OthVRs'; these works foregrounding neurodivergent, queer and other 'othered' perspectives. 'The OthVRS' also run open access VR workshops, aiming to encourage critical audiences and uptake of VR creation by underrepresented artists. In addition, Tessa is currently engaged in a funded PhD at the University of West Scotland making VR Non Fiction that explores queer identity, gender and performance. See more at [tessaratuszynska.com](https://tessaratuszynska.com)

### About this project & funding

For more information and outputs of this project you can watch an introductory video [here](#), or [read](#) and [watch](#) Tessa's recent research outputs.

This project is funded by the Creative Clusters R&D programme; a research collaboration between Bristol and Bath Unis, The Watershed, and South West creative and tech industries. Tessa was granted a 'New Talent' fellowship on the '[Expanded Performance](#)' [pathfinder](#), which looks specifically at how new technology interventions change and expand our ideas of performance, audience, togetherness and liveness. Tessa was granted a sum of 12K for a year's research into these topics, out of which all financing for this production is sourced

\* I use RL as a shorthand for 'Not Virtual', but believe lives and identities both Virtual and Corporeal, to be 'real'.



**VISUAL REFERENCES FOR A 'HOME' PAGE/ SPACE**

A landing page of the webdoc where audiences engage with interviews of academics, architects, journalists, spacemakers & club promoters. This is the hub from which users access the 'club' spaces via portals.

Vis description: Images of walls with many stacked TV screens  
 Nam June Paik artworks; TV Garden (1974) & TV Eyeglasses (1971)  
 Still from The Truman Show (1998)  
 Still from The Matrix Reloaded (2003)

**VISUAL REFERENCES FOR 'CLUB' PAGES/ SPACES**

These spaces will be based on interviews with specific space makers, and be representations of their fantasy ideas for accessible virtual nights.

These spaces will be visually represented by animators and illustrators and could be hand drawn, computer generated, 2D or 3D, in a range of Visual styles.

Vis Description: Panoramic images of interiors, 2 CGI, 1illustrated  
 Alamy stock '360' images  
 360 illustration by [Andre Wee](#)

**VISUAL REFERENCES FOR ADDITIONAL ASSETS**

Space makers will discuss ideas around architecture, embodiment, avatars & interaction inside their virtual spaces. Artists will interpret their ideas visually.

Vis Description: Images shown are avatar and prop prototypes from Black radical feminist VR project '[Neurospeculative AfroFeminism](#)' (HypenLabs, 2017).

## RELATED PROJECTS, LINKS AND REFERENCES

### VR Events & Multi-User Spaces

#### LOST HORIZON (2020)

A two day festival event, held inside a multi user VR platform, by the organisers of Glastonbury's 'Shangri-la'.

See trailer [here](#) and visitor made video [here](#).

#### H.O.R.I.Z.O.N. (Habitat One: Regenerative Interactive Zone of Nurture) by the Institute of Queer Ecology (2021)

A partnership of the Guggenheim Gallery, H.O.R.I.Z.O.N is a downloadable, participatory artwork taking the form of a social simulation game. The game, in which users become inhabitants of a remote wilderness island invites players to participate in the creation of a "digital commune." [Link here.](#)

#### CTM Cyberia (2021)

A Virtual multiplayer festival environment and exhibition. [Link here.](#)

### Talks

#### Verity McIntosh: Meet Me On The Other Side / Watershed Pervasive Media Lunchtime Talk (2020)

Verity is a Senior Lecturer at the University of the West of England (UWE Bristol) where she runs the pioneering MA Virtual and Extended Realities course. Verity talks through examples of Social VR and their various user bases in an accessible way. [Link here.](#)

#### Straszfilms / Identity, Gender, and VRChat (Why is everyone in VR an anime girl? (2121)

Youtuber Straszfilms discusses gender, identity and VR chat avatars. [Link here.](#)

### VR/ Web / Interactive Documentaries

#### The Black Trans Archive (2020) and other artworks by Daniella Brathwaite-Shirley

Daniella is an artist that seeks to archive Black Trans experience. She uses technology "to imagine our lives in environments that centre our bodies". See the archive [here](#) and Daniella's website [here](#).

#### Testimony VR (2015)

An interactive virtual reality and web based documentary that shares the stories of survivors of sexual assault and their journey to healing. [Link here](#)

#### Drawing Room VR (2015)

A hand drawn VR documentary. [Link here.](#)

#### Shamans of Siberia / Shelf Life 360

A VR documentary made by collaging animation, photographs, videos and audio taken from the American Museum of Natural History. [Link here.](#)

### Articles

Sophie K Rosa (2021) *In Defence of Sex and Parties*, Novara Media. [Link here.](#)

Rindon Johnson (2019) What's the point in having a body?, Dazed Beauty. [Link here.](#)

### Books

Russell, L. (2020) *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, (Brooklyn: Verso)