

UNIVERSITÉ DU QUÉBEC À MONTRÉAL

TECHNO-SPIRITUALITY AND THE DIGITAL SELF: FROM SMARTPHONE
APPLICATIONS TO IMMERSIVE INSTALLATIONS

THESIS
PRESENTED
IN PARTIAL FULLFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN COMMUNICATION

BY
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NOVEMBER 2021

UNIVERSITÉ DU QUÉBEC À MONTRÉAL

TECHNO-SPIRITUALITÉ ET SOI NUMÉRIQUE : DES APPLICATIONS POUR
TÉLÉPHONES INTELLIGENTS AUX INSTALLATIONS IMMERSIVES

MÉMOIRE
PRÉSENTÉ
COMME EXIGENCE PARTIELLE
DE LA MAÎTRISE EN COMMUNICATION

PAR
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NOVEMBRE 2021

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REMERCIEMENTS

First of all, thank you to Vesna for always believing in me and helping me to follow my dreams. And thank you to my devoted friends for the constant encouragement and emotional support and stimulating conversations that allowed me to sort through my ideas. I love you all.

À ma co-directrice Katharina Niemeyer et mon co-directeur Dany Beaupré, je suis à jamais reconnaissante pour vos conseils, votre soutien et votre enthousiasme. Je n'avais aucune idée de ce que je faisais lorsque j'ai entamé ma maîtrise et je suis très chanceuse de vous avoir trouvées.

À mon jury, Sofian Audry et Jean-François Renaud, merci pour vos perspectives perspicaces et votre intérêt pour mon projet.

Je suis énormément reconnaissante à Jaime Demperio, l'équipe du Centre de design et tous les autres professeur.e.s qui m'ont donné l'occasion de travailler à l'école. Sans vous tous, je serais toujours piégé dans un emploi insatisfaisant.

Mille mercis à Kenny Lefebvre, qui est allé au-delà de ses responsabilités pour rendre mon installation possible.

À mon très cher Francis Desruisseaux, la voix de *Soli*, merci pour ta contribution créative au projet et pour avoir rendu l'expérience super amusante.

Thank you to Navid Navab for translating my ideas into realistic plans and for making connections, to Peter van Haaften for bringing my installation to life with coding magic, and to Kevin Calero for the stunning documentation of the installation.

Cette installation n'aurait pas été possible sans le soutien financier d'Hexagram, du CELAT, de la Faculté de communication et de l'AémDC. Merci !

Et finalement, merci à tou.te.s mes participant.e.s pour votre curiosité et pour vos précieuses réflexions.

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RÉSUMÉ

Grâce à la récente remontée de la spiritualité du Nouvel Âge dans la culture dominante, les développeurs de logiciels mobiles ont conçu des applications spirituelles pour téléphones intelligents. Cette industrie multimilliardaire florissante des médias pour téléphones intelligents réemballe diverses pratiques de la spiritualité du Nouvel Âge telles que la méditation, la divination et l'astrologie pour une nouvelle génération de consommateurs technophiles. Bien que les applications spirituelles pour téléphones intelligents ne soient pas les premières technologies médiatiques à tirer profit de la popularité de la spiritualité du Nouvel Âge, ce qui est fondamentalement différent dans la marchandisation de la spiritualité sous forme d'applications pour téléphones intelligents est la modalité high-tech du média en tant que logiciel (exemplifiée par sa personnalisation algorithmique) et notre intimité psychosomatique avec le téléphone intelligent en tant qu'appareil personnel.

Ce projet de recherche-création—ancré dans une profonde curiosité de se confronter à l'émergence d'applications spirituelles pour téléphones intelligents, à leur popularité répandue et aux implications de leur utilisation sur l'expérience d'être de l'utilisateur—s'est transformé en une préoccupation plus grande sur la façon dont la technologie a été traditionnellement utilisée pour médiatiser la spiritualité et, plus loin, sur le rôle spirituel de la technologie dans nos vies. En considérant ces intersections particulières de la technologie, de la spiritualité et du Soi, j'ai réalisé une installation immersive qui aborde les questions de notre désir d'en savoir plus sur notre Soi à travers des expériences personnalisées, de notre intimité avec nos téléphones intelligents qui se caractérise par une dépendance et une croyance en eux en tant que dispositifs technoprothétiques, et de la confusion de la réalité associée à la nature mystérieuse de la technologie et de la spiritualité. L'œuvre créative qui en a découlé, *Soli : Expérience de méditation numérique*, vise essentiellement à générer des modes de compréhension alternatifs par la production et la diffusion de l'illusion et du spectacle, ainsi qu'en engageant un discours et une analyse critiques avec des concepts théoriques et créatifs. En plongeant l'utilisateur dans cette expérience subversive, j'ai cherché à identifier le rôle du Soi par rapport aux domaines croisés de la spiritualité et de la technologie.

S'inspirant de la théorie critique de l'école de Francfort, des théories post-structuralistes du philosophe français Jean Baudrillard et des théoriciens contemporains techno-spirituels des médias, j'examine trois thèmes cruciaux : le soi—en tant qu'augmenté par la technologie, en tant qu'extension de la technologie et en tant

qu'homogène avec la technologie ; l'illusion—en tant qu'immersion, interface hyperréelle, aura et image ; et le rituel—en tant que pratique de transcendance, en tant qu'inextricable de la nature magique de la technologie et en tant qu'échange symbolique. Le processus méthodologique de mon travail créatif, qui s'étend sur plus de deux ans de recherche et de développement, suit une méthode itérative caractérisée par des procédures expérimentales et d'observation, des exercices et l'acquisition de mes propres compétences, et des collaborations avec d'autres personnes. Enfin, une analyse basée sur les réactions des participants et le discours théorique fournit des conclusions, des critiques et d'autres questions relatives au projet de recherche-création.

Ce que l'expérience immersive de Soli suscite essentiellement chez la majorité de ses participants, c'est une distorsion à multiples facettes et une désintégration ultérieure de la perception de la réalité. Soli existe au sein de notre soi-disant réalité, mais aussi en tant qu'autre à cette réalité, comme un simulacre d'expérience hyperréelle quotidienne dans laquelle nous sommes tous immergés par le biais de nos diverses technologies médiatiques en simulant, reproduisant et exagérant les rituels familiers et les illusions du soi et de la réalité. Ainsi, le Soi se révèle être une fragmentation multiforme à travers de multiples interfaces et appareils. Plutôt que de s'appuyer sur la réalité, le Soi persiste à proximité de la réalité dans les domaines médiatisés de la simulation, de l'illusion et du simulacre. Perceptible uniquement par le processus d'engagement avec les technologies médiatiques, le Soi se révèle à nous sous la forme d'images, de données et d'expériences sensorielles inépuisables. De cette manière, Soli est une expérimentation qui pourrait nous offrir des perspectives et nous aider à formuler des questions sur les technologies médiatiques spirituelles et sur la nature spirituelle des technologies médiatiques.

Mots clés : soi, applications spirituelles pour téléphone intelligent, technologie médiatique, hyperréalité, installation immersive.

ABSTRACT

The recent emergence, popularity, and profusion of spiritual smartphone applications for New Age spiritual practices such as meditation, astrology, and divination is situated at both current and historical intersections between media technology, spirituality, and the Self. Through the production and presentation of an immersive installation, *Soli: Digital Meditation Experience*, I examine the smartphone—as an exceptionally spiritual device itself and as a vehicle for the consumption of spiritual practices—in order to analyse the significance of spiritual media technologies in shaping conceptions of the Self and of reality. After establishing a creative and conceptual framework based on themes of the Self, illusion, and ritual, I implement an iterative methodology consisting of several phases of research, development, and participant testing before concluding with a public presentation of the immersive installation. The results of the subsequent participant observation and theoretical analysis of *Soli* suggest that the consumption of spiritual practices through media technologies generates a palpable confusion of the boundaries between reality, the Self, and media technologies. As such, the Self no longer refers to any fixed reference point, but rather a concept that is only perceptible through media as infinitely interchangeable and mutable images, data, and sensory experiences.

Keywords: self, spiritual smartphone apps, media technology, hyperreality, immersive installation

We are at the edge of a new world, where art
and reality merge together into one language,
where art and the new transform reality into a
new form, where the past, the future and the
present, come together, in an event of change,
an event of alchemy.

—K Allado-McDowell and GPT-3

INTRODUCTION

It was sometime in 2018 that I began to notice something peculiar happening around me. There had been a perceptible shift in the ways in which people were relating to themselves and to one another. While this shift may have been gradual, it felt rather abrupt. Overnight, it appeared, everyone had become fascinated—obsessed, even—with spirituality, magic, and the occult. Nearly everybody I knew started buying healing crystals like amethyst and rose quartz and burning bundles of sage for spiritual cleansing. Decks of tarot cards became commonplace in the homes of both close friends and new acquaintances. All over social media, especially on Instagram, astrology memes and accounts erupted and multiplied relentlessly, gaining hundreds of thousands of followers. Major retailers and brands, too, introduced consumer products inspired by New Age spiritual practices. And then there were the apps.

Co–Star was the first one that I remember being very significant. At social gatherings I would meet someone for the first time and they would ask me if I had *Co–Star*. *Let’s add each other and see what our astrological compatibility is*. This became standard practice amongst friends and colleagues, as well. People all around me were incessantly asking one another about their sun, moon, and rising signs, pulling out their smartphones to check their natal charts. *This app is so accurate!* We were all so enthralled by what the little glowing screen between our hands had to reveal about our personalities and relationships.

This sudden interest in New Age spirituality seemed virtually inescapable, both online and offline. Were all these people seriously concerned with developing a deeper

awareness of the self and accessing a higher plane of consciousness? Or were they engaging in spiritual practices for fun? Was this interest in spirituality a performance or was it genuine? Did these distinctions matter at all? New Age spirituality had become a full-blown trend for the masses and it was impossible to tell the difference between the mystics and the faddists.

At the same time as I began to take note of these spiritual smartphone apps as, what appeared to me, a remarkably bizarre synthesis of trendy supernatural beliefs with high-tech software, there was a palpable societal shift in attitude toward digital technologies. The turning point occurred in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal of 2018 that permanently marked the public consciousness. Like in the aftermath of Y2K, this event starkly brought into focus the magnitude of our relationships with our digital technologies. People seemed more aware than ever of how their online activity bled into offline structures, relationships, and circumstances. And it seemed like people were more critical than ever, too, of our digitalised realities—of social media, of carefully curated representations of the self, of the veracity of information, of big data and algorithms, and of the power of the manipulation of personal data in both maintaining and disrupting hegemonic order.

