

AG- GRE- GATE

**queer (dis)orientations and collectivities in the
virtual world**

hexe.exe & T Braun

Spawn Point

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aggregate / multitude is a social practice, performance, and virtual embodiment project started in spring 2023 by artists T Braun and hexe.exe.

More instances of this work including performance documentation can be found at tbraun.artist or mariehinson.com.

The two virtual reality worlds can be visited through the VRChat social platform using VR headset, PC, or mobile device at:

https://vrchat.com/home/launch?worldId=wrlid_8223faf0-e7c1-4a13-9eca-d06a06e0d933

https://vrchat.com/home/launch?worldId=wrlid_d40044ab-0819-4f28-9145-02ee3b74db90

aggregate /multitude

(Morning never came because right was becoming, the walls were a wormhole and I slithered under them)

i would start slow, alone in
empty space i would feel
the walls flex and move /
scared, i thought i should
go home but i stayed,
brought body and soul into
the room the walls were
moving because i was
living in two worlds, split
in the world

conduct figure from field
like fireflies on pineboughs
midnight nightmorning

*When I shift, they become
blocked*

*When I shift they become
blocked and I de-shape and
re-shape and I deshape and
re-shape*

*My lover stirs and leans
over to kiss*

*My lover stirs and leans
over to kiss me, inviting me
forth from me, inviting me
forth from "atmospheric
existence"*

atmospheric existence

aggregate leads to multitude which leads to collective which leads to what comes before and what comes after

Wormhole

I am waiting in T's world. The walls and floor curve up around me. I am engulfed in shiny gold and orange surfaces. I look down through a window in the floor to a landscape far below of undulating polished glass and twisting grids. My face sweats at the gasket of my headset. I sit on my knees in front of my fan, sirens from the busy brooklyn street spilling into my mic.

We are in a gallery with large windows overlooking the street. The hum of traffic mixes with the murmurs of visitors. "Is touch ok?"

I place my hand on your shoulder and invite you to sit. I guide your hands into the controllers and show you which buttons allow you to move, turn, and jump. "Have you been in VR before? How did you feel?"

I lower the headset on your head and adjust it. I witness you slip from this world to that. "This is hexe," I say.

I faintly hear hexe greet and orient you. I hold space as your senses calibrate.

The figure in front of me shakes to life. Anime styled emo person with shaggy hair under a black baseball cap, slumpy striped sleeves and a toothpick in their mouth. Your head raises and your hands track back from where they were outstretched. "Hello!" I say to help locate you.

I have no idea what the rush of pixels and light will feel like to your eyes and brain. I am a cat girl with floofy cat ears, saucery otherworldly eyes, all rendered in gray scale with a goth black corset and striped sleeves. "Have you been in VR before?"

Your arms float up to meet your gaze and your wrists arc as if conducting an invisible force. "I can see my hands!" I flash back to the first time my physical and virtual body(s) mirrored each other. I never get tired of that intoxicating magic.

I hear your excitement as your breath draws in and your head wheels about. "Can I give you headpats? This is how we greet each other here."

You say yes. I ask you if you can feel it. Some people have phantom touch, and you say yes kind of. Then you look down through the window and gasp. I say welcome to T's world! I'll show you around.

Since my headset is connected to my laptop, I am able to see what you see. hexe is guiding you toward a narrow pipe that will allow you to freefall from a spherical maze into a room of fleshy cushions animated with the traces of your movement. I gently rest my hand on your shoulder to remind your nervous system that you're sitting safely in this world. "You're about to fall."

I land first and look back up as you tumble down after, your avatar's arms waving in their free fall animation. It's a soft landing in a jello form like a giant translucent waterbed. The indentation of our bodies casting clones of our movement into jello forms on the wall. I help you find the door, clipping through the opaque plane and out onto an overlook of rolling gemtone dunes and towering glassy spheres. You grow quieter now

and I hang back while you explore.

You are in hexe's world now: a sunny, hilly meadow populated with spiky glass spheres that contain audio clips. You've picked one up and are passing it through your head. In the physical world, a storm is gathering. A faint rumble of thunder passes through the gallery. You swivel toward me. "Where did that come from?"

