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Immersive Art and Wellbeing: The Positive
Psychological and Neurological Effects of
Immersive Experiences

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Fine Art

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the psychological, neurological and emotional impacts of immersive experiences within contemporary installation art, with a certain focus on the role of light, sound and multisensory environments in shaping perception and wellbeing. Concentrating on the practices of artists such as James Turrell and Olafur Eliasson, alongside theoretical perspectives on digital immersive art discussed by Marcus Verhagen, the research examines how immersive installations activate embodied awareness and alter cognitive and emotional states. The study situates immersive art within a broader cultural context characterised by digital saturation and sensory overload, distinguishing between restorative immersive experiences and everyday digital overstimulation. Through interdisciplinary analysis incorporating art theory, neuroscience and psychology, the dissertation explores how immersive environments can induce states of presence, absorption and emotional regulation. Additionally, the research traces the historical foundations of meditative practices to contextualise immersion as part of a long-lasting human search of stillness and attentional focus. By connecting contemporary artistic practices with historical and scientific outlines, this dissertation argues for the increasing relevance of immersive installation art as a tool for mental wellbeing and reflective engagement within an accelerated and hyper-mediated society.

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Table of Contents

Positionality Statement	5
Introduction	6
Chapter 1	9
<i>James Turrell: A Neuroscience of Light</i>	9
<i>Investigating Emotional Regulation Through Mindfulness: An fMRI Study</i>	10
Neural Mechanisms of Light Therapy	13
Chapter 2	15
<i>Olafur Eliasson: Psychological Dimensions of Perception and Experience</i>	15
<i>Digital Immersion in Contemporary Art: Insights from Marcus Verhagen</i>	17
Chapter 3	20
<i>The Historical and Spiritual Foundations of meditation</i>	20
<i>Digital overstimulation and the loss of rest and regulation</i>	21
<i>Mark Fisher: Mental Health in a Capitalist World</i>	23
Conclusion	26
Reference list	29

Positionality Statement

This dissertation is deeply significant to me, not only in relation to my artistic practice, but also in shaping who I am as a person. I did not choose this topic out of obligation or academic convenience, rather, it emerged from a genuine belief in the importance of immersive experiences and their potential impact on mental and emotional wellbeing. Throughout my studies, I have been consistently drawn to environments that encourage presence, reflection and sensory awareness, both within art and everyday life. This research allowed me to engage critically with ideas that already resonate with my personal values, while also challenging me to move beyond intuition and develop a theoretical and scientific understanding of them.

By undertaking this research, I wanted to expand my knowledge beyond creative practice and to strengthen the conceptual foundations that will inform my future career aspirations. Ultimately, this dissertation represents a merging of personal belief, artistic ambition and reflects my commitment to creating meaningful, intentional work that prioritises human connection and wellbeing.

Introduction

Immersive installation art offers an audience a unique opportunity to pause, reflect and reconnect in a world that is becoming increasingly full of overstimulation and emotional disconnection with the self, many aspects of life nowadays contribute to a deterioration in mental wellbeing. The non-stop presence of social media and digital technology often leads to burn out, anxiety and sensory overload. Urban environments and fast-paced routines can disconnect individuals from their emotions, leaving no space for mindfulness and reflection. This dissertation will explore why immersive experiences can have profound positive effects on mental wellbeing and will make the case for greater access to these experiences in public spaces around the world rather than just in studios and galleries. This dissertation will highlight the psychological and neurological responses behind these soothing sensory experiences, researching how these mind-altering environments can calm the nervous system and heighten a sense of emotional awareness.

Immersive art positions the viewer within the work itself, moving them from a passive observer to an active participant. The shift from observing to participating extends beyond the surface level aesthetics of an artwork, creating environments so immersive they can trigger meditative ‘flow’ psychological states. This directly places the individual in the present moment, encouraging unconscious thought. Neurological studies into meditation, multi-sensory experiences and sound therapy show that these states reduce cortisol levels, activate cognitive areas that are associated with emotional regulation and empathy and slow heart rates (Lutz et al., 2013).

In Chapter 1, I will discuss how a single encounter with James Turrell’s *Aftershock* became the base of this entire exploration into the psychological and neurological impacts of immersive

installation art. I begin by reflecting on the reflective perceptual shift I experienced within Turrell's radiant environment, an encounter that formed my interest in how light, space and sensory distortion can shift emotional and cognitive states. By exploring Turrell's practice, I highlight how his installations intentionally disrupt spatial cues, encouraging viewers to "see themselves see" and to enter altered states of awareness (Thompson and Alexandra, 2019, p.6). The chapter will then move beyond art theory and into cognitive science, tying parallels between immersive installations and mindfulness research. I examine how focused sensory environments influence emotional regulation and reduce stress-related neural activity. These findings reveal how immersive art can copy the neurological mechanisms of meditation, promoting calm, presence, and positive wellbeing.