The convergence of these circumstances catalysed my curiosity about the implications of these spiritual smartphone apps. I began to think about what it all meant that a significant number of people were attempting to understand themselves and others through these apps, or to improve themselves, or even to simply distract themselves. This didn't resemble to me quite the same kind of techno-consumption of the self and of reality with which we had all, more or less, become accustomed on social media, for example. It appeared to me, rather, as something more profound that had to do with our beliefs about the world and of ourselves within it. Moreover, these apps seemed to me very much like the final frontier: was there anything that remained untouched by

smartphones and their apps? They had already taken possession of our bodies and our minds and now they had come for our very souls—likely the last thing that there was to crystallise in app form. What began as an interest in the phenomenon of spiritual smartphone apps became a greater preoccupation with how technology has been traditionally used to mediate spirituality and, further, with the spiritual role of technology in our lives.

This preoccupation coincided with the beginning of my master's studies at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) in Communication and Experimental Media. I had entered into this research-creation programme on a whim, not knowing what research-creation was, much less having any sort of consistent creative practice. Unlike my classmates I did not identify as an artist, but rather as a creative person. I had dabbled in many artistic disciplines without ever developing a fixed practice, including various visual arts, performance, creative writing, music, graphic design, curation, and event organisation. I had not, however, previously experimented with new media art that involved computers and cables and coding. Despite this, it somehow felt instinctive to me to embark on the creation of an immersive audio-visual installation. I had a vision, I just did not know how to execute it.

My vision, to be exact, was to plunge users deeper into their smartphones. To do so, I would recreate the experience of using various types of spiritual smartphone apps, but would bring this experience out of the device and into physical space by creating an immersive environment. I wanted to confuse app, reality, body, mind, and smartphone. I wanted to thrust the user into a state of total digital intoxication, to create an extreme scenario, to see what would happen if I exaggerated our very real conditions. Would I be able to excavate some sort of truth about our relationships with our smartphones if I created a situation in which the user and device were even further embedded in one another? How would people react to this intense scenario and what could these

reactions reveal about the intersections of spirituality, technology, and the self? However, I also wanted the immersive installation to be executed in a way that was not overtly serious, but fun and entertaining and absurd. While I wanted to push the relationship between the user and their smartphone to an extreme point, I also wanted participants to feel more disoriented and bemused than as if they were participating in an uncomfortable social experiment. Was there some wisdom to be found within such an experience? Or would the whole thing be superficial dramatisation of the phenomenon I was investigating?

While I had no previous experience with creating an installation, much less one that involved new media, digital technology, and audio-visual equipment, this format seemed like the only way I might achieve the sort of hyperbolic experience that I had initially envisioned. I knew I would need to rely on my creative talents and vision, but also to acquire some new skills and work with other artists and professionals. I knew from the beginning that I would not be able to make this on my own and that there would be a very collaborative quality to the process. As sociologist Howard Becker points out, “All artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people” (1982, p. 1). My role in this project would not only be as creator, but also as creative director. I would venture into the unknown. I was not sure how I would do this or what exactly would result from it in the end. The whole thing manifested as a very intuitive process.

What follows is a research-creation project that ultimately seeks to generate alternative modes of understanding through the production and diffusion of illusion and spectacle, as well as by engaging in a critical discourse and analysis with theoretical and creative concepts. *Chapter 1* will present a broad contextualisation of spiritual smartphone apps, consider creative and scholarly work regarding the subject matter, and propose primary research objectives and questions. Elaborating on essential themes introduced in the

previous section, *Chapter 2* will deliver a detailed discussion of creative and theoretical frameworks pertinent to the project. A thorough description of the immersive installation in its formal, technical and aesthetic aspects will be described in Chapter 3, along with the methodological process. Chapter 4 will serve as an analysis of the process of creation and of the reception of the immersive installation by the participants with regard to my intentions, objectives, research questions, and conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Rather than revealing quantifiable answers, this final chapter will prompt further questions regarding the ways in which we might understand ourselves in relation to our personal technologies.

CHAPTER I

CONTEXT, OBJECTIVES, AND RESEARCH QUESTION

1.1 Context

The genesis of my research-creation project, *Soli: Digital Meditation Experience*, is rooted in a profound curiosity to confront the emergence of spiritual smartphone apps, their widespread popularity, and the implications of their use on the user's experience of being. In order to illustrate my impetus for exploring these questions through the creation of an immersive installation, it is essential to provide an overview of spiritual smartphone apps as a particular genre of digital media, as well as to outline the sociocultural circumstances surrounding the phenomenon. Moreover, this section serves to contextualise formal and aesthetic features of *Soli* (which will be described in Chapter 3) and reveals the significance of these apps as a point of departure for the study of the relationships between technology, spirituality, and the Self.

1.1.1 Spiritual Smartphone Applications

A recent revival of New Age spirituality in mainstream culture has led mobile software developers to participate in this trend by producing digitalised versions of secular mysticism in the form of smartphone applications (apps). Designed to grant users access into the metaphysical realm of spirituality at the swipe of a finger, this flourishing multi-billion-dollar industry of smartphone media has succeeded in repackaging various practices of New Age spirituality such as meditation and mindfulness, divination, and astrology to a new generation of techno-obsessed consumers (Jones, 2019; Griffith, 2019; Gebel 2019; Shieber, 2020). From serious to

entertaining to gimmicky, countless apps of varied popularity and quality dedicated to spiritual enlightenment clutter both Apple and Android app stores. So, what, exactly, do these apps do and who are their users? While I will not examine each of the thousands of spiritual smartphone apps here, I will provide a brief summary of some of the most notable ones pertaining to the aforementioned practices.

It is the meditation and mindfulness apps that generally first come to mind when I talk to people about my research. Perhaps the least esoteric of the set, these apps seem to appeal as much to the those invested in personal productivity as they do to those attracted to the supernatural (Ehrenreich, 2015). Another reason for their broader recognition may be that they have been available for a longer period of time. Nearly a decade before other varieties of spiritual apps began to occupy the public consciousness, meditation app *Insight Timer* launched in 2009 and now has over 18 million users (Koetsier, 2020). Other more high-profile apps that offer meditation services, *Calm* and *Headspace*, appeared on the market shortly after in 2012 and count over 80 million and 65 million users, respectively (Todd, 2020; Chaykowski, 2017; Shieber, 2020). These users, ranging from teenagers to seniors located across the world, tend on average to be middle-aged women (Koetsier, 2020; Chaykowski, 2017; Huberty et al., 2019). While the three apps each provide free content as well as paid subscriptions for exclusive features, their services differ slightly. *Insight Timer* allows anyone to upload guided meditations, relaxing music, or uplifting monologues which can be accessed by all users, in addition to promoting live meditation sessions. *Headspace*, on the other hand, consists of various collections of meditations produced by its own team, classified by different levels and moods, alongside colourful animations that propose mindful techniques for overcoming anxiety, insomnia, depression, lack of motivation, and stress, for example. *Calm*, however, is distinguished by its curated library of meditations from trained instructors, as well as its calming soundscapes and bedtime stories recorded by celebrities. Despite their

varied approaches to mindfulness and meditation, these apps are consistent in tracking the progress of their users, sending daily reminders for meditation, and generating customised notifications to prompt mindful behaviour.

Facilitating the more mystical facets of spirituality are the astrology apps. Explicitly targeted toward younger consumers such as Millennials and Generation Z, it is reported that these consumers consist primarily of women, non-binary, and queer people (Velasco, 2020; Bertram, 2019; Jones, 2019; Larocca, 2019; Lutkin, 2019). Currently the most popular amongst these apps is *Co-Star*, which boasts its use of artificial intelligence and NASA data to generate natal charts, daily horoscopes, and compatibility reports for over 7.5 million users (Co-Star, n.d.; Velasco, 2020). First released in 2017, the self-described “hyper-personalized, social experience bringing astrology into the 21st century” claims that it can do what other horoscopes cannot: provide an astrological precision normally only accessible through the expertise of skilled astrologers (Co-Star, n.d., para. 1). The app is free to use; the only requirement is that users specify their date of birth, along with its exact time and location. While *Co-Star* may have been one of the first astrology apps to achieve mainstream significance, other apps like *Sanctuary*, introduced in 2019, perform nearly identical functions. However, unlike *Co-Star*, *Sanctuary* incorporates human astrologers into its services, rather than attempting to simulate them. Although the app’s basic features are also available at no cost, users are able to pay a fee for a live chat with a professional astrologer, psychic, or tarot reader about specific questions they may have. Ostensibly positioning itself as the antithesis to *Co-Star*, *Sanctuary* encourages users to “Get insight from a real astrologer, not some algorithm” (Sanctuary, n.d., para. 2). Much like the prominent meditation and mindfulness apps discussed above, *Co-Star* and *Sanctuary* take themselves quite seriously as experts in their industry; however, they also incorporate entertaining elements like interactive interfaces, emoji, GIFs, and pop culture vernacular.