You begin to shift in your seat. "I think I'm done now." You thank hexe and I lift the headset off, which continues to track your avatar's head. When I glance at the screen, hexe is holding space for your contorted body as it slips back from that world to this.



Image above: IRL photo of a person sitting on a chair in a large room in an academic building. They are wearing a virtual reality headset and holding up motion tracked controllers. A wire snakes from the back of their head, under the chair and across the floor. A large flat screen monitor on a tall stand shows a bright image of pinks and turquoise. It is a rendering of what is seen through the headset. Two figures appear against the background, both cartoon, one humanoid and one a human octopus hybrid.

This photo was taken during a presentation in July 2023 at Concordia University's 4th Space.

Aggregate

We designed our VR worlds as two distinct spaces interlinked by portals (a kind of spatial hyperlink) assembled from a shared folder of original assets. These assets were an aggregate and multitude of 3D forms, images, sounds, and text that emerged from our conversations around glitch, fragmentation, and disorientation.

Like a Möbius strip, the worlds spill back and forth into each other conceptually and materially, our two voices distinct yet interdependent. Like your body transported into phantom touch in VR while tethered to cable underfoot IRL.

Our main spatial assets were polygon meshes of spheres, cubes, and planes distorted through procedural inputs. One method of transformation was prompt-based AI-generated 3D models using Ahmed's text as input. Another method was stochastic displacement of the polygons by 2D greyscale renders of noise functions. Rather than sculpting rooms or bodies, we wanted to use the affordances of VR to traverse and enter a space not arranged by functional orientation.

Atmospheric Existence

To build and experience VR is to be fully embedded in systems of orientation. Every turn of the hand is mapped on the XYZ matrix and unfolds in linear time from a perspective that emerges from a singular point of view. Being in VR requires us to orient in a way that reveals orientation's glitchy edges and material sheen. As the virtual envelops the physical, the din of disorientation increases and the flesh body reemerges, called forth by motion sickness, sweaty headsets, and cables that coil around legs. This ebb and flow between realities reflects the interplay between the abstraction of language and the tangible world, cyberspace and meatspace, and moments of orientation and disorientation.

In addition to creating work for virtual reality, both of us live a significant portion of our social lives in virtual spaces. The social platform we use is called VRChat and has tens of thousands of players who create worlds and avatars to fill its vast multiverse. Many of these players are queer and trans* and find a special realm for expression and connection beyond their IRL circumstances. What emerges is a potent, rhizomatic undercommons of collective new forms of embodiment, spatial imagination, and solidarity. This emergent language has been a portal of wonder and liberation for us both.

We started our collaboration with the goal of building a virtual world together. We wanted to create moments of glitch and disorientation in an interactive spatial format to offer embodied critical engagement with concepts from texts that resonate with us, such as Sara Ahmed's Queer Phenomenology and Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch's Crip Technoscience Manifesto. We also wanted to create a site that would foster discourse among our queer and trans* friends in VR as a form of social practice.