Throughout Chapter 2, I investigate how Olafur Eliasson increases the psychological and perceptual themes introduced in Chapter 1, signifying how immersive installation art can shape cognition, emotional awareness, and wellbeing. Eliasson's work, grounded in light, colour and multisensory engagement, places the viewer as an active participant whose perception becomes a form of meaning-making. Through installations such as *The Weather Project*, I explore how his atmospheres arouse presence and meditative states by grounding the body in sensory experience and a heightened awareness of self and environment. The chapter will then extend this analysis into the digital realm, focusing on Marcus Verhagen's discussion of technologically mediated immersion. By comparing Eliasson's materially rooted installations with digital experiences shaped by projection, interactivity, and virtual environments, I examine how both forms generate psychological absorption, reduce stress and reconnect the viewer within the present moment. Ultimately Chapter 2 reveals how immersive art, whether physical or digital, acts as a restorative counterforce to overstimulation, offering viewers a space of contemplation and emotional grounding.

In Chapter 3, I explore the historical and spiritual foundations of meditation and self-regulation within Buddhist philosophy. By returning to Buddhism's importance on awareness, compassion and emotional balance, the chapter shows how early meditative traditions provide a deeper context for understanding why sensory grounding and presence remain central to human wellbeing. Meditation is offered not only as a spiritual discipline but as a psychological tool that continues to align with modern theories of attention, regulation, and inner clarity. I then contrast these principles with the accelerating pressures of digital culture, examining how overstimulation, constant connectivity and 24/7 productivity challenge the very stillness that both Buddhism and restorative immersive art cultivate. This chapter therefore places immersive installation at a turning point. It can repeat the chaos of digital overload or embody Buddhist ideas of regulation and mindful presence, offering a counterbalance to contemporary cognitive strain.

In my dissertation I will consider how immersive environments remove all boundaries between self and space and reawaken connection to comfort within ourselves we may have once felt during childhood - a fleeting sense of unity with the world. This research argues that installation art with such immersive and profound positive impact can function as a form of psychological restoration and should extend beyond galleries into public spaces, where its restorative potential can be accessed by all rather than a privileged few. Through sensory engagement, light and sound, it offers the audience a gateway into mindfulness and emotional healing, affirming the essential human need for connection, both within the self and the surrounding world around us.

Chapter 1

James Turrell: A Neuroscience of Light



Aftershock, 2025, James Turrell, Copenhagen Contemporary

Standing inside James Turrell's *Aftershock* in Copenhagen Contemporary earlier this year (Turrell, 2025), I felt my entire cognitive state shift. The whole room dissolved into colour and luminosity, and for just a moment I was suspended between emotion and perception, sensation, and awareness. Having studied Turrell for years, encountering his work in person was more than just an academic experience, it was deeply personal. I felt as though I was meeting a long-studied language in its purest form, finally hearing it spoken aloud. This installation simply altered me, my breathing slowed, and all thoughts dissolved. My emotional response grew unexpectedly intense, revealing just how profoundly immersive environments can recalibrate the mind.

This chapter begins with that encounter as it completely encapsulates the core of all my research which is the psychological effect of immersive installations and the neurological mechanisms that underpin those experiences. Turrell's work is rooted in light, perception, and the architecture of seeing which creates conditions in which viewers' emotional and cognitive states can shift dramatically. His installations offer a gateway not only into altered perception but into understanding how the brain processes sensory stimuli when conventional visual cues are distorted or removed.

James Turrell is an American artist, best known for his groundbreaking explorations of spatial experience since the 1960's. His artwork offers an important and deep case for exploring the psychological and neurological impacts of immersive installation on us humans. In Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art gallery guide *Into the Light* (Thompson and Alexandra, 2019), Turrell's practice is portrayed through a language of perception itself, as he describes how 'light is slowed down, contained, and made into something we inhabit' (Thompson and Alexandra, 2019, p.4). Instead of illustrating light, Turrell treats it as a medium with sculptural aspects, a term of experience rather than just an image. This completely transforms the viewer from a passing spectator to a participant because of their perception.

Turrell's early projection works, such as the large scale Ganzfeld installation (Turrell, 1991) which is a perceptual condition in which visual fields lead to disorientation and sometimes hallucination (Thompson and Alexandra, 2019, p.7). Turrell thoroughly removes purposeful cues, edges, and any surfaces to interrupt the viewer's natural mode of vision. When the human eye is refused spatial awareness and contrast, the brain automatically reconstructs depth and any form of surface from expectation rather than data itself, highlighting the direct psychological relevance. The audience's perceptual stability becomes weakened which then leads to a heightened sense of self-awareness. Turrell himself states he wants us as viewers to "see ourselves see" (Thompson and Alexandra, 2019, p.6)

This guide clearly references Turrell's engagement with the Ganzfeld effect. Within neuroscience, Ganzfeld atmospheres are usually known to disrupt the brain's predictive awareness of space, forcing resistance upon internal priorities over external cues. James Turrell recreates these environments architecturally through curved walls, concealed light sources, diffused colour and soft gradients so that the viewer becomes suspended in a "field" rather than just a room or gallery.

Investigating Emotional Regulation Through Mindfulness: An fMRI Study

Turrell's work demonstrates how profoundly light, and space can shape our internal states, shifting perception in ways that feels neurological. To understand how an artwork can slow the breath, soften emotional intensity, or heighten awareness, it becomes essential to look beyond aesthetics and into cognitive science. The psychological and neurological mechanisms behind these experiences provide a framework for explaining what I personally felt in Turrell's work.