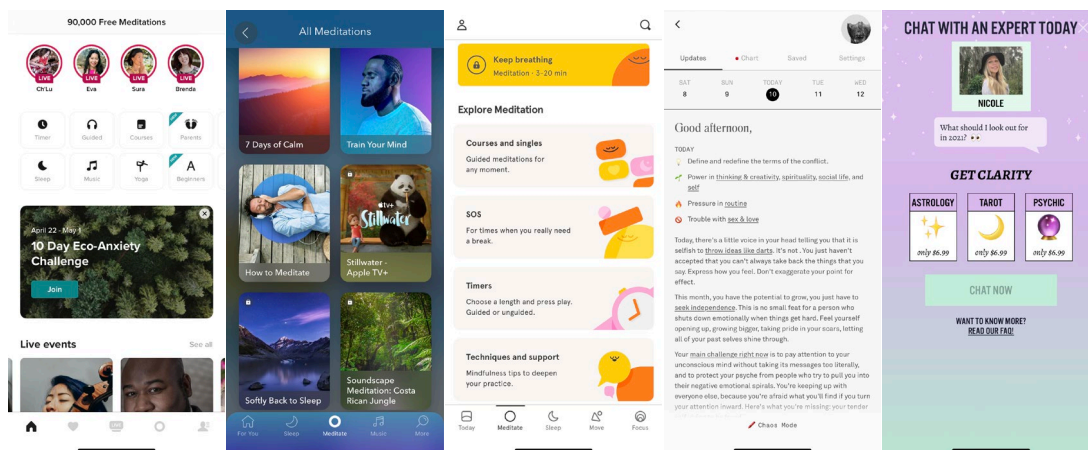


Figure 1.1: *Insight Timer, Calm, Headspace, Co–Star, and Sanctuary (Screenshots, Smartphone Apps)*

It is by relying on algorithms, scientific data, or various human experts that *Insight Timer, Calm, Headspace, Co–Star, Sanctuary*, and other similar apps seemingly maintain a certain credibility. As I will explore in Chapter 2, our societal conditioning to understand the language, symbols, and connotations of science as vehicles for objectivity directly informs our predisposition to believe in practices that engage with scientificity, even superficially. However, plenty of other apps make no such scientific pretence. These more playful apps, of which there appear to be infinite copies of one another, remain relevant to this discourse as media objects which rely on spiritual themes for pure entertainment or distraction by claiming to reveal divine truths. A non-exhaustive list of examples includes palmistry apps that predict the user’s future by scanning the underside of their hand with the smartphone camera, rune stone apps that require the user to shake their device to display ancient Norse symbols with divinatory meanings, crystal ball apps that communicate divine messages by absorbing the user’s energy through the screen, apps that cleanse and align the user’s chakras through sonic vibrations and binaural beats, and aura apps that use the camera to detect colourful energy fields surrounding a person. It is crucial to note that the purported veracity of spiritual smartphone apps—whether serious, entertaining, gimmicky, or otherwise—is unimportant in understanding the significance of such digital artefacts. What matters

here is that they are acknowledged as “expressions of cultural knowledge, and even critique” (Elisha, 2020, para. 13).

1.1.2 The Trendiness of New Age Spirituality

It would be misleading to label New Age spirituality as a niche curiosity. Spiritual smartphone apps, with their millions of users and their billions of dollars, are part of a much greater trend within the mainstream culture industry. Dominant digital media platforms have eagerly followed suit, with music streaming service *Spotify* offering users horoscope-themed “Cosmic Playlists” and social networking platform *Instagram* equipping its camera feature with zodiac face filters for embellishing selfies. Like tech companies, traditional consumer goods industries have capitalised on the popularity of secular mysticism: alongside such products as zodiac eyeshadow palettes and overpriced water bottles endowed with healing crystals, both high fashion designers and fast fashion brands emblazon clothing with occult symbols like tarot cards and pentagrams. Furthermore, leading brands as diverse as German alcoholic beverage producer *Jägermeister*, sportswear manufacturer *New Balance*, and American train company *Amtrak* have incorporated New Age spiritual references into marketing strategies. What prompted this mainstream surge of an esotericism that was not long ago relegated to the realm of alternative sub-cultures? A great deal of research and cultural commentary, as outlined in the following paragraphs, suggests that it has to do with our turbulent times.

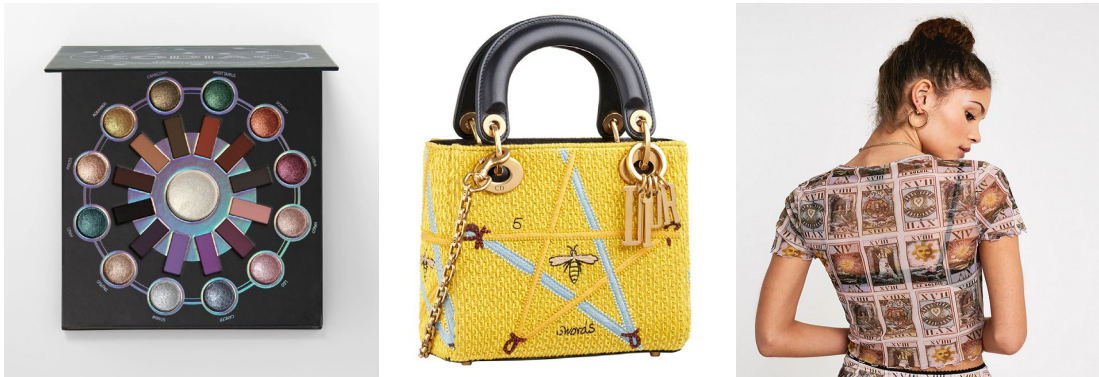


Figure 1.2: Zodiac Eyeshadow Palette, 2017 (Photograph, BH Cosmetics); Dior Pentagram Bag, 2018 (Photograph, Bergdorf Goodman); and Tarot Print Shirt and Skirt Set, 2019 (Photograph, Urban Outfitters)



Figure 1.3: Jägermeister Tarot Augmented Reality Advertisement, 2018 (Image, Palehorse Design)

This currently thriving market of New Age spirituality is tightly entangled with the simultaneous explosion of the self-care industry which sells the idea that personal well-being necessitates the consumption of specialised products that promote relaxation,

happiness, empowerment, and success (Shome, 2014; Tokumitsu, 2018). Gaining momentum in the last several years alongside a renewed mainstream interest in and subsequent commodification of feminism, self-care is now a lucrative industry that has become late capitalism's antidote to the stresses and anxieties of life under the oppressive system itself (Shome, 2017; Miller, 2014; Purser, 2019). In fact, it has been theorised that the widespread impulse to consume spiritual practices as self-care in Western society, especially amongst marginalised groups, correlates directly with the precarious circumstances of our realities that disproportionately affect these same people (Timothy & Conover, 2006; Redden, 2016; Profitt & Baskin, 2019). It is no surprise, then, that the users of spiritual smartphone apps belong predominantly to these marginalised demographics. As we face immense uncertainty and witness relentless deprivation in all domains of life—from environmental destruction, the dissolution of truth, increasingly polarised and populist politics, exacerbated socio-economic inequalities, and irreconcilably concurrent paranoia and infatuation with the technologies that surround us—spiritual practices free from religious dogma propose alternative avenues for coping with the dystopian stresses of our hyper-late-capitalist global predicament.

As these tendencies have been intensified by the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic over the past twelve months, there has been a perceptible growth in demand for spiritual media experiences. While academic research on the matter is scarce, at least one statistical study indicates that the consumption of spiritual content across digital media increased during the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic (Segal, 2020). Journalistic investigations and cultural commentary across numerous publications document the increasing use of spiritual smartphone applications in particular throughout the global health crisis (Wortham, 2021; Sachdeva, 2020; George-Parkin, 2021; Kaplan & Stenberg, 2020). This correlation between our circumstances and our belief systems in the present day is parallel to that of the destabilising experience of the

dramatic technological and socio-cultural transformations of Modernity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in which spiritualism and the occult captivated mass media, and of the socio-political turbulence and civil rights movements of the 1960s in which New Age spiritual practices emerged as a countercultural lifestyle (Ellwood, 1994; Natale, 2016; Possamai, 2005). Today's New Age spirituality, repurposed by the current self-care industry as “a secular ethic of transformation, happiness, and success,” permits individuals to cobble together an arbitrary patchwork of concepts, symbols, and practices in the pursuit of personal enlightenment (Possamai, 2005, p. 102). Marketed as a form of self-care to a largely disenfranchised mass of consumers, spiritual smartphone apps represent the latest iteration of products that claim to restore our inner peace by offering guidance for transcending the ills of the world we inhabit and for deepening our knowledge of our Selves.

1.1.3 Past and Present Spiritual Technologies

Spiritual smartphone apps are certainly not the first media technologies to capitalise on the trendiness of New Age spirituality by offering consumers effortless solutions with which to fill the void. As Simone Natale and Diana Pasulka explain, “media technologies [entertain] a close and complex relationship with beliefs in the supernatural...occasionally [acting] as conduits for the supernatural” (2019, p. 3). The convergence of digital software with metaphysical practices in the form of spiritual smartphone apps may be understood, through a media archaeological lens, as an explicit continuation of other spiritual communication media—some of which continue to maintain their relevance today and others of which have been forgotten or replaced (Natale, 2016a; Parikka, 2012). Through such a perspective, linear ideas regarding technological progress may be rejected in order to make sense of spiritual smartphone apps not as an evolution of previously-developed media technologies, but as operating within the logic of “remediation” in which ‘old’ and ‘new’ media coexist and intersect (Bolter & Grusin, 1998).

A recent observation regarding astrology app *Co-Star* succinctly summarises these notions of media archaeology and remediation:

Where you once read what your sun sign was up to that month in the back of a *Seventeen* [magazine] in the grocery-store checkout line, now your entire natal chart is at your fingertips. And where human astrologers were once the interpreters of the complex art of transits and houses, *Co-Star* spits it all out automatically (Bryant, 2019, para. 17).

Horoscopes published in print and digital versions of newspapers and magazines continue to flourish alongside their flashier interactive app counterparts, as do websites and books that offer spiritual services and guidance—perhaps they even feed one another’s success. Some spiritual gadgets, too, resist obsolescence despite attempts at their digital translation. One example is of the pseudo-scientific aura photography of the 1970s which remains popular today; while aura-detecting apps are available, there is a nostalgic novelty in the instant-film format of traditional aura photography that still draws clients (Gaitanidis, 2019; McHugh, 2018). In contrast, spiritual media such as audio recordings of guided meditations on CDs and cassettes, or television psychics like the memorable Miss Cleo that offered pay-per-call fortune-telling sessions, have become obsolete in tandem with technological transformations.

There is a wealth of other forgotten spiritual media technologies that have left notable traces on spiritual smartphone apps. Uncannily reminiscent of astrology apps are the *Horoscope Computer* and *Zodiac Astrology Computer* of the 1970s: handheld electronic devices marketed as games that lit up with symbols, numbers, and short messages to inform users of various details about their birth chart, horoscope, and compatibility with others (Morgan, 2020a; Morgan, 2020b). Several decades prior, during the spiritualism fad of the Victorian era—which, not to be confused with spirituality, is predicated on beliefs of communication with spirits of the dead—automaton devices like coin-operated fortune teller machines relayed prophetic messages through mechanically animated life-like mannequins whose voices emanated from concealed record players, or simply by dispensing cards with written fortunes

(Natale, 2016b). Dating even further back to medieval Jewish folklore is the fabled Golem, an anthropomorphic figure constructed from clay which, as legend has it, could be programmed with magical incantations to perform various functions—possibly the earliest supernatural “metaphor for technology, particularly artificial intelligence” and “an essential piece of magic technology, something that we enchant as a means of revealing the secret nature about the divine” (Bebergal, 2018, pp. 63–65). Picking up where previous technologies left off, spiritual smartphone applications are neither new nor ground-breaking; rather, they represent the continuity of atemporal concepts within the cultural imagination.



