

Artist in Residence

The Creative Care Lab of Waag Society is taking Jennifer Kanary Nikolov(a)'s artistic research project *Labyrinth Psychotica* under its wings in the form of an artist/researcher in residence within their Utopian Practices-programme; Science, Arts & Design REunited. The mission of Creative Care Lab is to implement creative technology for innovation in health care.

Het Creative Care Lab van Waag Society heeft het artistieke onderzoeksproject 'Labyrinth Psychotica' van Jennifer Kanary Nikolov(a) onder haar hoede genomen in de vorm van een 'artist/researcher in residence' binnen het Utopian Practices-programma: Science, Arts & Design REunited. Het Creative Care Lab heeft als missie om creatieve technologie in te zetten voor innovatie in de zorg.



Roomforthoughts: Labyrinth Psychotica

Creating and using immersive labyrinthine and wearable multi media interactive installation art as a tool that could help better understand the subjective experience of psychosis

BY JENNIFER KANARY NIKOLOV(A)

Kunst, wetenschap en design zijn van oudsher nauw met elkaar verbonden geweest. In de moderne tijd is er een scheiding opgetreden door (technologische) specialisatie. Vandaag de dag zijn er echter weer veel voorbeelden te vinden van kruisbestuivingen tussen de genoemde domeinen. De kunstenares Jennifer Kanary Nikolov(a) doet onderzoek naar psychose, en streeft ernaar een virtuele omgeving te creëren waarin je voelt wat het is om een psychose te hebben.

Door het combineren van wetenschap met kunst slaat zij een brug tussen de disciplines, en doet dat op zeer integrale en onderbouwde wijze. In het Fablab van Waag Society werkt ze samen met medewerkers van de Waag aan prototypen, gebaseerd op Augmented Reality. In mei 2011 zullen haar eerste resultaten als artist in residence worden gepresenteerd tijdens een workshop. In het navolgende Engelstalige artikel gaat de kunstenares nader in op haar werk.

In this article I would like to give you a short introduction to my art practice *roomforthoughts* and my research project *Labyrinth Psychotica* that investigates what it is like to be psychotic. I will briefly explain what psychosis is and elaborate on how I have approached this subject and what I hope to achieve during this artist in residency.

ROOMFORTHOUGHTS

Since 1998 my art practice *roomforthoughts* has tried to formulate an answer to the question of what a thought is. What is the power of thought, how is a thought born? How does a thought affect our body (our brain), our behaviour, and our consciousness? Up until recently I built installation artworks that were materialized questions about the physics of thought. I have been interested in discovering possibilities to employ my art as a creative tool of knowledge, making room for a new way of commissioning art in science, that goes beyond the more traditional role of art as an illustrator/translator of science to the general public. As I have a background in fashion I started to look at my art as a way to stitch, weave, and knit thoughts together as an outfit. Much like the simple act of trying on a crown to imagine what it would be like to be a king. Here I believe my art becomes a form of materialized thought and thoughts become the clothes to wear. I then started to develop installations that aimed to entail the complexity of subjective experience that one could try on. By using artistic elements that influence not only our 5 senses, but also our memories and sense of time and space. I became interested in the question if it would be possible to develop an artistic experience that could help imagine what it would be like to be psychotic.

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE PSYCHOTIC?

Psychosis is considered as a severe mental disorder in which thoughts and emotions are so impaired that contact is lost with external reality. Psychosis is believed to affect 1–3% of the population at some point in their lives. Symptoms of psychosis can be:

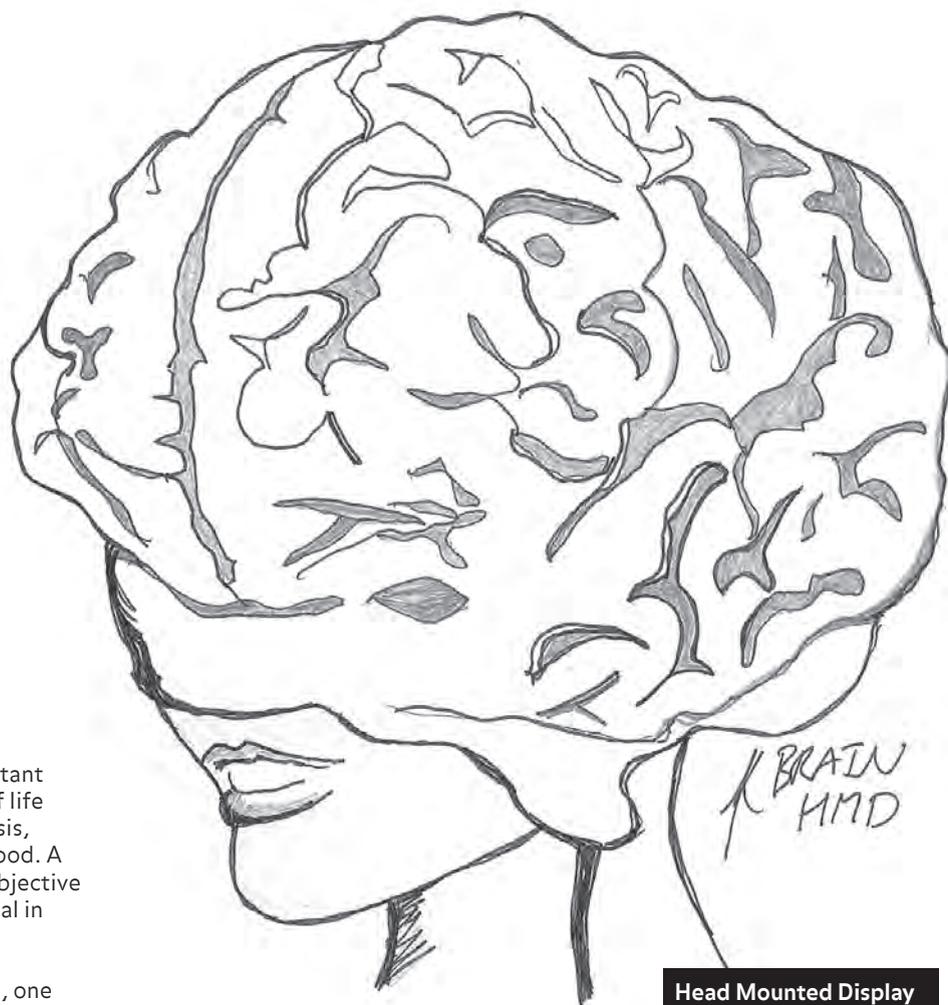
- having paranoid or grand ideas that others do not share
- hearing things that others do not hear like voices or music
- seeing things that others do not see
- believing that you are being watched, followed or persecuted by others
- believing that others can control your thoughts, or that you can control the thoughts of others
- feeling that your thoughts have sped up or slowed down

Psychosis is often considered as a 'thought' or 'reality' disorder. What is interesting for me as an artist, apart from the fact that madness is often linked to creativity, is that thoughts seem to be objectified. In psychosis, whatever imaginary thought you might have it has the danger of being enlarged and experienced as a real reality.

In his award winning 2004 book *Pure Waanzin: Een Zoektocht naar de Psychotische Ervaring* [Pure Madness: A Search for the Psychotic Experience] the linguist Wouter Kusters tries to develop a language that is able to articulate what it is like to be psychotic. As Kusters (2004, p16) argues: psychiatry is good at suppressing, controlling, healing and even preventing psychosis; but it is unversed in understanding and describing the subjective experience of psychosis.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

There is strong evidence that supports Kusters criticism that there is an insufficient understanding of the subjective experience of psychosis by science, caregivers and the general public. At the same time there is strong evidence that the nature of psychosis holds a difficulty of expressing and communicating the subjective experience of psychosis by those experiencing it. On top of communication issues there are also barriers in brain processes that occur with imagining what it is like to be another. These barriers and lack of understanding and communication on both sides contribute to a large amount of suffering. This lack of understanding strongly affects attitudes towards



Head Mounted Display

family, empathy are very important for the wellbeing and quality of life of people experiencing psychosis, feeling safe by feeling understood. A better understanding of the subjective experience of psychosis is crucial in creating a situation of trust.

Starting from Kusters' criticism, one might ask the question how to contribute to a better understanding of the subjective experience of psychosis? Which tools could be used outside of linguistic language? Which tools could provide new ways of understanding something that is so difficult to describe? I became interested in the question if it would be possible to develop an artistic experience that could help imagine what it would be like to be psychotic. In doing so I started to investigate existing psychosis simulators within the context of an artistic research PhD trajectory at Plymouth University, Roy Ascott's Planetary Collegium, Milan Node, NABA.

PSYCHOSIS SIMULATION

In recent years, there have been several psychosis simulators that have been created in a scientific context as virtual teaching and awareness environments for mental health workers and students, providing a method for generating empathy, also among family members and relatives. While studying these psychosis simulators, my research points out where there is room for improvement in the design structures of these simulations and argues for the use of multimedia installation art as a creative tool of knowledge in approaching a better understanding of the subjective experience of psychosis.

Such a tool provides an alternative environment for discussions as it acts as a realtime catalyser and prosthetic for our imagination. At the same time it helps identify psychosis simulation, as a pioneering field that is in dire need of discourse.

INTALLATION ART

As an artist who tries to understand psychosis by building installations, my work deals with the alteration of senses, as it is one of the key aspects of psychosis. As the psychiatrist Fuller Torrey explains the senses are flooded, "it is as if the brain is being bombarded both with external stimuli (sounds and sights) and with internal stimuli (thoughts, memories) (Torrey, 2006 pg). It is this over-acuteness of the senses and abundance of triggered thoughts and meanings in psychosis that, in my opinion, makes installation art such an appropriate medium to experiment with. To realize its potential in that respect, one would have to look at society, psychiatry and psychology as it generates mistrust. Sympathy and installation art as an intricate system of experience that is analogue to psychosis (a system being a set of connected entities that form a complex whole).

