A Dissociated Mind

Installation Art | **Experimental Film** | **Immersive Storytelling**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zx6buASpwz8

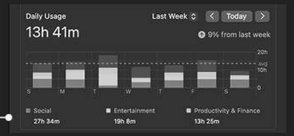
My project examines the profound impact of pervasive screen use on human engagement with the tangible world.

In an era where the virtual world within screens often replaces the tangible world, excessive use of screens reshapes human embodiment and engagement with physical reality.

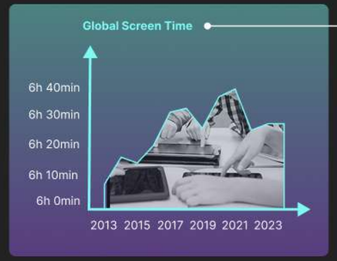
This project uses depersonalization-derealization disorder (DPDR) as a lens to magnify the harmful consequences of screen use. Through the narrative of a young person in despair from the 2050s, along with an interactive installation simulating the suffocating experience living in this speculative world, the project leads the audience to reflect on their own behaviors regarding digital interfaces and dissociation with physical reality.

Pervasive Screen Use in Digital Age

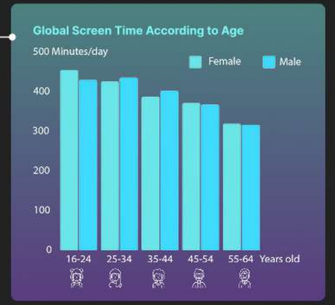
"How much time do you spend on screens each day?" When I was asked this question, I answered 13 hours, recalling the screen use statistics on my laptop. It suddenly strikes me that, if I sleep 9 hours a day, there will only be 2 hours a day when I am not using screens.



Even though I may be a extreme case, people are witnessing growing screen time globally in recent years.



In 2024, data shows that younger generations spend more time with screens.



Excessive screen use can lead to various harmful effects for the overall wellbeing.

These harmful effects made me recall one of my personal experience. It was a very dark period of my university life, when I turned to using smartphone to fill up my spare time to stop myself from overthinking.

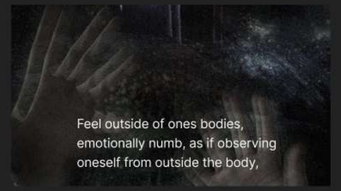
Until one day, I realized something was off - why does the real world started to look flat, fake, as if looking through a digital screen, and my senses became numb. I eventually knew that this is **dissociative disorder**, more specifically, **depersonalization-derealization disorder**.

Are Screens Dissociating us from Reality?

Dissociative disorder includes Depersonalization-Derealization disorder (DPDR). It is defined as **"feelings of unreality and detachment from one's self and one's surroundings"** (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Depersonalization (DP)

Feel unreal or detached from one's mind, self or body



Derealization (DR)

Feel unreal or detached from one's surroundings

There are lots of similarities between DPDR and other harmful effects of overusing screens. I did some research, and noticed that there is indeed some interplay between screen use and DPDR symptoms.

- Increased digital media use during Covid-19 lockdown leads to increase in experiences of depersonalization (***Ciaunica et al, 2022***).

- Research shows there is a linear association between VR use and DPDR symptoms (***Barreda-A'ngeles and Hartmann, 2023***).

Disturbances of bodily and mental health, making us feel detached from surroundings, feel detached from ourselves...all of these made me think, screens are making us disconnected with physical reality, disembodied from our bodies.

Somatic Movements as a Therapy

As technology is distancing us from the physical world, what are the forces that could bring us back? I soon noticed the concept of "soma".

Soma, means the body perceived from within. While "somatics" is the study of soma.

Somatic movements are generally used in practices of dance, spiritual practices, as well as a movement therapy.

More importantly, research found that Somatic movement therapy effectively reduces dissociative disorders, including depersonalization-derealization (***Reuille-Dupont, 2020***).

What if I push the circumstances to the extreme, if in the future when human beings are even more dependent on screens - will everyone has DPDR symptoms? will somatic movements becomes a very important part of daily life?

I remembered "eye exercises", a set of exercises Chinese students need to do daily at school to prevent short-sightedness. What if somatic movements are also taught in this way in this future society?