Figure 1.4: *The Enlightenment Tape, Meditation Cassette (Still Frame, YouTube) and Miss Cleo Television Advertisement (Still Frame, NBC News)*



Figure 1.5: *1970s Horoscope Computer by Mattel (Photograph, Rik Morgan) and Victorian Madame Zita by Rover Brothers Co. Automaton (Photograph, Darrah Glass)*

1.1.4 Intimacy with our Smartphones

However, what is fundamentally different about the commodification of spirituality in the form of smartphone apps is the high-tech modality of the media as software (that is exemplified by its algorithmic personalisation) and our psychosomatic intimacy with the smartphone as a personal device. What makes an astrology app different from an astrology website that provides the same services, for example, is the device across which the media is accessed. While a traditional website may, indeed, be visited through a smartphone's internet browser, a smartphone app may not be accessed through a computer. This detail may seem inconsequential, yet it reveals a crucial distinction about what it means to consume spiritual media through mobile software: algorithmic precision enabled by our heightened intimacy with smartphones. While we are intimate with our computers, too, they do not accompany our every move or facilitate the same closeness that smartphones do—a closeness that has been compared to a childlike attachment to comfort objects (also known as transitional objects) like teddy bears and security blankets. Such an attachment to our smartphones, demanded by their haptic interfaces and by the expectation that we are never far from them, allows apps to simply collect more data about us than computer-based media.

It is no surprise to the average app user that the personalised experiences often offered by apps are made possible by using our personal information about geographical location and movements, our search history, and who we communicate with and what we talk about, for example. It is also widely acknowledged by users that, as the saying goes, *if it is free, you are not the consumer; you are the product*. Not only does the collection of personal data allow app developers to generate personalised content, but it allows them to provide this content for free by selling this data to advertisers who target these same users with hyper-specific ads based on their needs and interests. Most users are aware of this. What is more nebulous is the process by which this happens. Where does our data go after it is collected? Who is responsible for the algorithms that

sift through this data? How do the algorithms that make conclusions about us operate? And what about all of the biometric data collected by face recognition and fingerprint scanning software? I raise these questions purely to point to the incredible obscurity of it all. We do not know how our apps function and we do not know how our personal data is processed. So what, then, does this imply for users of spiritual smartphone apps? Is our data also being used to reveal more information about us, to make predictions, or to determine spiritual truths? Or is the content randomly generated? These are questions that users may be confronted with, whether consciously or subconsciously. This is the reality of our relationships with spiritual smartphone apps—whether or not users believe in their authenticity, they do not know what goes on behind the screen.

What is further crucial for understanding the distinction between the consumption of spiritual media through a smartphone, rather than in other digital or analogue formats, is our profound intimacy with our smartphones. Unlike other digital devices that collect our personal data, such as computers and tablets, for example, the smartphone, for many users, maintains an uninterrupted proximity to the body. When we are not actively looking at our screens, the personal device remains near us, in our pockets or on our nightstands, at the dinner table or on our desks. It is with us when we sleep, when we work, when we relax, and when we socialise. This is precisely how apps are able to collect such detailed data about their users. From casual conversations with friends and colleagues to studies and global statistics published by journalists and researchers, it is evident that this intense intimacy with our smartphones is a widespread phenomenon (Thompson, 2014; BusinessFibre, 2019). Moreover, the stay-at-home orders of the pandemic have only contributed to an increase in our screen time as we rely more than ever on our smartphones to connect us to our worlds. Consequently, the smartphone has become a vital and indissociable extension of the Self in both physical and cognitive terms.

While technologies of all sorts—from rudimentary tools to industrial machines to computer software—may be understood as extensions of the self in the sense that they allow us to perform functions that the human body and mind are otherwise unable to (Simondon, 1958) and in the manner that they fundamentally alter the ways in which we perceive and interact with the world (McLuhan, 1962), this extent to which the self and a personal device have become embedded in one another is unprecedented. Our obsessive-compulsive use of these personal devices has effectively shifted our conceptions of the ‘Self’ by obfuscating any distinction between the real and the virtual as we live simultaneously and perpetually on both sides of the screen (Hjorth, 2012). Thus, while the commodification of New Age spirituality in the form of media technologies is not a new phenomenon, the intersection of transcendent practices of the psyche—of the inner Self—with a hyper-intimate personal device and its data-siphoning algorithmic software presents a salient site for discourse.

1.2 Objectives

Both recent and historical circumstances surrounding the emergence and popularity of spiritual smartphone apps expose central themes that I will explore and discuss with this research-creation project. Considering these particular intersections of technology, spirituality, and the Self, I wanted to develop a creative work that engages with such themes of our desire to know more about our Selves through personalised experiences, of our intimacy with our smartphones that is characterised by a reliance on and belief in them as techno-prosthetic devices, and of the confusion of reality associated with the mysterious nature of both technology and spirituality. Moreover, I wanted to produce a creative work that could be inserted within the non-linear genealogy of these spiritual media technologies. I wanted to create something that would act as a bridge between spiritual smartphone apps, newspaper horoscopes, pseudo-scientific twentieth-century gadgets and Victorian fortune-telling automata—and, in doing so, to ultimately disrupt such narratives. In order to refine these objectives, I identified

creative works and scholarly research that had been previously realised in regard to these thematic implications of spiritual smartphone applications and of spiritual media technologies in general.

1.2.1 Existing Artistic Creations

It would be impossible to discuss artistic explorations of technology, spirituality, and the Self without acknowledging the work of new media artist Nam June Paik. Widely regarded as the founder of video art and a pioneer of incorporating telecommunication and information technologies into creative practice, Paik's works often employ televisions and video projections intended to induce mesmerising or meditative states (Greenberger, 2020). Spiritual themes feature prominently in his work as he blends Eastern spiritual traditions with Western media culture, with a particular recurring preoccupation with the Buddhist concept of Zen, a contemplative state of awareness (McIlhagga, 2020). Works such as *TV Buddha* (1974), in which a Buddha statue sits opposite a television and 'watches' its image on the screen as it is filmed in real time; *I Ching 36* (1991), an anthropomorphic figure constructed from televisions and a large wheel inscribed with numbers and symbols for the ancient Chinese divinatory art of I Ching; and *TV Garden* (1974), an installation of colourful, glowing televisions embedded within lush green vegetation; reimagine a remarkably mundane, everyday object such as the television as a spiritual object capable of producing transcendent, consciousness-expanding experiences.



Figure 1.6: *TV Buddha*, Nam June Paik, 1974, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (Photograph, *The Estate of Nam June Paik*)

Following in this artistic tradition is contemporary digital artist, Krista Kim. Motivated by the belief that our current techno-society's social media, algorithms, and quest for connectedness has deprived us of humanity, Kim proposes a new artistic movement for the digital age, Techism. According to her 2014 *Techism© Manifesto*, the movement seeks to “transcend highly organized and complex digital constructs that connects human consciousness on a level that will forever transform our world and human existence” (Kim, 2014, para. 12). Working with video installations designed to heal viewers through light and sound, Kim, like Paik, cites the significance of Zen principles of mindfulness and meditation in her creative practice. Such works include *8x8* (2018), featuring shifting polychromatic colourscapes stretched across a massive horizontal screen and accompanied by calming music for viewers to bask in, and her *Meditative Design* (2020) video series of digitally-rendered architectural spaces with kaleidoscopic aesthetics. Particularly inspired by the illuminated screens of our devices

that we spend much of our time gazing into, Kim refers to her artworks as Digital Zen (Mun-Delsalle, 2018).



Figure 1.7: *8x8*, Krista Kim, 2018, Palais de Tokyo, Paris (Photograph, Krista Kim)

Meditative themes are persistent in much of techno-spiritual art, at times positioning the viewer as something that is acted upon by the artwork and, at other times, as something that acts upon the work. Haroon Mirza’s audio-visual installations, such as *A C I D G E S T* (2017) and his collaboration with Siobhan Coen, *Dreamachine 2.0* (2019), immerse viewers in ambient environments of psychedelic lights and droning electrical sounds to facilitate “transcending everyday reality to engage with other, higher forms of existence” (Bucknell, 2020, para. 2). Such audiovisual aesthetics are also prevalent in trance music and its subcultures for producing altered hypnotic states (Wier, 1996). Conversely, artist Maxime Michaud, a recent graduate of UQAM’s *Maîtrise en Communication (Recherche-cr ation en m dia exp rimental)* programme, relies on the viewer, or user, to determine the sound and colours of the audio-visual installation *Vers une sensation de «d tente» par l’exp rience m diatique immersive* (2018) by algorithmically interpreting their brainwaves and heart rate (Michaud, 2018).

In yet another variation of digital meditation, collaborators Peaches and Pussykrew developed an online gaming experience entitled *Fill the Whole* (2021) which leads users through an other-worldly digital realm of extra-terrestrial avatars with whom they can practice guided meditations. While each of these artworks are fascinating and innovative, I have not been able to locate creative projects that specifically implicate the smartphone in explorations of spiritual practices. Such a dearth of creative work on the subject matter is fundamental in stimulating innovation in my own research-creation practice.



Figure 1.8: Vers une sensation de «détente» par l'expérience médiatique immersive, Maxime Michaud, 2018, Agora Hydro-Québec, Montréal (Photographs, Maxime Michaud)



Figure 1.9: A C I D G E S T, Haroon Mirza, 2017, Pérez Art Museum, Miami (Photograph, Oriol Tarridas)



Figure 1.10: Fill the Whole, Peaches and Pussykrew, 2021 (Screenshot, <https://fillthewhole.today/>)

1.2.2 Existing Research

Likewise, little research is available regarding spiritual smartphone apps, especially in the fields of communication and media studies. Most of the research on the subject has been conducted within the domains of psychology, medicine, religious studies, marketing, and education—nearly all of which are concerned with only meditation and mindfulness apps. Psychological studies, for example, draw correlations between increased use of mindfulness and meditation apps with improvements in users' mental health and stress levels (Bostock et al., 2019; Flett et al., 2018). Medical studies, too, report on improvements of blood pressure (Adams et al., 2018) and sleep patterns (Huberty et al., 2019) with the use of similar apps. On the other hand, scholars in religious studies observe the ways in which traditional spiritual practices have incorporated spiritual smartphone apps into their rituals (De Olmos, 2017) and how these practices have transitioned into virtual realms while maintaining their authenticity (Kim, 2019; Grieve, 2017). Marketing analyses demonstrate a growth in users of spiritual smartphone applications (Mathur, 2019) and cite various circumstances of the pandemic as motivating factors, while indicating that subscription prices may present barriers to users (Kellen & Saxena, 2020). Finally, an educational study reveals that spiritual smartphone apps may disengage users from spiritual traditions in favour of promoting product consumption (Hyland, 2017).