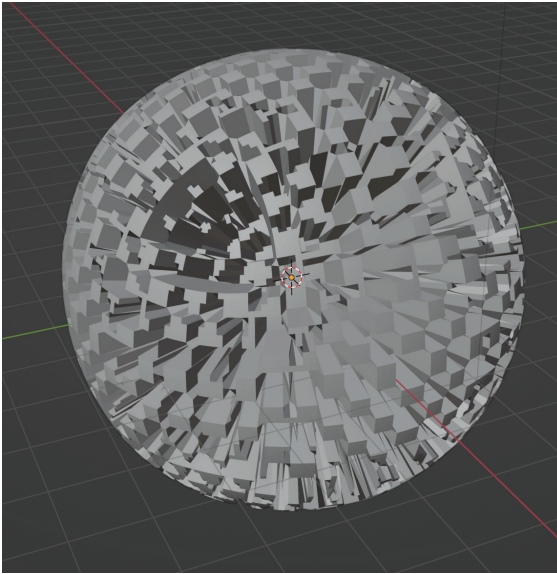


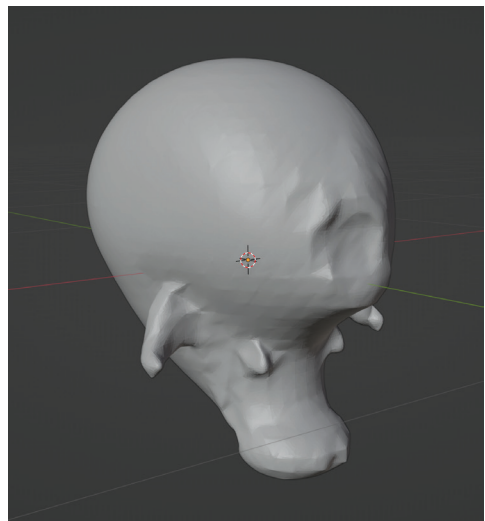
Image on left: grayscale shaded rendering in a 3D modeling software of a virtual object. It has the outer shape of a sphere. The surface collapses along sharp rectangular edges, extruding long lines into depth, interrupting the smooth surface. This is one of the shapes deformed by procedural noise textures.

“If a face is inverted and becomes queer or deprived of its significance, then such a deprivation would not be livable simply as loss but as the potential for new lines, or for new lines to gather as expressions that we do not yet know how to read.”

- Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*

Image on right: grayscale shaded rendering in a 3D modeling software of a virtual object. It has an organic, rounded shape, larger and bulbous on top, reducing to limb like appendages below.

This shape was created from prompt inputs to an AI generator using the quote above from *Queer Phenomenology*.



disorientation is a glitch and the Möbius strip is the pathway to the glitch/

lived experience is s p a t i a l /and relational and we understand where we are in the world by turning to or away from what's around us (Ahmed, 2006) forever unfolding through (dis)orientation//

*/ our queer desire doesn't just motivate us to turn toward what we crave but impacts how we inhabit space • queerness is / relational \ spatial / / temporal *

disorientation/ is a vital, unsettling force that embodies the fluidity and complexity of queer subjectivity

/disorientation\ can emerge from the misalignment between the movements, desires, and experiences of queer and racialized bodies and the normative structures that govern spaces

queer politics could involve disorientation as a means of deviation driven by desire (Ahmed, 2006)/

*But what if we can't afford to linger in disorientation\ How can we pull apart the (dis)orientation binary and //reorient \ \ disorientation as a glitch \ And once we're in that glitch how can we collectively orient through care and create a new topology to support us /// The topology of the Möbius strip is the pathway to the glitch \ \ \ *

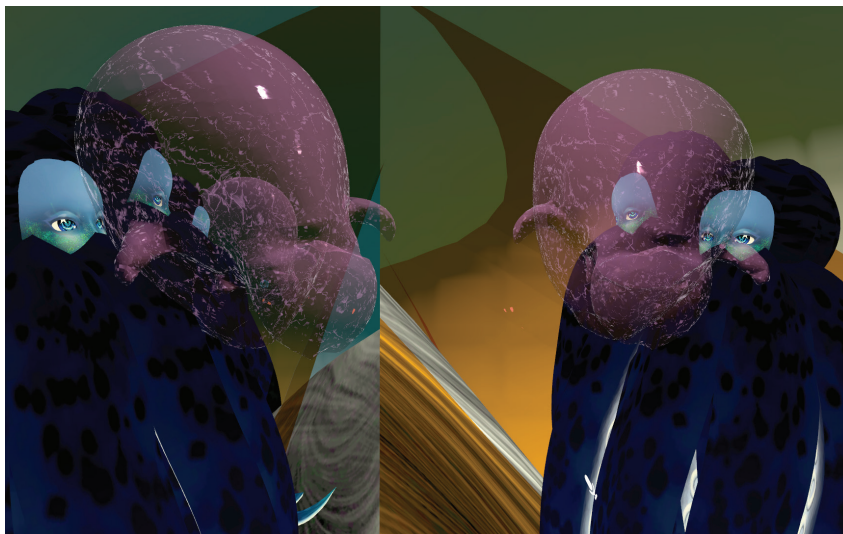


Image above: screenshot of T's world. Two octopus/human hybrid avatars overlap each other and gaze into a mirrored image of their figures on the other side of the frame. The figures are dark blue with light blue faces. Overlaid is a bulbous transparent form in warm pinks. The background is twisting yellow and olive curve forms.