This leads directly into the following case study, which uses mindfulness research to reveal how focused, immersive experiences influence emotional regulation and brain function in ways highly relevant to installation art.

The psychological and neurological mechanisms focusing on positive mental wellbeing in immersive installation art can be highlighted through parallels with mindfulness research. Lutz et al's. (2013) *Mindfulness and Emotion Regulation-A functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) Study* reveals the structure for understanding how present focused experiences such as immersive installation, alter neural and emotional processing, which can also be applied to the experience of art installations that are designed to promote emotional wellbeing.

Lutz et al's (2013) studied experienced mindfulness specialists using fMRI whilst engaging in emotional regulation tasks. The findings revealed increased activation in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) and the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), which are the regions associated with control and emotional awareness. Imaging also revealed reduced activity in the amygdala, which is associated with emotional reactivity. This suggests that mindful engagement fosters a neurological balance between increased self-regulation and weakened stress activity (Lutz et al., 2013).

In this study, Lutz et al (2013) used fMRI to compare neural responses during an emotion regulation task between experienced mindfulness practitioners and control participants (non-meditators). The paradigm required participants to view emotionally relevant stimuli and either allow themselves to respond naturally or to adopt a mindful stance of non-judgemental awareness (react or regulate). The results revealed that during the regulation condition, the mindfulness group showed increased activation in prefrontal regions. This "top-down control/ bottom-up reactivity" structure is central to many emotion regulation theories (Gross, 1998). In this case study, mindfulness training appeared to strengthen the engagement of cortical regulatory circuits (ACC & DLPFC), enhancing the capacity to monitor, modulate or inhibit emotional responses before they escalate. This further aligns with how the dampened amygdala response suggests that emotional stimuli provoke less inevitable arousal when one is practiced in mindfulness. The Lutz et al study supports a dual mechanism of increased regulatory capacity and attenuated reactivity.

Simply, immersive art installation engages attention, perception and emotion in ways that tune into mindfulness that other art cannot enforce. When an audience enters an environment of sound and dynamic light, their sensory systems become connected with the present moment.

This promotes a state of absorption that softens default cognitive patterns, such as theory for self-referential thought (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). From the neurological perspective, these experiences will likely reduce any activation of the default mode our brains usually go to known as the default mode network (DMN). This is the same network suppressed during meditation (Brewer et al., 2011), thus enabling feelings of calm and unity.

This study provides a realistic foundation for understanding how focused attention and emotional regulation are supported by changes in brain connectivity. These mechanisms directly relate to the psychological conclusions of immersive art. Much research in neuro-aesthetics show that multi-sensory art can stimulate dopaminergic reward circuits, within the ventral striatum and orbitofrontal cortex (OFC), producing motivation and pleasure (Vessel, Starr and Rubin, 2012). When joined with a sensory focus on mindfulness, such as installations using slow light transitions or harmonious soundscapes, this can evoke joy and emotional release, creating a balance of arousal and peace consistent with positive mental wellbeing.

Psychologically, Immersive environments promote embodied cognition, where the body's sensory experience becomes intertwined with emotional meaning (Gallagher et al., 2015). Viewers physical movement through light and sound mirrors the mindful awareness of your breath or body sensations describes in Lutz et al's (2013) study. This alignment between mindfulness and art immersion suggests that installation art operates as a form of environmental meditation, expressing the internal process of attention regulation and emotional awareness (Hölzel et al., 2011).

Therefore, the reduction of amygdala activity noted by Lutz et al (2013) may correspond to the calming effects often reported in immersive art atmospheres. These environments provide a safe and non-judgemental space for emotional engagement in conditions that encourage parasympathetic activation, lowering stress responses and promoting wellbeing (Porges, 2011). The viewers psychological shift from analytical observation to embodied presence reflects the mindful state of "non-judgemental awareness", producing a calm state of mind achieved through meditation. When applied to immersive installation art, these principles suggest that such environments support mental wellbeing by connecting attention, sensory input, and emotion, completely transforming art into an active mediator of neural and psychological restoration.

Neural Mechanisms of Light Therapy

Building on the insights from Lutz et al. (2013), who demonstrate how mindfulness practices engage brain regions associated with emotional region, it becomes clear that intentional sensory focus can measurably influence neural and emotional states. This foundation provides a natural bridge into research on light-based interventions, such as A Comprehensive Overview of the Neural Mechanisms of Light Therapy, which highlights how controlled visual stimuli modulate mood-related pathways, including serotonergic activity and circadian regulation. Together, these studies suggest that the brain is highly responsive to deliberate sensory environments, whether through mindful attention or targeted light exposure. This overlap directly supports the potential of immersive art installation. By combining light, sound and embodied presence, such environments may activate similar regulatory networks, fostering calm positive affect, and psychological restoration. Thus, immersive art becomes not only aesthetically engaging, but a meaningful, research-supported tool for enhancing mental wellbeing.