While academic studies on the topic are sparse, there is, however, an abundance of musings from cultural commentators and journalists. Such articles include Hilary George-Parkin's "The anxieties and apps fuelling the astrology boom" (2021) on BBC, Haley Velasco's "Why Astrology Apps Are Rising" (2020) in the Wall Street Journal, Maura Judkis' "How app culture turned astrology into a modern obsession" (2019) in The Washington Post, Amanda Hess' "How Astrology Took Over the Internet" (2018) in The New York Times; Kari Paul's "Covens Versus Coders: How Witchcraft Apps Are Pissing Off Real Witches" (2016) in VICE, and Barbara Ehrenreich's "Mind Your

Own Business” (2015) in *The Baffler*, to name a few. As is evident from their titles, these articles are overwhelmingly preoccupied with identifying and explaining spiritual smartphone apps as cultural phenomena.

While spiritual smartphone apps have been largely uninvestigated in communication and media studies, there has been important literature published on the broader subject of spiritual media technologies. Of these notable publications, the earliest appeared in close proximity to the new millennium—Y2K, a monumental, era-defining non-event that would test our faith in the powers of digital technology and ultimately cement our co-dependency with them. The looming close of the second millennium is certainly on Erik Davis’ mind as he delivers his treatise on technomysticism, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, & Mysticism in the Age of Information* (1998), charting the human impulse to access the magical and metaphysical realms of existence through both analogue and digital means from esoteric mythologies of transcendence, alchemical formulas for divinatory purposes, pre- and post-industrial mechanical deities, energetic healing through electrical currents and magnetic waves, hypnotic soundscapes, trance music, video games, online chatrooms, and virtual realities. Following this sweeping chronicle, Adam Possamai focusses his attention on the web-based activities of spiritual practitioners and pop-culture reinventions of spiritual belief systems in *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament* (2005), dissecting the new spiritual practices that emerged from science fiction mythologies in literature and cinema, as well as the proliferation and commodification of New Age spirituality through internet media and online marketplaces.

Meanwhile, more recent publications such as Simone Natale’s *Supernatural Entertainments: Victorian Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture* (2016b) and Peter Bebergal’s *Strange Frequencies: The Extraordinary Story Of The Technological Quest For The Supernatural* (2018), examine late nineteenth- and early

twentieth-century technologies designed to communicate with spirits and supernatural beings, noting spirit photography, Ouija boards, electronic voice phenomena over radio and telephones, and elaborate mechanical contraptions for stage magic amongst them. In an effort to consolidate these varied streams of knowledge regarding spiritual media technologies, as well as to introduce necessary updates for the second decade of the nascent millenium, Natale returns with Diana Pasulka to provide a collection of essays from media studies scholars in the edited volume, *Believing in Bits: Digital Media and the Supernatural* (2019), which explore spiritual transcendence through algorithms, social media, augmented reality, and social telepathy apps while maintaining historical links.

Also relevant is the transhumanist discourse which promotes the belief in human transcendence through technological means. Transhumanists do not see technology as a way to practice spirituality, but rather as a spiritual practice itself. Ray Kurzweil, in *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* (1999), writes of the inevitability that humans will merge with their technologies, resulting in immortal forms of life that will be spiritual beings by nature of their eternal consciousness. More recently, philosophical investigations, like Aura-Elena Schussler's "Transhumanism as a New Techno-Religion and Personal Development: In the Framework of a Future Technological Spirituality" (2019) and Abou Farman's "Mind out of Place: Transhuman Spirituality" (2019) attempt to situate transhumanism as a spiritual practice rooted in self-improvement and as an instrument for shaping ideological structures and power relations.

Beyond both spiritual media technologies and transhumanist philosophies, the intersection of spiritual beliefs and technology has been discussed at length in academia over the past several decades. From Gilbert Simondon's mid-twentieth century assertion that we develop technologies in an attempt to regain access to a "primitive

magical unity” in *Du mode d’existence des objets techniques* (1958), to theories by contemporary scholars that expose how our technologies have always been rooted in collective belief systems of cultural mysticisms and religion in such publications as Erich Hörl’s *Sacred Channels: The Archaic Illusion of Communication* (2018); Vincent Mosco’s *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace* (2004); and Jeremy Stolow’s *Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between* (2013); these works demonstrate the ways in which prescientific magical ideas still dictate how we design and understand technologies. Reflecting on the convergence of the smartphone with this spiritual thinking, Betti Marenko illustrates the mythological significance of the app as intermediary between the material and metaphysical with “Digital Materiality, Morphogenesis and the Intelligence of the Technodigital Object” (2015). Yet, despite these vast and vividly-articulated repositories of knowledge on spiritual media technologies and their transcendent, reality-defying properties, much remains to be discussed about the particular case of spiritual smartphone apps within the greater study of spirituality, technology, and the Self.

1.3 Research Question

What I aim to contribute to existing research and creation about spiritual media technologies, and about the broader relationship between spirituality and technology, is a closer examination of the Self (the signification of which I will elaborate on in chapter 2) as implicated in the use of such media technologies. With spiritual smartphone apps as a point of departure, my research-creation work, in the form of an immersive installation, will confront the intrinsic entanglements between spirituality and technology through a ritualistic exploration of our pathological and ambivalent co-dependency with our smartphones.

Conceptualising the smartphone and its user as a unified spiritual being, I will interrogate the ways in which we understand the intricate relationships between

ourselves, our personalised technologies, and our belief systems through a deliberate existential mystification of reality. Operating within the liminal interface between the real and the virtual, between Self and smartphone, I will hyperbolise the illusory and spectacular experience of engaging with our personal devices. Instead of suggesting a 'digital detox' to stimulate critical reflection, I will propose a caricatural 'digital intoxic' that is saturated in the absurdity and sincerity of existing amongst, within, and through our smartphones.

By immersing the user in this subversive experience, I will attempt to identify the role of the Self in relation to the intersecting realms of spirituality and technology. Subsequently, I will determine how the user's conception of their Self is informed by both their intimacy with their smartphone and by their consumption of spiritual media technologies. Ultimately my research-creation will address the following question: What are the implications of the consumption of spiritual experiences through media technologies on the user's understanding of their Self and on their experience of reality?

CHAPTER II

CREATIVE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

I will approach this core research-creation problem and the surrounding questions from two primary creative frameworks and three conceptual frameworks which both complement and challenge one another. My creative experimentation with the relations between spirituality, technology, and the Self will be informed by two immersive interactive installations: (1) Christina Lonsdale's *Radiant Human Aura Photography* (2013–present), an ongoing travelling project exhibited in 2016 at The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City in the context of the *Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905–2016* exhibition, and (2) Nick Verstand's *AURA* (2017), a collaboration with the Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research, exhibited in Eindhoven at *Dutch Design Week 2017*.

My conceptual investigation into the aforementioned relations will be developed through three schools of thought spanning the early twentieth-century to the present-day: (1) the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School's Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin—German academics deeply influenced by the communist philosophies of Karl Marx who were active during the interwar period of the twentieth century in Frankfurt and later in the United States and who were highly critical of both the fascist propaganda of Nazi Germany and of the American consumer culture of their time; (2) the post-structuralist theories of French philosopher and photographer Jean Baudrillard, who published innovative analyses in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries on contemporary popular culture and media technologies, politics, and consumerism, with a particular fascination for American

culture; and (3) a grouping of contemporary media technology theorists, whose theories I refer to as techno-spiritual due to their specialisations in the magical nature of technology, consisting of Gilbert Simondon, Jeremy Stolow, Simone Natale, Diana Pasulka, Erich Hörl, Erik Davis, and William A. Stahl—present-day scholars (with the exception of twentieth-century Simondon) from both Europe and North America that have witnessed our transcendence from the material world to cyberspace and are well-acquainted with the current circumstances of our digitalised realities.

While these creative and conceptual frameworks propose an eclectic spectrum of approaches, methods, and theories for the analysis of the relations between spirituality, technology, and the Self, it should be stressed that there is a noticeable lack of diversity. The artists and theorists who comprise these frameworks may all be identified as of European descent and, with the exception of Lonsdale and Pasulka, as male. It is no secret that tech industries are overwhelmingly dominated by white men (Alegria, 2020; Hardey, 2019; Myers, 2018) and that academia, too, was built on this dominance and continues to sustain it to this day (Bagilhole, 2010; Hodo, 2016; Melaku and Beeman, 2020), despite some diversification in recent decades (Leonard, et al., 2002). I draw attention to this detail not for the sake of simply making a point, but to acknowledge the limitations of the perspectives of these frameworks, which are representative of a nearly homogenous positionality, or standpoint (Harding, 1986; Yuval-Davis, 2006). This does not imply that all of the aforementioned artists and theorists share the same lived experiences and perspectives, but rather that each of their lived experiences and perspectives are informed by similar socio-cultural positions. Thus, the following discourse on spirituality, technology, and the Self may be predisposed to philosophical biases about what reality is and how it is experienced.

Despite their limitations, I have established these creative and conceptual frameworks in order to examine three crucial themes. First the concept of the Self—as augmented

by technology, as an extension of technology, and as homogenous with technology. Second, the concept of illusion—as immersion, hyperreal interface, aura, and image. Third, the concept of ritual—as a practice of transcendence, as inextricable from the magical nature of technology, and as symbolic exchange.

2.1 The Self

I have been referring to the Self as a proper noun, capitalised. My intention with this detail is to distinguish the Self as an indispensable concept, rather than merely make reference to one's individuality. In the context of this research-creation thesis, the notion of Self does not pertain to singular ideas about one's role as a vessel for sensory experience (Arendt, 1981), as a user of devices (Jouët, 2000), as an intermediary between worlds (Haraway, 1985), as feature and function of society (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988), or as synchronous spectator and spectacle (Lacan, 1966). Rather, by combining these ideas, I propose the Self here as a union of body (that which physically interacts with the reality), mind (that which mentally perceives and interprets the reality), and spirit (that which intuitively feels and believes in the physical and mental experiences of reality).

