

## Imagined Futures through Alter-narratives

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The Alter-narratives exhibition provokes us to question our reality, then attempts to reshape it through a montage of cyberpunk-ish narratives. While the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted society enough to pause and re-evaluate itself, this multi-disciplinary exhibition helps us think beyond passive examination, but jolts us into deliberate experimentation. The price of admission: Your Wi-Fi connection.

As shared by the organizers from Tokyo University of the Arts, the Alter-narratives exhibition was originally set to open in March at one of the University Museum galleries - Chinretsukan. However, this exhibition, like many others in the world, shifted to the online platform due to the coronavirus situation.

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has set about unprecedented ripples of change across society, with no exception for the cultural industry. This opened up new possibilities in all directions, from the theft of a valuable painting by Vincent van Gogh in March from the Netherlands' Singer Laren Museum when it was closed due to safety concerns [\*1], to the reopening of Spain's Prado after its longest closure in 80 years [\*2], where the institution had to rethink its fundamental facts of life, with only one-fifth of its paintings on display, and vastly reduced ticket sales to limit crowding.

Upon re-opening, Miguel Falomir, Prado's Director, likened the reconfigured museum to a perfume, "with all its essence concentrated in a small space". He observed how never before was the pleasure of visual and performing arts systematically denied, leading to a gap in life which could point to the "vindication of the importance of culture". Similar to light at the end of a tunnel, Falomir pointed out that with reduced attendance, visitors can have an absolutely extraordinary "encounter" with art, reviving the sense of intimacy and space.

While the Alter-narratives exhibition was said to have no choice but to migrate/move to online, one cannot

help but wonder if it was perhaps meant/made for online. The myriad mirage of sights and sounds from artists around Asia, five Japanese artists, two Korean artists and one Singaporean artist, meshed together in a borderless exhibition, remixing and repurposing realities to raise questionable futures of the human race, made personal through your own mobile device.

Alter-narratives opened with a 20-sided icosahedron dice interface, metaphorically signalling the random and unforgiving nature of reality, yet offering an equal chance for every possibility to occur, as seen in the experiments artists have constructed. With each face made of equilateral triangles, icosahedra have been found dating to Roman/Ptolemaic times [\*3], yet it is not known if they were used as gaming dice, lending to the mystical yet foretelling quality of the artworks within.

Building on the concept of civilisations, the choice of "going online" for an exhibition re-triggers the question of the Internet as a communication medium and its impact on society. Professor Harold Innis once wrote in his seminal book, *The Bias of Communication* [\*4], that "[i]mprovements in communication...make for increased difficulties of understanding".

While potentially confusing at first, he explains how media could be divided into time-biased and space-biased types, where predominance of a media type which would have an eventual impact on the type of civilisation formed:

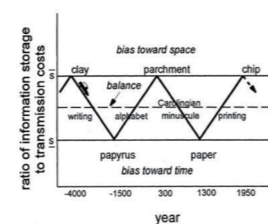


FIGURE 1 Innovations in communications technology and patterns of social organization

a. Time-biased media include clay carvings or

stone tablets, hand-copied manuscripts on parchment or vellum and oral sources such as Homer's epic poems. These are intended to carry stories and messages that last for many generations, but tend to reach limited audiences.

b. Space-biased media are more ephemeral. They include modern media such as radio, television, and mass circulation newspapers that convey information to many people over long distances, but have short exposure times.

While traditional exhibitions could be viewed as time-biased media, implying presence and belonging, online exhibitions fit the context of space-biased media, which allows it to be transmitted further and faster, with the risk of longevity in society's memory. From observing the Sphinx and the Great Pyramid at Giza, Innis wrote that "the monarchs who built the pyramids had to relinquish their absolute power when papyrus replaced stone as the dominant medium of communication". On eventual impact on civilisation, while time-biased media favour stability, community, tradition and religion, space-biased media facilitate rapid change, materialism, secularism, and empire. Where Alter-narratives takes us, should be seen through each artist's work.

Much of Alter-narratives works may be performative and ephemeral as they are transmitted online, but are still linked back to material culture.

a. For *One Million Seeings*, Yuki Harada invites you to join his long-form nostalgic acts of viewing printed photographs, and instructs viewers to print and bind a hardcopy of her art book (PDF) at convenience stores during the exhibition period.

b. In *Scenery Composition*, Park Sanghyun explores what "quarantine art" might look like, through a reconstruction of his past exhibitions in his own bedroom, re-evaluating how the concept of personal

space operates against a public exhibition.

c. In *Spinning, Weaving, and Thinking ii*, Mio Suzuki creates beautiful spatial art works which involves respinning threads from existing textures to deconstruct nostalgia into something completely new, voluminous, and overwhelming.

While it could be argued that COVID-19 has forced artists and curators to shift online, it should be known that online art, affectionately known as "Net Art" [\*5], has always been conceived and born online all along. While galleries worldwide are digitising exhibitions, artists like Nam June Paik from Korea and Olia Lialina from Russia have been there all along, producing works that cross the line between physical and virtual. Interestingly, Olia Lialina's works can still be seen at <https://www.arebyte.com>. If anything, Alter-narratives has reawakened interest in this milieu, potentially opening new possibilities of what it means to be a museum today, and how we could imagine its renewed purpose for society.

### Footnotes

\* 1 : Van Gogh painting stolen from Dutch museum closed by coronavirus, *The Straits Times*, March 31, 2020

\* 2 : Spain's Prado reopens its doors, *Financial Times*, 6 June 2020

\* 3 : Minas-Nerpel, M. (2007). "A Demotic Inscribed Icosahedron from Dakhleh Oasis." *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 93, 137-148. Retrieved June 21, 2020

\* 4 : Innis, Harold. (1951) *The Bias of Communication*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p. 28.

\* 5 : Visual Arts - Net art: the works that were conceived and born online, *Financial Times*, 8 June 2020