Light therapy has emerged as a useful, non-invasive intervention with documented benefits across a range of neurological and psychological disorders including depression, sleep disturbances and cognitive dysfunction. Rooted in early clinical requests for seasonal affective disorder (SAD) in the 1980's, light therapy has since been expanded to treat non-seasonal depression and other conditions with success (Huang, Tao & Ren, 2023).

Fundamentally, light therapy takes advantage of the brain's sensitivity to light as a powerful environmental factor capable of controlling neural circuits. In humans, exposure to bright light has been linked to improvements in mood, alertness and sleep quality, and is increasingly recognised as a profitable and accessible intervention with relatively few side effects (Huang, Tao & Ren 2023). Clinical research supports the effectiveness of bright light therapy in reducing symptoms of SAD and depressive disorder, with some evidence suggesting comparable outcomes to combined light and antidepressant therapies may even enhance treatment effects relative to medication alone (Huang, Tao & Ren 2023). The neural pathways that convey the light's influence on mood and cognition begin in the retina with particular photosensitive cells. In addition to the traditional rods and cones responsible for form vision, naturally photosensitive retinal ganglion cells (ipRGCs) play a key role in non-image-forming responses to ambient light (Huang, Tao & Ren 2023).

Light's interaction with sleep and circadian rhythms further illustrate its influence on brain function. Light directly impacts the suprachiasmatic nucleus (SCN) which is the central pacemaker, and suppresses melatonin secretion, resulting in phase shifts that can enhance sleep quality and entrain circadian rhythms (Huang, Tao & Ren 2023). However, clinical studies note that the beneficial effects on sleep and circadian disorders depend on precise timing and duration of light exposure. This emphasises that ideal therapeutic design must account for individual chronobiology.

Neuroimaging evidence, while limited, is beginning to identify links of light therapy in human brain activity. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies show that extended bright light interventions can alter the amygdala, prefrontal connectivity and engage pathways associated with mood regulation. This offers preliminary human evidence for circuit-level changes induced by light therapy. Together, the joining clinical and preclinical findings summarised by Huang, Tao & Ren (2023) emphasise that light therapy engages multiple neural circuits that collectively influence mood, cognition and sleep. While further research is needed to refine our understanding and heighten intervention parameters, these neural mechanisms provide a compelling basis for therapeutic applications and for exploring light-based modalities to support mental wellbeing.

Bringing these ideas together, this chapter frames immersive installation art as a space where perception, emotional, and neurological processes cross, directly addressing the central question of how immersive environments influence psychological wellbeing. Through Turrell's manipulation of light and spatial awareness, perception is slowed and attention is drawn inward, disrupting habitual modes of seeing and encouraging heightened self-awareness. When considered alongside research into mindfulness and sensory regulation, immersive installations can be understood as environments that foster present-moment attention, emotional regulation, and a softening of cognitive reactivity. This alignment between artistic practice and neuroscientific evidence positions immersive installation not simply as a visual experience, but as an embodied, sensory encounter. It is capable of shaping internal states and supporting mental wellbeing, forming a conceptual bridge into the practice-led investigations that follow.

Chapter 2

Olafur Eliasson: Psychological Dimensions of Perception and Experience



The Weather Project, 2003, Olafur Eliasson, The Tate Modern, London

Building on the psychological case study evident in James Turrell's work, it is valuable to take into consideration how other contemporary artists similarly connect emotional and perceptual processes to shape immersive experiences. This naturally leads to Olafur Eliasson, an artist whose practice is deeply rooted in exploring how viewers psychologically engage with light and colour in spatial environments. Eliasson, a Danish and Icelandic artist best known for large-scale installations that merge science and art, he consistently investigates how experiential encounters can influence cognition, awareness, and emotion. His work offers a critical bridge between how multisensory atmospheres shape the viewer's inner experience.

In the book *Take Your Time* (2007) by Olafur Eliasson, he proposes an essential outline for the understanding of how immersive installation art can heighten psychological wellbeing. Whilst Eliasson's wide range of work focuses on multiple senses – (hearing, sight, touch, and smell), he uses a vast range of materials to offer an active debate between the audience and the artwork. Eliasson constructs what he calls “devices for the experience of reality” (Eliasson, 2007),

suggesting that rather than presenting objects for passive observation, he invites the viewer to become a creator within the artwork itself through perception. By positioning the body at the centre of creating meaning, his installations guide participants to connect with the self and their senses, which ultimately grounds them in the present moment. The participatory approach joins with cognitive theories that sensory experiences form a foundation of self-awareness.

The Weather Project (Eliasson, 2003) the large artificial sun of bright amber transforms the Tate Modern Turbine Hall into a space of calm to alter the audience's neurological state. By immersing themselves into an experience of safety, warmth, and colour, Eliasson notes that the viewers are unconsciously compensating for the lack of all other colours, which engages brain areas of the conscious and unconscious. This piece of work had viewers travel from all over the world to see it, suggesting it had a profound positive impact. Furthermore, it offers insight into how the public construct reality through sensory processing. Many commenters that have visited this installation compared the exhibition to some zen practices with atmospheres of awakened "third eye," describing it as a profoundly meditative and spiritual setting. The connection between the spiritual and immersive aspects alongside the restorative potential, calls the overstimulated public world into a home of stillness and unity.