I consider this a possibility, as many installations combine concepts, space and multi-media to immerse the viewer in a sensorial and contextual network structure, in order to create a physical as well as a mental experience.

THE LABYRINTH

One of the aspects of psychosis that I focus on is the experience of time and space. According to Kusters one of the clearest indications of acute psychosis is disorientation in time and space. How can one create an experience that could be considered analogue to entering a world in which time and space is distorted? In my research I argue for the use of installation art that uses the architectural and metaphorical form of a labyrinth.

I ask myself, what if one would rethink the labyrinth in terms of augmented reality? By combining the torturous structure of the maze with the meditative nature of the labyrinth one might create an interactive labyrinthine multimedia installation that could allow for a visitor to enter an alternative reality. Namely the reality of the artwork in which the artist has created their own little universe with its own

set of rules that is completely different than a 'normal' person is used to. In this little world there could be the potential of experiencing fear as well as ecstasy, depending on a choreographed symphony of light and dark, of disturbing and wondrous smells, objects, colours, materials and sounds. If the path that the visitor follows in this world has walls that twist and turn around corners it will literally disturb the persons sense of time and space as they lose all points of reference that they are used to using. What if the walls started talking to you, reacting to you as if they knew your every move? What if they started giving you assignments? How would you interpret the hidden meaning of the artist if the topic of this experience was about becoming psychotic by entering an labyrinthine artwork about psychosis? Could such a structure help to go beyond an illustration of the experience of psychosis? Could it help move away from simulation or representation, literally bringing a visitor to their own grey border between the mad and the normal?

REAL AND UNREAL

During my research process I have developed 3 low tech case study labyrinths. 'Suicide Pigeon', 'Intruder' and 'Intruder 2.0'. The build of these labyrinths was useful in approaching an understanding of the experience of the unreal. One of the challenges I set upon myself was the idea of how to translate the experience of these labyrinths into a wearable version that functioned in the 'real' in a way that could temporarily transform ones everyday office space into psychotic space. This is when I came up with the notion of a 'do-it-yourself-psychosis' kit. The idea is that this kit would be a wearable experience that would conceptually function in my labyrinths as well in everyday life spaces, exploring the labyrinth of everyday life.

HMD'S A 'DO-IT-YOURSELF-PSYCHOSIS' KIT

When you think about how to simulate psychosis, one quickly comes to the wish to work with Virtual Reality. Indeed many of the existing psychosis simulators make use of Virtual Reality technology to illustrate the experience of psychosis. But I am not looking for a way that illustrates. I'm looking for a way that creates an experience that is analogue. An experience that makes the user doubt their own borders of the real and unreal. With current developments of Augmented Reality that uses Virtual Reality as an added layer to reality, the chances of achieving this has become enhanced. My current goal is to develop a Head Mounted Display (HMD) that plays with the borders of the real and the unreal. In my opinion we will not break through the stigma of madness unless we breakthrough the stigma of our reality concepts.

This HMD would ideally contain a natural tracking software that does not need markers to trigger video processing. An HMD in which natural objects would be the triggers. These elements would start a network of associations that allow us to dive deeper into the emotional logic of psychotic space. Understand why seeing the colour white makes you guilty of 9/11 and sets you to turn yourself in at a police station.

To give an example: you see a white coffee cup on your desk the colour white triggers the memory of Snow White, which in turn triggers the notion of the poisoned apple, which in turn triggers the notion of being guilty of eating from the tree of knowledge. You think about Newtons falling apple, which triggers the idea of the Big Apple, New York and it's falling towers. You can only conclude that your thought of Snow White caused the snowfall of white ashes thus forms evidence of your guilt.



In psychosis ones thoughts seem to go so fast, and the thoughts seem to formed by a symbolic logic in such a way, that communication becomes very difficult. My challenge as an artist is to design a network of experience in which the viewer can form his own personal path of emotional logic. This network of associations, that augments reality on layers of thinking and memory, would contain voices that comment on your moves, comment on what you see, then allowing for what you see to become a type of hallucination.

The design of the HMD is now moving towards an HMD in the shape of a giant brain, I've surfed as many images as I could and I was surprised not to see an HMD in the form of a brain. For me this symbolises what I am trying to do in a very literal way. Empathy as trying to step into the brain of the other. At the same time it refers to psychosis as being considered a brain disorder. There are many more associations I can link with this symbol, but that will have to find a place in my thesis. One thing I do want to add is that such a HMD could also be adapted to understand other human mental states, of 'what it is like to be...?'

As I entered a phase in my research where it became impossible to execute this alone, I started looking for financial and advising partners, once that became settled, I started to look for an institute to collaborate with that had the technological knowledge and experience with working with artists, but that was also inspired by the content of my project and was willing to invest their commitment and go that extra mile. Waag Society turned out to be such a space. I am very grateful to be able to work here and develop the HMD that I aim for. I gladly look forward to the coming months in which the next phase of my research commences.

To visit the website of Jennifer Canary Nikolov(a), go to: www.roomforthoughts.com

Images for this article come from the installation Intruder 2.0 at Museum het Dolhuys during an earlier residency of the artist there.