2.1.1 The Self as Creative Medium

The mundane yet mysterious nature of the Self, a timeless human preoccupation, continues to captivate us as something we seek to know and to classify. As much as it has been studied by philosophers and scientists throughout humanity (Martin & Barresi, 2006), the Self remains a persistent theme in creative practices (Carbon, 2017; Eufusia et al., 2009). While attempting to understand the Self through art is certainly not a novel concept, interactive installation artworks, specifically those that rely on experimental technological processes, may provide original perspectives. While the individual is traditionally positioned as audience or consumer in relation to art (Larsen,

2013), interactive installation artworks integrate the individual as an essential element in the production of creative meaning and formal aesthetics through embodied experience: interactive art is that which responds to the individual and in which the individual, in turn, responds (Jeon et al., 2019; Stern, 2013; Mondloch, 2010; Costello et al., 2005). Because the presence or participation of the individual is required for the completeness of such art, the Self becomes a creative medium. Two such installations which inform my own research-creation project, Verstand's *AURA* and Lonsdale's *Radiant Human Aura Photography*, rely not only on the involvement of the individual to generate meaning, but also employ specialised techniques for deciphering the Self as the subject of the artwork.

Lonsdale is a photographer with a very special camera. With her immersive installation, which could be referred to as a spiritual photo booth, she produces personalised aura photographs for her participants. These aura photos, printed on instant film, depict a professional portrait of the human subject, as well as the supposed energy field which surrounds them, appearing as luminous clouds of colour. Originally developed in the 1970s based on Semyon Kirlian's 1939 discovery of electrography, this method of aura photography requires an Auracam 6000—a \$16 000 piece of equipment consisting of a modified Polaroid camera and two electro-magnetic sensors on which the subject places their hands while being photographed. According to the manufacturer, these hand sensors transmit electro-dermal and temperature data to the camera's built-in algorithm which renders this information as various hues (Aura Imaging Inc., 2021). Once the artist's participants are photographed, she explains the significance of the chromatic aura in relation to the subject's body, providing a formula for understanding the Self (Cascone, 2019). In Lonsdale's words:

Radiant Human serves as a conduit for those seeking a new kind of self-exploration—a brief, metaphysical vision quest, compelling us toward a uniquely tangible kind of self-discovery...Perceptions can pivot with the click of a shutter, illuminating our truest selves, and giving new light to what was there all along (n.d., para. 1).

The relevance of this installation lies not in its factual or scientific accuracy in depicting a truth, but rather in establishing a tangible semiotic framework for communicating and comprehending an otherwise imperceptible Self through specialised media technologies.



Figure 2.1: Participant Places Hands on Electromagnetic Sensors, Radiant Human Aura Photography (Photograph, Natalia Mantini)



Figure 2.2: Aura Photos by Radiant Human Aura Photography (Photograph, Christina Lonsdale)

Like Lonsdale, Verstand seeks to represent the individual's imperceptible Self through a language of colour and light. However, while Lonsdale's aura photography installation sits squarely in the realm of pseudo-science, Verstand's *AURA* is operated by a scientific biotechnological system. Outfitting participants with a variety of wearable biosensors, Verstand's immersive interactive installation claims to "[materialise] emotions into a perceptible, physical form" (Verstand, 2021, para. 1). As the participants' brainwaves, heart-rates, and galvanic skin responses are captured by the sensors, this data is algorithmically transformed into chromatic beams of fluctuating light which form an oscillating, curvilinear shape of opaque light around the participants' bodies (Verstand, 2021). Also differing from Lonsdale's installation which welcomes one participant at a time, Verstand's *AURA* invites multiple participants within the space to bask in or interact with their luminous auras while in the presence of others. The artist explains that "*AURA* explores how this perceptual process influences the understanding of ourselves and of each other. The installation symbolises the materialisation of (internal) metaphysical space into (external) physical space" (Verstand, 2021, para. 3). The Self is the nucleus of this artwork, yet it remains unknowable to each participant as Verstand does not reveal the significance of the colours and movements of the beams of light; the process behind which the Self is represented remains concealed. Despite the obscure nature of these representations, *AURA* ultimately generates perceptible aestheticisations of the abstract Self that participants are free to interpret.



Figure 2.3: AURA Participant with Biosensors (Photograph, Samantha Castano)

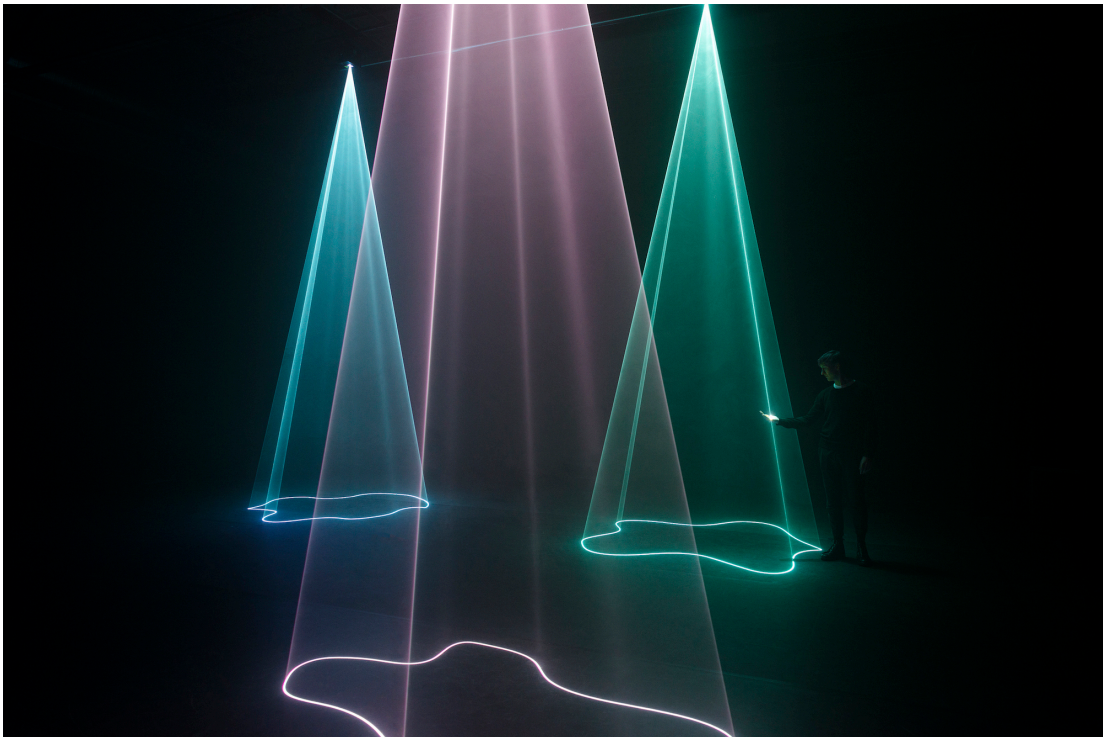


Figure 2.4: AURA, Nick Verstand, 2017, Dutch Design Week, Eindhoven (Photograph, Noortje Knulst)

2.1.2 The Self and Media Technologies

Media technologies need not be bound to art for us to attempt to make sense of our Selves through them. The relationship between the two is a complex and nebulous one that occupies the mundane realm of our everyday lives. While creative spaces such as art installations may draw attention to this relationship in ludic or unexpected manners, our commonplace interactions with and co-existence amongst media technologies warrant equal attention. As techno-spiritual theorists contend, the relationship between media technologies and the Self is an inherently spiritual one because it informs our quotidian perception of reality—of both our internal and external worlds and experiences. Davis suggests that:

For of all technologies, it is the technologies of information and communication that most mold and shape the source of all mystical glimmerings: the human self...By creating a new interface between the self, the other, and the world beyond, media technologies become part of the self, the other, and the world beyond. They form the building blocks, and even in some sense the foundation, for what we now increasingly think of as ‘the social construction of reality’ (Davis, 1998, pp. 3–4).

Simondon, too, discusses at length the spiritual relationship between the Self and technology, theorising that all technologies are the incarnations of our desires and of our belief systems. It is. He insists, through technology that we attempt to access what untempered reality cannot offer us by circumventing terrestrial laws of time and space and distance. He further proposes that our technologies function as prosthetics that alienate our Selves from our realities through the promise of a magical unification between the two (Simondon, 1958). For Simondon, technology is the magical intermediary that separates the Self from reality, while, for Davis, it is the Self and technology which co-create one’s reality. These two perspectives do not seem contradictory, but rather complement one another. Such an interpretation infers that reality can only be perceived in relation to one’s interaction with technology.

Approaching this relationship from a more critical standpoint in direct reaction to the Nazi propaganda of World War II, the theorists of the Frankfurt School argue that the Self is an extension its media technologies, rather than the reverse. Observing in real-time the indoctrination of the public by this mass media rhetoric, Adorno (1964) articulates the transformation of the individual into passive consumer devoid of a real sense of Self. Controlled through the consumption of mass media content and media technologies that are force-fed to the masses by those in power, the individual is stripped entirely of their capacities for critical thinking as they blindly consume whatever is sold to them. And that which is sold to the masses are standardised, mass-produced commodities completely devoid of authentic culture (Adorno, 1964, Benjamin, 1936/2016). While Adorno (1964) refers to this as the “Culture Industry,” Marcuse (1964) describes this predicament as a “one-dimensional” reality in which a universal mode of thinking and behaviour renders individuals indistinguishable from one another. While the theorists of the Frankfurt School condemn the militarisation and politicisation of media technologies and popular culture as instruments of power in a wartime context, their concerns regarding the agency of the Self within today’s culture of passive consumption remain relevant. Ultimately, according to this school of thought, the Self is annihilated by its media technologies. There is no individual, no Self—only a homogenous mass of passive consumers, each individual an empty container to be assigned meaning by its media technologies.