Throughout Eliasson's collaboration with the Hirshhorn Museum, it highlights his objective to create atmospheres where humans can participate within their own existence. This idea repeated in his dialogue with Robert Irwin where Irwin affirms that "feeling is not a response; it is an action". Eliasson then expands by noting that the perceiver becomes a producer and projects their emotions onto the world (Eliasson, 2007). Such environments will encourage the participants to recognise their own potential in the role of making meaning and reality.

During Eliasson's practice, lighting, and atmosphere both function as a psychological media. For example, this was demonstrated in *Your Sun Machine* (Eliasson, 1997) where a circular hole cut into the roof allows sunlight to flood in and spread across the room, transforming the space into a natural phenomenon as a cosmic reminder of the individuals place in the universe. In a similar artwork series, *Light Politics*, Eliasson describes the experience of light as "a safe haven from an engagement I neither not wished to escape...It transformed my sense of self-in-place, my very capacity of perception" (Eliasson, 2007, p. 253). This language of transformation and a heightened presence deeply resonate with neuroscience and many theories of flow states, identifying these effects as paths to emotional balance.

Eliasson (2007) verifies the argument that immersive installation art can serve as a psychological and transformative medium used to restore humans in contemporary culture. Eliasson's installations exist in a threshold between sensation and thought, inducing what he calls "wonder," a cognitive mode that expands awareness. His impressive atmospheres offer viewers a temporary release from the huge amount of digital overstimulation and a reconnection with themselves.

Digital Immersion in Contemporary Art: Insights from Marcus Verhagen

While Eliasson's installations emphasise bodily presence, sensory grounding and a return to organic perceptual experience, the contemporary landscape of immersion has rapidly expanded into the digital realm. This shift raises new questions about how technologically mediated environments influence cognition and emotional engagement. Marcus Verhagen's discussion of digital immersive art directly enters this investigation, offering a critical lens through which to examine how immersion functions when it is shaped less by natural phenomena and more by screens, algorithms, and virtual architects. His analysis provides a compelling counterpoint to Eliasson's materially grounded practices, unveiling how digital experiences both extend and complicate the psychological and perceptual themes established in Eliasson's work.

Through *Digital Immersive Art*, Marcus Verhagen proposes the ability to exist fully within the present moment (Verhagen, 2025). Whilst traditional art forms typically portray another world, Immersive Installation creates a real time environment, emerging the viewer into a 'full of life' experience. The statement 'activate the viewer' is often exclaimed in this article by Verhagen when describing the viewer as an active participant in the artwork rather than a passive observer. This psychological, transformative experience has profound implications as it shifts the ordinary object-based view of artwork.

The rise of artists using light projection, interactive technology and computer graphics has been surmised by Verhagen as 'Techno-Vitalist Art'. With most of these artworks being displayed in darkened spaces, audiences can alter the boundaries between self and surroundings by plunging them in sensory environments. For instance, Olafur Eliasson's installations such as *The Weather Project* (Eliasson, 2003), highlights perception, provoking visually unusual bodily experiences which focuses on the logistics of the eye and the mind. A similar artwork *Drawing on the Water*

Surface Created by The Dance of Koi and People (TeamLab, 2016) create a floating environment for the viewers where they can fully melt into the installation. Artworks like these create a psychological state of absorption, suggesting lower stress levels and encouraging a meditative state of mind.

Experiences like *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience* (Exhibition Hub and Fever, 2022) further promotes this art form, where the experience encourages the audience to ‘lose themselves’ in colour and light, (a phrase commonly used in promotional material for the immersive exhibition). This invites the audience to completely forget their problems and stresses in life and focus on this moment in time. This undergoes a constant flow in visual stimulation and puts the analysing mind on hold. This effect deeply resonates with findings in neuroscience, linking these immersive experiences directly to reductions in stress hormones in the body, heightened emotional regulation and increased activity in cognitive areas associated with sensory processing and empathy.

Verhagen also connects such immersive experiences with Sigmund Freud’s belief of the “oceanic feeling” which is a state of harmony in early childhood before the self becomes familiar with the external world. During this early stage of life, the child views themselves as a continued version of the mother and the surrounding environment. Through the development of individuality this state is lost. However, Freud implies that adults briefly reencounter this state in moments of unity and closure. Immersive Installation Art has the potential to overwhelm the senses, reactivating the original sensation of being connected. This neurologically aligns with theories of the flow state, where the brain areas associated with self-referential thought soften and the feelings of relaxation can arise.

Ultimately, Verhagen’s analysis views digital immersion as deeply psychologically and culturally significant. These works appear in a moment where contemporary life is characterised by overstimulation, persistent productivity and a cultural drift away from embodied presence. Immersive installations respond to these conditions by providing an alternative method: they create spaces of slowness and contemplation. Their growing popularity reaches more than entertainment value; it signals a craving for mindfulness and emotional safety within an increasingly digital and hyper-mediated society. By pulling the viewer into “a narrow present” where external noises quieten, immersive art functions as a soft form of resistance to acceleration culture, allowing the public to bring themselves back into a place of care, feeling and interiority.