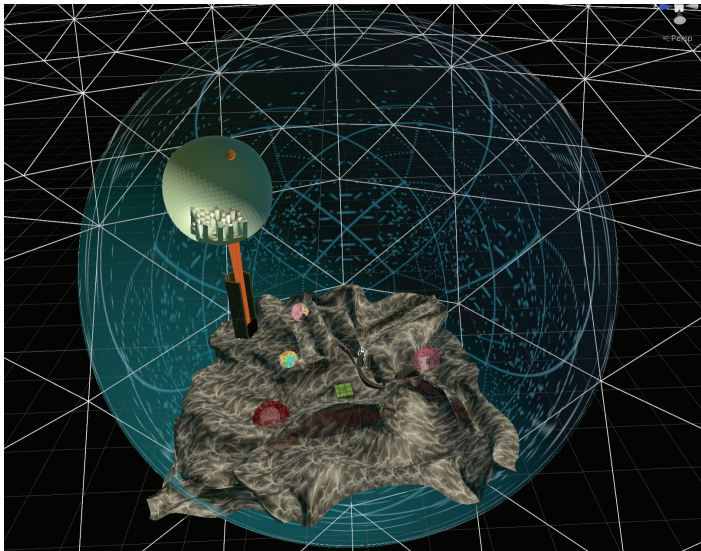
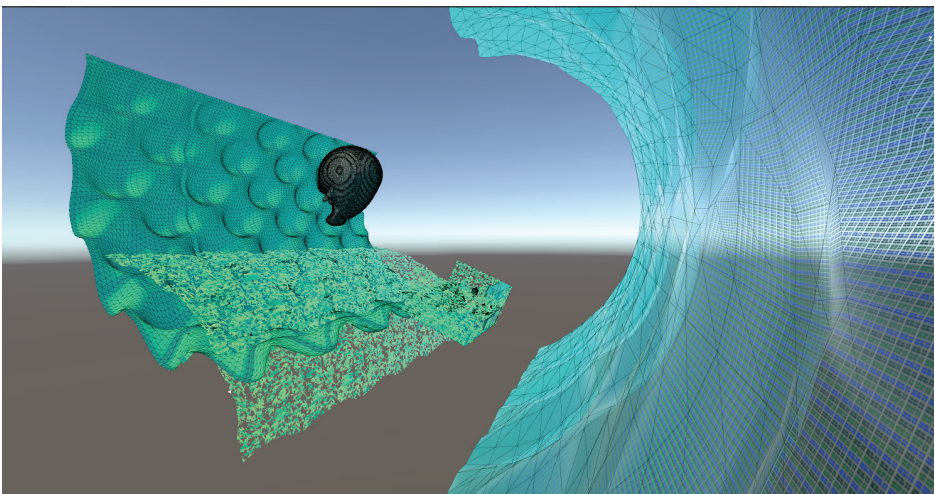


Image above: screenshot of T's world as a wide overview. The landscape, populated with spheres of various sizes and colors hangs suspended in a transparent teal bubble. The background skybox is a black grid crossed with a grid of white lines.

Image below: screenshot of hexe's world as a wide overview. Two curved planes reach toward each other like waves against a default skybox with a grey and blue ground and sky. The center plane is a blueish green and is pocked with regular hollows. Floating above is the bulbous ai generated form.



Multitude

In T's world, I love the moments of body pleasure in sudden, total disorientations of glitch. Built up in layers of our 3D models, their world is full of crevices that break the game physics in mysterious and delightfully treacherous ways.

Rather than approaching the glitch as something to be fixed, T constructed a shrine at one of these sites with a staircase, mirrors, and an inside out spherical enclosure. Stepping through the false wall of the sphere renders you immobile and dislodges your viewpoint from your avatar's head.

I love experiencing this event with another person, our bodies caught overlapping and intersecting in an impossible intimacy. A new form of queerness, both in body and gender, but also entirely something else. We can dwell together in a space of brokenness, linger safely without fix, and consider bodily our solidarity in our undoing.