Baudrillard, far from being an optimist on the matter, would seem to agree with the Critical Theorists of the Frankfurt School. He posits that the over-saturation of information propagated by the media technologies of our techno-digital age has led to an implosion of the Self; the individual exists only as a receptacle for media technologies, taking on the form of data or image or simulation. For Baudrillard, there is no real Self, only virtual versions (Baudrillard, 1984). Yet, he takes these ideas further, asserting that “...there is no longer any man-machine distinction: the machine

is on both sides of the interface. Perhaps you are indeed merely the machine's space now—the human being having become the virtual reality of the machine, its mirror operator” (Baudrillard, 2002, pp. 177–178). What he is suggesting is not only that the Self exists purely in relation to the machine, or media technology, but also that the Self, indistinguishable from the machine, has been absorbed into the media technology. Although Baudrillard’s assessment of the convergence of the Self and media technology exemplifies our intimacy with our smartphones, his inflexible conception of the Self as existing in opposition and in conflict with media technologies dismisses possibilities of what the Self can be. Perhaps the Self is more malleable than Baudrillard acknowledges; rather than mourning its loss, could we be witness to its transformation?

2.2 Illusion

In its multifaceted entanglements and interplay, the relationship between media technologies and the Self appears as many things: the two may be considered mirrors, extensions, products, fragments, replicas, and simulations of one another. Acting together, upon one another, and in spite one another, the edges between the two are thoroughly blurred. This total absorption of one into the other induces only the ambiguity of illusion. Where do the media technologies end and the Self begin? What constitutes the real Self? And what about reality? As untraceable as Plato’s legendary Atlantis, reality remains a sort of parallel dimension of which we may catch glimpses, which appears to exist before us, just within reach. Reality is where we attempt to go to when we disconnect from our media technologies, but where we never seem to arrive at because the media technologies do not disconnect from us. Ever-elusive, reality and its real Self shimmer like a mirage in desert heat, like something that we are certain exists or, at least, that had once existed. It is this illusion of the real that functions as an intermediary between the Self and media technologies.

2.2.1 The Illusion of Immersion

It is within the multisensory excess of immersive spaces that illusion thrives. Illusion requires a disorientation and subsequent reorientation of our perception in order to confuse the real. Through immersion, the real is altered, simulated, or replaced by something else. In fact, an immersive medium is one “whose purpose is to disappear” (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 21). Immersive installation art, for this reason, is an ideal venue for generating illusory experiences because it extends beyond the physical boundaries of the individual, demanding multisensory exploration and acting as an alternate realm of experience. This destabilisation of reality is a crucial feature of both Lonsdale’s *Radiant Human Aura Photography* and Verstand’s *AURA* installations, each generating a space in which the boundaries between participant and media technology are virtually non-existent. Immersion, in this way, may be understood as a form of virtual reality that operates not only on illusory simulation, but that is also designed “to foster in the viewer a sense of presence” in which one forgets that any technological mediation is occurring (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 22). This sense of presence refers to a cognitive state produced by immersion and, when enabled through a seamless affordance, renders the interface wholly imperceptible.

With *Radiant Human Aura Photography*, Lonsdale achieves such immersion through the use of a specialised tent. Geodesic in shape, the tent serves as an otherworldly departure from whichever space it occupies. Inside, the participant is cast in darkness and confronted only with the presence of their Self, the machine, and the artist behind the machine. Lonsdale explains the significance of the tent in producing a desired experience, stating that “The reason this dome looks like a spaceship is because I wanted to adopt the spirit of space exploration...this is about discovering our atmosphere, about being able to embrace the unknown” (Manning, 2016, para. 14). By entering the tent, participants are estranged from familiar reality and are plunged into the unfamiliar, into a world that binds them to the installation itself. Here, it is both the

tent's exterior outer-space aesthetic, as well as its interior obscurity into which the participant is immersed, that contribute to the installation's ability to create an illusion of oneness between the Self and the representation of the Self. For Lonsdale, drawing attention to the participant's perception of themselves within this space and within the presence of their photographed aura only lends greater credibility to the power of its ambiguity—of the subjectivity of the illusion (Manning, 2016).



Figure 2.5: Radiant Human Aura Photography Tent (Photograph, Christina Lonsdale)

Verstand, too, relies on the capacity of darkness to obfuscate perceived limits between the Self and the experience of his *AURA* installation. In Verstand's work, however, this alternate reality is one that is shared amongst multiple participants at a time. Despite the presence of others in the dark space, each participant is enveloped in their own beam of coloured, undulating light, contributing yet another layer of immersion. Here, the participant exists simultaneously within an illusory substitute for the real and an

illusory substitute for the Self. The impact of this dual immersion is not only a confusion of Self and of the representation of the Self, but also of the Self in relation to others (Servie, 2017). As each participant's aura manifests within the shared space based on the emotional data captured by biosensors, reactions to one another's auras, in turn, contribute further data to be aesthetically represented. Thus, Selves blend into one another while remaining physically distinct. What remains of one's real Self—influenced by the presence of others, algorithmically processed, and shrouded in both shadows and light—is the illusion of simulation.



Figure 2.6: AURA Participants Immersed in Light (Photograph, Samantha Castano)

2.2.2 The Illusion of Media Technologies

The inability to distinguish between that which is real and that which is not is a primary preoccupation for media theorists. For the Frankfurt School's Benjamin,

coincidentally, the authenticity of a thing is described in terms of its 'aura' (1936/2016). While Benjamin discusses this concept of the aura specifically in terms of works of art, his ideas may be applied to the relationship between media technologies and the Self, as well as to the illusions this relationship fosters. This aura proposed by Benjamin is analogous with the real—that which is authentic, factual, and true—while simulations and reproductions of this so-called real are deprived of such an aura (1936/2016). Furthermore, he insists that this loss or absence of aura occurs across technological mediation because, through media technologies, the real is alienated from “the here and now of the original” (Benjamin, 1936/2008, p. 21). In this way, reality or a real Self cannot exist in relation to media technologies; that which is possible in the realm of media technologies is only the illusion of reality or of the Self. Ultimately, this illusion is entirely bound up in the experience of media technologies, which Benjamin contends is unequivocally distinct from an unmediated experience (Costello, 2005). While Benjamin's position regarding the real may appear quite polarised (there is only authenticity or illusion, aura or lack thereof), it must be remembered that he is critical not of the potential of media technologies, but of their utilisation as vehicles of war propaganda.

What Baudrillard proposes for examining the question of reality in relation to media technologies is an interface between the real and that which is other. For Baudrillard, in opposition to the real sits the 'virtual,' which he describes as the overabundant simulation of the real (1990b). Like Benjamin's loss of aura which results from technological reproduction, Baudrillard's notion of the virtual is “the compulsion to exist in potentia on all screens” (1990b, p. 57). Here, the screen refers to the incessant reproduction of the images and information of reality by technological (and often digital) means. In the face of such circumstances, Baudrillard proclaims that “the world will never be real or original again, and that everything is doomed, henceforth, to the curse of the screen” (2002, p. 115). Where Baudrillard deviates from Benjamin's

disenchanted position is in his elaboration on the concept of ‘hyperreality,’ the interface between reality and virtuality. Hyperreality, first and foremost, is characterised by an utter incapacity to perceive the substitution of the real for the virtual. Thus, hyperreality also represents the emergence of an alternate version of reality which is rooted in the truth, or realness, of the synthesis of the real and virtual. Baudrillard explains that such a phenomenon no longer corresponds to a process of simulation; instead, he refers to this copy of that which does not exist as a ‘simulacrum’ (Baudrillard, 1988). Hyperreality acts as the ultimate illusion because it is more than real, which renders it fundamentally undetectable.

2.2.3 The Illusion of the Image

The greatest perpetrator of this illusory hyperreality, according to Baudrillard, is the image. It is, in fact, images which predominantly fill the cursed screens of which the philosopher speaks so repugnantly—of our televisions, cinemas, computers, and smartphones, amongst other media technologies. The images propagated by our screens, Baudrillard argues, reduce reality to an inversion of itself by confusing the real from its reproduction and simulation. He refers to this as “the perversity of the relation between the image and its referent, the supposed real” (Baudrillard, 1984, p.13). Moreover, the more realistic the image is, Baudrillard contends, the more “diabolical,” “immoral,” and “perverse” it is (Baudrillard, 1984, pp.13–14). Through the relentlessness of images, reality ceases to retain any coherence, becoming fragmented across each visual reproduction. Eventually, our world becomes so saturated with such images that they begin to not only reproduce the real, but to reproduce reproductions of the real (Baudrillard, 1981; Baudrillard, 1984). Within this territory of abstruse simulations, reality is replaced with its infinite, intersecting simulacra.

Of the most realistic of images, arguably, are the photographic ones. While the contemporary post-internet masses may no longer believe in the veracity of the

photograph due to its capacity to be infinitely and imperceptibly modified, the medium had long occupied public consciousness as an instrument of the truth—and, perhaps, to a certain extent it still does more so than other type of image. Stolow, following in the tradition of seminal photography theorists Susan Sontag (1977) and Roland Barthes (1980), notes how “from its inception in the mid-nineteenth century, the photographic camera was hailed as a medium uniquely suited to free scientifically minded observers from artistic contamination, replacing the subjective vision of the human eye with a mechanical means of documenting visible and even normally invisible things” (Stolow, 2016, p. 934). As a result of its supposed objectivity, the photograph became a crucial medium for proving the authenticity of spiritual phenomena (Stolow 2016; Natale, 2016b).

Photography, in its alleged scientific precision, was believed to possess the ability to reveal the invisible, or that which lies beyond human perception. Natale explains that “Photography was also employed to furnish mechanical, ‘automatic’ evidence of spirit phenomena...In this context, spiritualists also underlined the scientific value of messages and phenomena delivered automatically through the medium” (2016b). Similarly, Stolow describes how many spiritual believers and practitioners considered photography as “an important opportunity to produce visible evidence that would confirm long-held understandings of occult phenomena” (2016). Yet, both Stolow and Natale are quick to insist that rather than being pure fiction, occult photography is a representation, construction, and translation of reality based on ‘real’ techniques to render illusions (2016; 2016b). As is apparent with the success of contemporary installations like Lonsdale’s *Radiant Human Aura Photography* and Verstand’s *AURA*, the demand for occult images persists, both as entertainment and as sincere spiritual practice. In the same way in which an image is not the Self, but rather a simulated representation of the Self, so too are Lonsdale and Verstand’s auras simulated representations of the Self. These auras are not ‘real’ inasmuch as they do not

correspond to reality, but they are ‘real’ as languages, modes of understanding, and interfaces which unite the real and virtual Selves, the physical and immaterial Selves.