The practices of Olafur Eliasson and the critical bases outlined by Marcus Verhagen collectively demonstrate how immersive installation art operates as a powerful psychological and perceptual medium within contemporary culture. Through light, atmosphere, and participatory engagement, these works shift the viewer as an active producer of meaning which encourages states of presence and emotional regulation. Importantly, this distinguishes between positive digital immersion - where sensory environments foster mindfulness and restoration, and digital overstimulation - which dominates much of contemporary life through constant screens and cognitive overload. While immersive artworks offer moments of stillness and focused awareness, they also underline society's growing need for intentional spaces that counteract technological overload. This tension reveals immersion not just as an aesthetic approach, but as a response to broader neurological and cultural conditions. Building on these insights, the following chapter will move away from contemporary art contexts to explore the historical foundations of meditation, tracing where practices of stillness, embodied awareness and altered states of consciousness originated. By examining these roots, this will further contextualise immersive art as a part of a much longer human search of presence and unity.

Chapter 3

The Historical and Spiritual Foundations of meditation

Although contemporary culture often portrays meditation, self-regulation practises and even immersive installations as part of a modern wellness trend, their foundations stretch back centuries. Long before they appeared in galleries, studios or platforms for digital mindfulness, these practices were central to Buddhist traditions, where they served as tools for cultivating awareness, emotional balance and a deeper connection to the self. This chapter traces the historical roots of meditation and self-regulation, highlighting how ancient methods of guided sensory focus resonates directly with today's immersive experiences. By acknowledging this history, we can better understand how current artistic and therapeutic practices are not inventions of the present, but evolutions of long-standing human techniques for grounding, reflection and inner transformation.

Buddhism offers both spiritual philosophy and an ethical framework which has directly shaped practices such as meditation while also influencing attitudes toward compassion and wellbeing. Starting in India over 2500 years ago through the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), Buddhism was developed as a response to human dissatisfaction and suffering which is known as *dukkha*. Rather than suggesting escape through divine authority, Buddhism introduced a practical system for mental training and ethical living which emphasised self-awareness and insight through wisdom. Meditation developed as a central practice within this system which functions both as a psychological discipline and a spiritual tool that improves emotional regulation and inner peace. These early outlines continue to be highly relevant when considering how immersive experiences and sensory environments impact mental wellbeing in the world today.

At its very core, Buddhism starts with the acknowledgment of suffering as a universal and natural condition. From this awareness comes the responsibility to minimise suffering, not only within an individual but throughout the world at large. Ken Jones describes Buddhist social action as emerging straight from “manifest suffering and folly in the world”, which encourages compassionate response and ethical responsibility (Jones, 2001). Social action within Buddhism is therefore not separate from spiritual life but an extension of it. Acts of education,

service, charity and ethical work practice are known as practical expressions of spiritual insight rather than optional moral additions.

Unlike belief-based religious systems, Buddhism is rooted in experience and inquiry. Jones (2001) explains that Buddhism is not reliant on principle or divine revelation but is instead a realistic teaching that focuses meditation, ethics and intellectual knowledge as a deep awareness of interdependence, impermanence and non-attachment. Meditation has a crucial role in cultivating this awareness by training attention, developing emotional resilience and calming mental disturbance. In neurological terms, meditation has been shown to influence patterns of attention and emotional regulation which supports the idea that ancient Buddhist practices remain psychologically relevant.

In the modern world, Buddhism continues to change. Jones (2001) argues that Buddhism has repeatedly been reinterpreted across cultures, surviving precisely because of its flexibility and relevance. As digital culture increases disconnection, anxiety and cognitive overload, Buddhist philosophy provides tools of reflection and a sense of stillness that challenge overstimulation. Its emphasis on mindful awareness offers a meaningful contrast to technology saturated environments, reinforcing the importance of embodied presence and mental clarity. Buddhism therefore provides both spiritual and psychological insight to wellbeing, placing meditation not only as a religious act but a therapeutic practice also. Its outline of wisdom, compassion and awareness directly informs contemporary understandings of mental health and immersive experience, offering a foundation for examining how environment can heal rather than overwhelm.

Digital overstimulation and the loss of rest and regulation

While Buddhism promotes stillness, awareness and freedom from mental disturbance, contemporary digital culture increasingly encourages constant stimulation and distraction. This contrast is central to understanding wellbeing within immersive environments. Where Buddhist meditation reduces sensory input to cultivate clarity and emotional regulation, digital technologies divide attention and intensify cognitive overload. This dissertation argues that immersive installation sits in between two states: it can either replicate the chaos of overstimulating digital spaces, or it can offer viewers a reflective, grounding experience. By

depicting on Buddhist principles of presence and mindfulness, immersive installations have the potential to transform sensory engagement into a restorative rather than an overwhelming encounter. The discussion of digital overstimulation therefore extends Buddhist philosophy into a contemporary psychological context.