In my world, I wanted to approach Ahmed's framework of orientation, including her horizon, her home, the ground underfoot, and the table under hand from outside-in. The moments of disruption I experience in the world can't be described only on the axis between orientation and disorientation. There is no body unassigned to gender. There is no here free of police, no home without a landlord, no horizon not stolen.

Whose subjectivity is the belonging of orientation? What if the subject can't be located? I look for spaces of belonging, alignment, withinness that evade, bury, and disregard orientation.

In making my world, one spatial metaphor I drew from was an experience in the mountains where I grew up. I was raised in Creek and Cherokee land in eastern Appalachia: rolling mountains and hollows all covered in trees and etched with creeks. These mountains were formed and undone and formed again for so many geological ages that they have become a nearly directionless mass. Ageless roiling noise in rock form.

To drive through this terrain to my great grandmother's house was a stomach lurching twist in and out of hollows and ridges. The light tumbled down through the leaves onto bright glittering creek and scraping across moss and rock face. Turning from the valley beaming with noon light, we twist into a hollow cast into early morning as the sun clips sharply into long shadows barely scraping over the ridge above. Each hollow shatters time, a ragged pattern against east west traverse of the sun and the writhing line of the road.

You arrive in my virtual world and find yourself at the bottom of concave ground that stretches above your head and opens through pixelated leaves to sun and sky. At your feet is a shattered glassy sphere. It scatters light as you look into it. Inside, sound loops my voice reading fragments of T's writing.

You rush up the edge to see dozens of similar hollows. You have arrived in one of many randomized spawn points. Soon, coming over the ridges you see your friends also carrying these glass crystals.

Orientation to time and space is fractured here. Fragment calls to fragment, disintegration to disintegration. Our bodies are formed in pieces by its place. We mark and share our arrival, looking for relation to each other, conducting ourselves from the ground into figure.

Queer flesh as shimmering immanence

My physical/virtual body(s) are “as two segments of one sole circular course...one sole movement in its two phases” (Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 138)

I (dis)orient myself

Trackers, headset, and controllers “accumulate impressions on the skin” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 9)

*Pink marks trace where the face gasket meets my cheeks
My foot tracker twists and shoots my leg through my chest
A shiver runs down my spine
Molds me into a Möbius strip
lined with the flesh of latent possibility*

*I am more aware of my back body(s) than before
I reach behind my head to rearrange the cord and slither under it
We dance gingerly / it's a lifeline / if it breaks
my second world dissolves*

*Virtual cracks birth queer body(s):
In the middle of a soft moment with my lover, her spine folds and she slips into a
wormhole
She keeps talking since her perception remains where it had been
There is no such thing as ≠a “normal” body here*

*Body(s) “do not dwell in spaces that are exterior but rather [...] take shape by dwelling” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 9)
I dwell in a forest / in the arms of my lover / in a nest of pillows
I sleep
Glitching into dreaming
I can still feel my lover's kisses*

*We are “fed up with seeing with [our] eyes, ... talking with [our] tongue, thinking with [our] brain”! (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 151)
We become octopus body(s) “full of gaiety, ecstasy, and dance” (p. 150)
flipped-upside-down-body(s)
called to “walk on [our] head, sing with [our] sinuses, see through [our] skin” (p. 151)*

The body without organs is “what remains when you take everything away” (p. 151)

*Our organless body(s) (in)stalled in the portal between two worlds
cradled in the amniotic fluid of an egg
Suspended in collective queer phantasy*



Image above: screenshot inside hexe's world. The octopus figure holds two shattered crystal spheres with invisible hands, one refracting the edge of its figure and face. Behind is a pixelated green spatter like paint or tree cover breaking up the blue sky beyond. The world glows with bright daylight.

aggregate / multitude II

I like the term aggregate for pulling lots of pieces together
juxtapose privileges contrast
what doesn't try to cohere should be sorted to a binary
so that one side of meaning can rest against the other

when i want meaning that comes from collapse
or meaning that never arrives and we are looking
at hundreds of collaged pieces splitting apart their seams
calling out each others material form

aggregate like standing too close to see figure and only seeing
field of pixels

aggregate like a truckload of gravel loosely compiled mass of fragments
aggregate leads to multitude which leads to collective which leads to what comes
before and what comes after.

References

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MULTI- TUDE