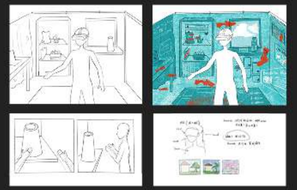
Thus, I initially formed a speculative narrative idea. I want to create a future world where advancement of screen-based technology made DPDR a common wellbeing problem among the population, and somatic movements are widely practiced to prevent and reduce DPDR symptoms.

This inspired me to design an immersive experience to display this narrative, to elicit discussions about the dynamics between modern day human beings and screen use.

Ideation & Sketches

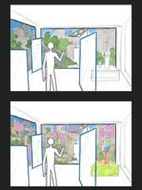
I want to design an immersive experience that brings the audience into a speculative world, where they immersively experience what it feels like to live with depersonalization derealization disorder.

Installation Sketch 1



There will be a room setting, along with a mixed reality experience. The viewer sees a physical world as well as virtual interfaces. The virtual world will become similar to a DPDR view gradually, using visual, auditory, tactile experiences.

Installation Sketch 2



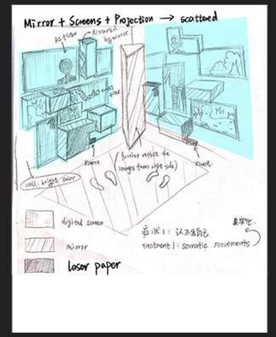
This is a space with mirrors in it. There are some projection mapped onto the walls, which will gradually become blurry and warped to simulate DPDR symptoms.

Installation Sketch 3

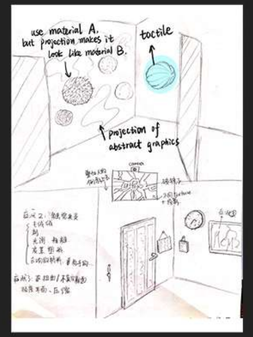
I became very interested in the material of mirror. Built upon sketch 2, I derived more details and variations.

idea 1

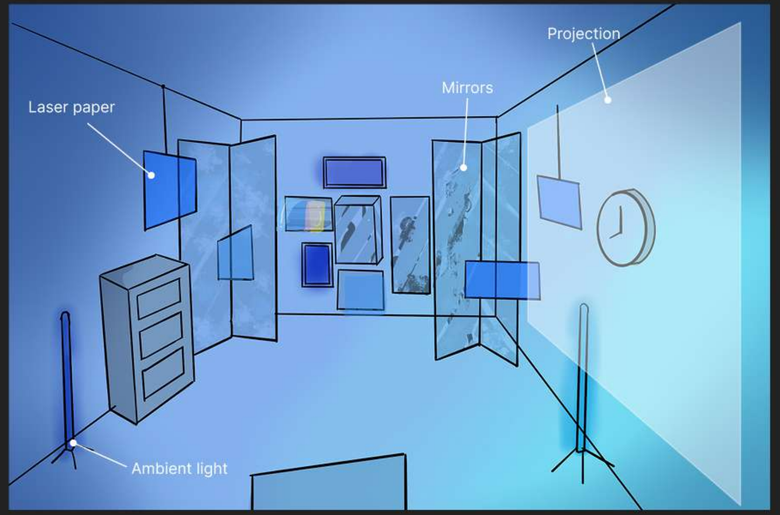
idea 2



idea 3



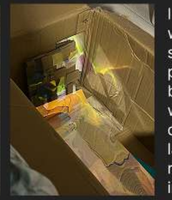
By removing and combining different ideas from the 3 ideas of Sketch 3, I came up with the final sketch.



Mood Board

Based on my information about symptoms of DPDR at this stage, I gathered images that could possibly represent what DPDR feels like, and created a mood board.

Material Experiments



I first experimented with small mirror surface and laser paper. I found that bending of mirror will create distortions, and laser paper can reflect light into a interesting pattern.

Then I moved to large-scale experiments. I used soft acrylic stick-on mirror, and sticked them on a rough cardboard. This led to a distorted mirror.

The soft stick-on mirror's distortion effect looks ideal to me. So based on this, I built several variations of mirrors in a space. I also tried incorporating laser paper into the mirrors to make them more dynamic.

After that, I experimented with arranging mirrors in different positions, to see how they reflect each other, and form boundaries and paths for the audience. Eventually, the installation concept is decided (as shown on the next page).

Final Version.

Installation Concept & Narrative

This project can be divided into four parts, with each of them explained in the following pages. Particularly, the narrative of this installation is found in Part 1: Experimental Film. The storyboard of the film is on the right side of this page.

2 Distorted Mirrors

The audience navigates through the room, which is the space that the character lives in.