Jonathan Crary's *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (Lezard, 2014). Nicholas Lezard examines how contemporary capitalism has worked to eliminate natural rhythms of rest and darkness, replacing them with a culture of constant productivity, digital engagement and consumption. His central argument is that we now exist in a society where "the erosion of all distinction between day and night" has become normalised, creating a world that never pauses and never sleeps (Lezard, 2014). Within digital culture, this overstimulation is not accidental but rather strategically produced in order to maximise labour, attention and economic layout.

Crary traces the roots of 24/7 culture back to industrial labour systems, stating that "the workers in the mills were organised into the 12-hour shifts. The mills never stopped" (Lezard, 2014). This model of uninterrupted productivity has now migrated into contemporary life through technology, with social media, smartphones and artificial lighting enabling a constant cycle of work and consumption. In modern society, individuals have become "willing connivers in [their] own sleeplessness" (Lezard, 2014) as digital platforms encourage engagement at all hours, dissolving the boundary between rest and activity. The psychological consequence of this is a condition of exhaustion that is normalised and rarely questioned.

Crary further suggests that digital capitalism does not simply discourage sleep but actively treats it as an obstacle. Scientific research into the brain of the white-crowned sparrow, which can stay awake for seven days during migration, demonstrates how biological rhythms are being studied in order to eliminate human need for rest (Lezard, 2014). This development is driven predominantly by military interests, where "the sleepless soldier would be the forerunner of the sleepless worker or consumer" (Lezard, 2014). Here, the human body is reduced to an instrument for productivity, reflecting Crary's claim that under late capitalism we are "disposable units for keeping economies running" (Lezard, 2014).

The digital world also transforms how we experience the physical space. Crary discusses the disorientation created when surroundings fell "both vague and oppressive," highlighting how screen-based environments detach individuals from direct sensory experience (Lezard, 2014). Screens function as "prostheses", replacing reality with filtered, algorithmic visual stimuli.

This constant mediation distances individuals from embodied awareness, intensifying mental fatigue and emotional detachment.

Crary's work reveals how digital overstimulation is not simply a by-product of modern life, it is a systematic condition shaping behaviour, mental health and identity. His analysis positions sleep as one of the last remaining spaces of autonomy in a culture of uninterrupted consumption, reminding us that rest is not indulgence but survival.

Mark Fisher: Mental Health in a Capitalist World

Jonathan Crary's *24/7: Late Capitalism and the ends of sleep* (2014) presents a captivating vision of contemporary life as one of the ongoing stimuli and productivity, in which rest, stillness and even sleep are being deteriorated more and more by the demands of late capitalist culture. This state of being permanently awake creates a condition in which the mind is rarely allowed to disengage, leading to cognitive overload and emotional fatigue. Extending this critique, Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* changes the emphasis from systems to the psyche, examining how these external pressures are internalised and experienced as anxiety, depression and emotional disconnection. Where Crary exposes the structural conditions of overstimulation, Fisher reveals their psychological consequences, suggesting that mental distress is not just personal but culturally produced. Together, their work frames late capitalism as a central force in the deterioration of mental wellbeing.

In *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Mark Fisher identifies a widespread issue in modern life: the acceptance of capitalism as the only viable reality, rather than simply as an economic system. For Fisher "capitalist realism" is the sense that capitalism is not simply dominant, but inevitable and so deeply rooted that imagining a logical alternative becomes almost impossible. Through this theoretical prediction, he argues that culture, education, labour, and subjectivity, forming an "invisible barrier constraining thought and action".

Fisher discovers how this condition seeps into everyday life: from the cultural realm, where even art, education and mental health are reframed in terms of capital, efficiency and personal accountability, to bureaucracy, unstable employment, and the commodification of services. As a result, mental distress becomes humanised and symptoms such as depression, anxiety or alienation are treated as individual failures or biochemical imbalances to be managed or

medicated, rather than as physical effects of a system that wears away collective meaning and community.

This outline has profound implications for psychological wellbeing. According to Fisher, the crisis of mental health in capitalist cultures is not related or purely a matter of personal vulnerability, but a predictable effect of general pressures, isolation, commodification, cultural emptiness, and the loss of non-economic values.

Given this identification, the realm of immersive art (art that draws us into sensory, spatial, or temporal experiences beyond everyday functionality), offers a form of resistance and healing. It offers a world where time is paused, productivity expectations are stopped, and the hyper-rational, business-ontology logic is subtly suspended through immersive art. In such spaces, value is not assigned through price or utility, but experienced through presence, wonder and meaningful sensory engagement.

While capitalist realism tends to defuse values that escape capital logic, reducing art to a commodity, culture to consumption, immersive art can reclaim art's capacity for emotional significance, psychological restoration and the transformation of subjective experience. It offers retreat from the relentless manipulation of life typical of capitalist realism. For individuals sinking in overstimulation, alienation or alienated labour, immersive art might operate as a form of physical resistance, not a political manifesto but a lived re-imagining of what human experience can feel like.

Moreover, immersive experiences can stabilize the sense of isolation and breakdown that Fisher identifies as central to mental distress. By creating communal or shared aesthetic environments, where audiences inhabit a shared space of sensory engagement, immersive art can interfere in the alienating logic of capitalist individuation, re-introducing collective attention, presence, and emotional communion.