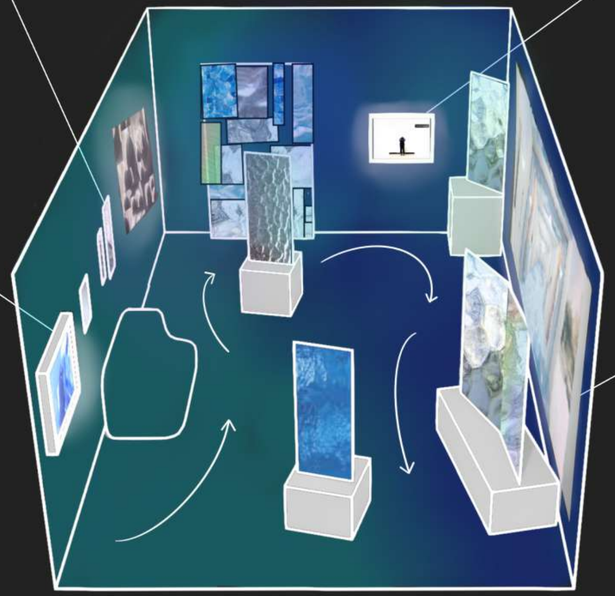
Along the audience's journey in this room, there will be 7 pieces of distorted mirrors, with each increasingly distorted and scattered in different ways. This progression creates an overwhelming sensory experience of DPDR.

1 Experimental Film

The film is about the story of a female character living in the 2050s, who had been through the period of 2030 to 2050, and gradually developed DPDR.

In this speculative world in 2045, every single item is covered with a digital screen. As people struggles to distinguish the digital world from reality, DPDR spreads quickly.

Eventually, in 2049, depersonalization-derealization disorder (DPDR) affects 90% of the population.



3 "Somatic Syncs" Tutorial

In the speculative narrative, scientists developed a set of simple movements called "Somatic Syncs" derived from somatic movements to help people manage DPDR symptoms.

A tutorial video of "Somatic Syncs" guides the viewers through the movements. By performing the same movements in the tutorial, the viewer can interact with the projected image on the wall.

4 Projection Image

A projector displays an animation on the wall. It is initially blurred by a visual effect that simulates DPDR visual symptoms.

However, when the audience performs the "Somatic Syncs" in front of a camera near the projection, the blurry effects will fade away. But it will become blurry again very soon.

Part 4: Projection Image

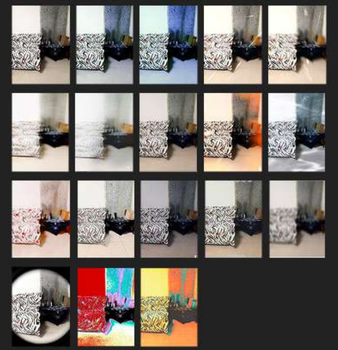
What do people with DPDR see?

In order to know whether the distorted mirrors are reasonable material, and what visuals I should project onto the walls, I have to understand what is the world that people with DPDR perceive. I met 8 persons who claimed to have experienced dissociative disorder to conducted the following 2 experiments with them (with their consent).

1 I showed them 18 images of derealization and 11 images of depersonalization I made. They choose the ones that matches their experiences and describe the reasons.

Images of Depersonalization

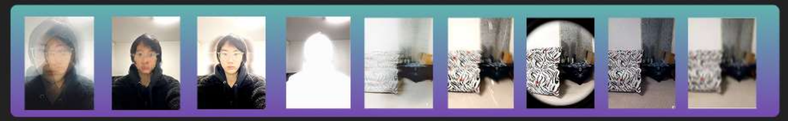
Images of Derealization



Experiment Process Notes

Results

5/8 3/8 2/8 2/8 5/8 4/8 3/8 2/8 2/8



The images selected by the interviewees shows that the distorted mirror is a proper material to produce this type of visual experience.

2 Sketch out their feelings about DPDR. They drew on paper, a tablet, manipulated a photo I provided them, or gave me photography that could represent their DPDR experience.

3D Modeling Iterations

With their answers, I started to create the visual for the projection. I first used Blender to model and render a futuristic animation as a base for the visual effects.

Originally, it was a room scene, but in order for it to have depth and looks flat at the same time, I changed into a corridor scene.

Using TouchDesigner to Create Visuals

Based on the interviewee's answers, I designed a visual effect that can best demonstrate the DPDR experience. This is an real-time changing effects based on the previous corridor animation.

Part 2: Distorted Mirrors & Lighting

Testing with Lighting

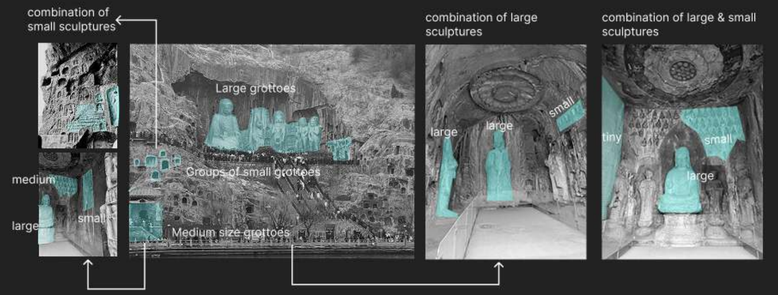
I used two different light sources: ambient light tube and convex lens light.

I experimented with different colors of and arrangement lighting. It turns out that dark blue + light blue ambient light, along with some warm-colored convex lens light works the best.

Series of Mirrors

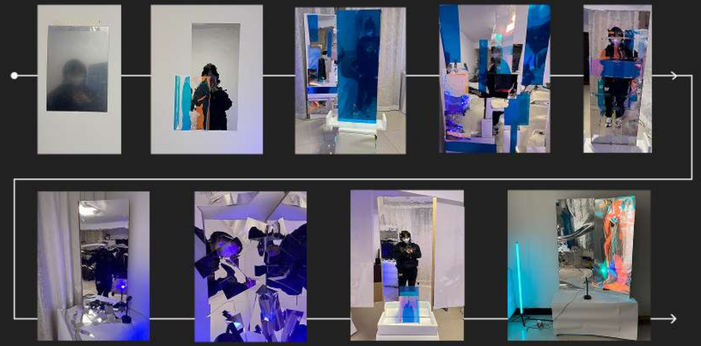
Right now, with the lighting, as the viewer walks along the path in this space, they see a series of mirrors as above. However, I realized these mirrors are mostly the same, and they don't show progression. I hope that they appears more overwhelming as a person moves through the space.

Inspiration: Longmen Grottoes



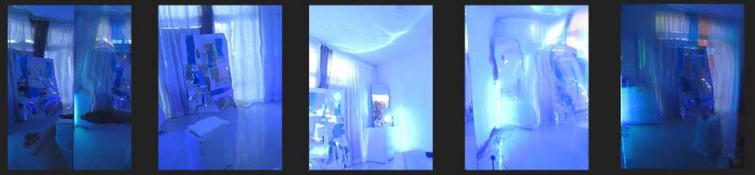
Just as I was stuck, I went to the the Longmen Grottoes. I noticed that they have different scales of grottoes with sculptures in different scales. There are large, medium, small grottoes; within each, there are also large, medium, small sculptures. In each grotto, however, the sculptures are arranged in a way that form a unique feature for this particular grotto.

This arc of changes inspired me to further polish the mirrors, to make each of them unique and distinctive, while they are all similar in some ways.



Final Installation View

Photography Taken in the Installation



Part 3: Somatic Syncs Tutorial

I want “Somatic Syncs” to be as simple and straightforward as possible, which is both reasonable in the narrative, and easy for a viewer to learn to interact in the space. After researching on different somatic movements, I adapted some of them into the following set of movements.

Link:

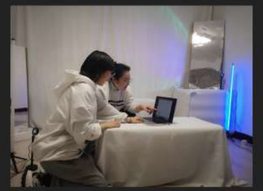
References

My references include somatic movement tutorials, cardio workout tutorial, and China’s broadcast gymnastics (a mandatory exercise for students in China). These all in a way represent a widespread and widely-practiced movement tutorial in different contexts.

Part 3: Narrative Introduction Film

Selected Frames

Filming Process



The filming took place the space where the installation is. The lighting, projection, and mirrors are all tested beforehand. I collaborated with the actress, designed camera positions, and handled both shooting and editing.

I aimed to depict the character's increasing sense of depersonalization and derealization as time progresses in the film. To reflect this, the lighting was controlled to shift gradually from bright to dark.

Lighting adjustments were made based on the specific requirements of each shot.

A reflective-textured costume was chosen, since it not only suits the futuristic setting but can also create dynamic color reflections.

https://youtu.be/HMo73LfUYOs