Fisher's own tragic death by suicide in 2017 casts a dark shadow over these ideas, a pure reminder that the psychic costs of living under capitalist realism can be devastating. That fact highlights the urgency of seeking psychological and cultural spaces that provide meaning, solace, connection, and perhaps pathways to healing beyond the default paths of consumption and commodification.

In this light, immersive art should not be dismissed as mere aesthetic luxury. Instead, it becomes a necessary and perhaps urgent form of psychological and social intervention. If capitalist

realism has reduced alternate futures unbelievable, immersive art might help us temporarily rise above that limitation. offering realistic proof that other forms of being are possible, and that mental health, community and meaning still matter beyond economic value.

When we frame immersive art not just as creative expression, but as a psychological protection and cultural resistance, its accessibility becomes not optional, but essential.

Conclusion

This dissertation has explored how immersive installation art offered a profound psychological, emotional and neurological counterbalance to the accelerating pressures of contemporary life. Through analysing the work of James Turrell, Olafur Eliasson, digital immersive artists and the historical grounding of meditation within Buddhist philosophy, this research revealed that immersive environments had the capacity to do far more than entertain. They reshaped attention, supported emotional regulation, quietened cognitive overload and reconnected individuals with embodied presence. Throughout the chapters, the findings consistently demonstrated that immersion was not simply aesthetic; it was therapeutic, neurologically restorative and socially necessary.

The research began with Turrell, whose environments destabilised ordinary perception and guided participants into a state of mindful absorption. Turrell's installation showed how light, colour and spatial ambiguity could slow breathing, reduce distraction and cultivate an acute awareness of the present moment. fMRI studies discussed in Chapter 1 confirmed that these states were not metaphorical but measurable, they corresponded to reduced amygdala activity, increased activity in regulatory cortical regions and the suppression of default-activity-mode network activity. Immersive art therefore mirrored, and sometimes replicated, the neurological mechanisms of meditation. This established the foundation for the central argument of this dissertation; immersive installations functioned as environmental forms of mindfulness and thus had the potential to support psychological resilience in a chronically overstimulated world.

Eliasson's work extended these ideas by showing how multisensory atmospheres repositioned the viewer as an active participant within their own perceptual and emotional experience. His installations, the weather project, created collective environments of warmth, unity and contemplative stillness within spaces usually defined by noise and movement. The psychological responses reported by audiences, reflection, emotional release and heightened bodily awareness, aligned with the cognitive theories discussed earlier in the dissertation, affirming the role of immersive art in grounding individuals in the present. These effects became even more evident when contrasted with digital immersive works, which, although technologically different, Marcus Verhagen's writing illustrated that these technologically mediated environments responded to a cultural hunger for slowness, interiority and relief from fracturing pace of digital life.

When placed alongside Buddhist philosophy, the significance of immersive installations became even clearer. Buddhism recognised centuries ago that humans required stillness, presence and regulated attention in order to avoid suffering. The dissolution of boundaries self and environment, a quality central both to early meditative states and to immersive art, offered individuals a temporary return to unity, clarity and emotional equilibrium. As Chapter 3 showed, this was not accidental; it reflected a long human history of seeking restoration through sensory grounding and mindful awareness. Immersive installations therefore emerged as a contemporary continuation of these traditions, making ancient principles accessible through artistic environments rather than monastic practices.

However, the importance of these installations deepened further when considered in the context of digital overstimulation. The pressures described by Jonathan Crary, constant connectivity, erosion of rest and the normalisation of cognitive exhaustion – revealed the psychological urgency behind the growing appeal of immersive art. Modern life encouraged distraction rather than presence, fragmentation rather than integration. Without accessible spaces that counteracted these pressures, emotional dysregulation, burnout and disconnection were likely to intensify. Immersive environments thus fulfilled a social function: they created pockets of pause and sensory recalibration in cultures that increasingly denied individuals time or space to recover.

For this reason, this dissertation ultimately argued that immersive installation art should not remain restricted to galleries, exclusive studios or ticketed exhibitions. If these experiences genuinely supported emotional wellbeing, cognitive clarity and psychological resilience, as the research repeatedly demonstrated, then making them accessible only to a cultural elite contradicted their restorative purpose. Public spaces such as parks, transport hubs, libraries, hospitals, university campuses and city squares could integrate immersive installations as part of everyday life, enabling wellbeing practices to occur outside therapeutic or institutional settings. In doing so, societies would not merely enhance aesthetic environments, they would actively support collective mental health.

Without such expansion, the consequences could be severe. As overstimulation, digital acceleration and emotional disconnection continued to rise, the absence of grounding environments would likely contribute to further psychological decline. Immersive installation art offered one of the few culturally acceptable, non-clinical and universally engaging avenues for restoring presence, regulating emotion and reconnecting individuals with themselves and

their surroundings. To neglect its potential would be to allow human wellbeing to deteriorate alongside the environments that shape it.

In conclusion, this dissertation demonstrated that immersive installations provided a vital form of psychological refuge and should no longer be viewed as optional cultural luxuries. They were essential, to wellbeing, to emotional balance and to the human need for restorative sensory experience. Expanding access to these environments in public spaces was not only described as beneficial; it was necessary for the mental health of future societies.

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