2.3 Ritual

From a superficial perspective, the concepts of spirituality and technology appear to profoundly contradict one another. While spirituality represents the magical, mystical, and metaphysical realms of the human experience, technology, as the apogee of scientific logic and reason, exemplifies all that is pragmatic, perceptible, and precise. However, as I have outlined, what unifies the two is not only that they both operate within frameworks of the transformative nature of the Self and of illusory subversions of the real, but also that they symbolise a fundamental quest for the transcendence of the mundane. As media technologies have become crucial to our daily rituals and to our very experience of being, particularly digital ones with their neoliberal folklore of socio-economic power and freedom, they promise us connection and enlightenment in the same way that all spiritual practices do. The smartphone, especially, as that intimate handheld object, is the apotheosis of the incessant project to create increasingly personalised digital technologies that will supposedly empower us, as well as an idealised vision of total connection between all people, communities, and objects. Furthermore, the transcendental function of both spiritual practices and media technologies relies upon ritual—the systematic or ceremonial gestures performed with the intention to induce a certain effect (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Whether or not we are consciously aware of this, our experiences of our Selves and of our realities are structured by the performance of such rituals.

2.3.1 Creating Ritualistic Encounters

Likewise, ritual is the basis for experiencing art. This is true when viewing traditional two- and three-dimensional works such as paintings, films, sculptures, and

performances, as well as when listening to sound pieces, for example. There is the process of arriving at the museum or theatre or website at which the artwork is located, the rite of entering into its space, of observing, of contemplating, of reacting. Engaging with art is inherently ritualistic as it demands a certain performance from the individual, of stepping into the role of audience, of becoming spectator (Duncan, 1995). While art historian Carol Duncan notes that “Ritual is associated with religious practices—with the realm of belief, magic, real or symbolic sacrifices, miraculous transformations, or overpowering changes of consciousness,” she also explains that “in traditional societies, rituals may be quite unspectacular and informal-looking moments of contemplation or recognition” (1995, pp. 424–425). These spaces in which we observe and consume art, Duncan continues, are liminal spaces in which individuals, as spectators, are invited to reflect on themselves and their realities by momentarily rejecting the behaviours of their everyday lives (1995). Thus, art may be understood as a ritualistic interface between the real and the Self, and that which is other or beyond. Immersive and installation art, in particular, operates on overt ritualistic models, in which participants are instructed or encouraged to perform prescribed actions.

The ritual in Lonsdale’s *Radiant Human Aura Photography* appears to be wholly guided by the artist herself. Upon greeting the participant, she instructs them to enter the specialised geodesic tent, sit down on a stool positioned in front of the Auracam 6000, and place their hands on the electromagnetic sensors. Next, Lonsdale operates the camera to produce the participant’s aura photo, for which the participant must remain motionless for several seconds. Once the photograph is produced and developed, Lonsdale verbally relays the spiritual significance of the aura to the participant. Finally, the artist offers the photograph, affixed to a branded card, to the participant (Belz Ray, 2016; Ronner, 2015). Yet, while Lonsdale’s explicit instructions direct the series of actions required for the ritual, the technological instrument dictates the ceremonial circumstances as well. As members of a society conditioned by cameras

for over two centuries, contemporary participants are familiar with the photographic ritual of sitting and performing before a camera. There is an unspoken, implicit conduct required by the instrument itself. Therefore, the terms of the ritualistic experience of the *Radiant Human Aura Photography* installation are codified by both the artist and the media technology.

In Verstand's *AURA* installation, however, it is the media technology which assumes a more explicit role than the artist in preceding over the ritual. While information regarding the exact proceedings of the audience's encounter with the installation is limited, it can be inferred that participants are offered the possibility to wear biosensors, presumably by a human and perhaps by the artist himself, before or upon entering the installation space. Thus, the ritual commences with the participant adorning their body with these various sensors, likely assisted by a human. Afterward, it is the instruments which inform the actions of the ritual, as participants react to the beams of light which surround them. Although these instruments are explicit guides for the ritualistic experience in that participants are completely aware of their presence and role, the gestures proposed by the instruments are not as evident. The participants must explore their relationships with the biosensors and with the beams of colour-changing and shape-shifting light as a means by which to perform the predetermined rites.

2.3.2 Ritual, Magic, and Media Technology

The role of media technologies in art for facilitating ritualistic experiences is not so incongruous from their ritualistic function in everyday experience. Media technologies, much like art, are inextricable from socio-cultural customs, traditions, and ways of being within the world and amongst one another. Benjamin observes that "Originally, the embeddedness of an artwork in the context of tradition found expression in a cult. As we know, the earliest artworks originated in the service of rituals—first magical then religious" (1936/2008, p. 24). Conversely, for the German philosopher,

technology and its penchant for limitless reproduction and simulation is void of ritualistic substance. Ritual, it seems for Benjamin, corresponds to the authenticity and to the ‘real,’ while “technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual” (1936/2008, p. 24). He continues, arguing that art which is untainted by technological reproduction, as a ritualistic practice, is an “instrument of magic” for the human pursuit of transcendence from the earthly plane to otherworldly dimensions (1936/2008, p. 25).

However, techno-spiritual theorists disagree with Benjamin’s position on technology, insisting that the magical thinking that had governed Western consciousness until its delegitimisation by the scientific reasoning of the Enlightenment and, later by the cybernetic logic of modernity, had never actually been eliminated; rather, this magical thinking was transposed into our technologies, particularly into communication media (Hörl, 2018). As Stahl summarises, “Historically, technology has not only been immersed in sacred myth and ritual, in many cultures certain technologies became central metaphors through which...that society understood reality” (1999, p. 2). Media technologies, more so than other technologies and tools, have essentially generated an illusion of seamlessness founded in an ideal of connectivity, insisting that users forget that there exists a separation between themselves and their devices by promoting an immediacy that functions to erase all traces of our four-dimensional world, propelling users into a multidimensional space of seemingly infinite networked possibilities that are otherwise unattainable in the lost realm of unmediated reality. This is technological transcendence—the ability to fundamentally alter our experience of the reality through such phenomena as the reproduction of the perceptible world and the instant transmission and communication of information.

This embodiment of mystical experiences and magic that is inherent in media technologies is hyperbolised by our ignorance of the digital—by our complete failure

to understand how digital technologies actually operate. Stolow explains that obscurity is so embedded in the design of digital devices and algorithms through layers of coded languages that even the most advanced computer scientists, much less average users, cannot comprehend how they function on a foundational level. This subsequently renders our interactions with digital media technologies “phenomenologically comparable with the performative techniques of prayer, ritual action, or magic, or with the ‘religious’ experiences of ecstasy and awe” (Stolow; 2013, p. 5). There is an unmistakable irrationality to such an esoteric relationship between our Selves and our media technologies, which as Davis notes, is only analogous to magic:

The powerful aura that today’s advanced technologies cast does not derive solely from their novelty or their mystifying complexity; it also derives from their literal realization of the virtual projects willed by the wizards and alchemists of an earlier age. Magic is technology’s unconscious, its own arational spell (1998, p. 38).

Technology, despite its varying degrees of incomprehensibility, embodies the magical qualities associated with transcendent practices of ritual not only because of its incomprehensibility, but in spite of this, too. It is our unquestioning willingness to engage with media technologies which we do not understand that contributes to their supernatural status, ultimately rendering opaque the nature of our relations with them.

This opacity of our relations with our media technologies, according to Baudrillard (1973/1975), is augmented by a phenomenon he refers to as “symbolic exchange.” Emerging within the post-modern hyperreality of a data-driven era inundated with simulations, symbolic exchange sits in contrast to the traditional capitalist transaction of production and consumption. This non-monetary exchange is characterised by an “uninterrupted cycle of giving and receiving” of information, images, signs, and codes (Baudrillard, 1973/1975, p. 143). Applied to media technologies, especially digital ones, symbolic exchange exemplifies the constant flow of personal data users offer in exchange for an uninterrupted availability of media content to consume. While we do pay with monetary currency for our technological devices and our internet connections,

for example, this conventional capitalist transaction is secondary to the excess of media simulation. Baudrillard further argues that, due to our human nature of delighting in excess—which corresponds with ritualistic traditions of festivities and sacrifice—users of media technologies derive pleasure from such rituals of symbolic exchange (Baudrillard, 1981). In other words, we fundamentally enjoy the boundless overabundance of hyperreality despite its inherent annihilation of the real and of the Self because of its approximation to ritual—and by extension, to spiritual experience. By appealing to the body and its senses through the gratification and entertaining escapism of ritual, media technologies like smartphones and their apps not only reconfigure our experience of reality, but they also redefine our notions of spiritual well-being as contingent on our relations with our technological devices.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The intersecting and perpetually entangled realms of spirituality, technology, and the Self, prompted by my primary curiosity about the implications of spiritual smartphone apps, are distilled into key concepts by the creative and conceptual frameworks that I have implemented. Through a thematic exploration of the artworks and theories discussed in Chapter 2, I was able to refine my initial creative impulses and intentions, as well as to reinforce the objectives of my analysis. The subsequent development of my creative work in the context of this research-creation project, detailed in this chapter, follows an iterative method characterised by experimental and observational procedures, exercises and acquisition of my own competences, and collaborations with others. This methodological narrative is presented in five distinct phases of formulation, from the creative work's genesis to its final form. Spanning over two years of research and development, my research-creation project is concluded with the realisation of an immersive audio-visual installation entitled *Soli: Digital Meditation Experience (Expérience de méditation numérique)*. Intended to subvert the ways in which we understand the intricate relationships between our Selves, our media technologies, and our perceptions of reality, *Soli* conceptually positions the smartphone and its user as a homogeneous entity within a meditative experience that culminates in the revelation of the participant's 'digital aura.'

3.1 *Soli*, Genesis

I had originally conceived of the idea of *Soli* in the first semester of my master's programme in the autumn of 2018 for my *Séminaire de recherche-crédation sur*

l'interactivité (Research-Creation Seminar on Interactivity). At this point in my academic trajectory, I had not yet defined the topic of my master's research project. I had, however, resolved to study the smartphone and its relation to the Self in some capacity. During these early stages, I was reflecting on the role of the museum selfie and the ways in which the smartphone mediates our contemporary experiences with viewing art. While thinking about the prevalence of flashy, ludic, and entertaining artworks and exhibitions that seem to insist that its spectators take selfies and share the footage online (I specifically had in mind the Yayoi Kusama retrospective exhibition, *Infinity Mirrors*, that has been touring the world since 2012 and Olafur Eliasson's 2017 solo exhibition, *Multiple Shadow House*, at Montréal's Musée d'art contemporain), I began to formulate the concept of an artwork that would *require* its spectator to take a selfie with it in order for it to be fully experienced.

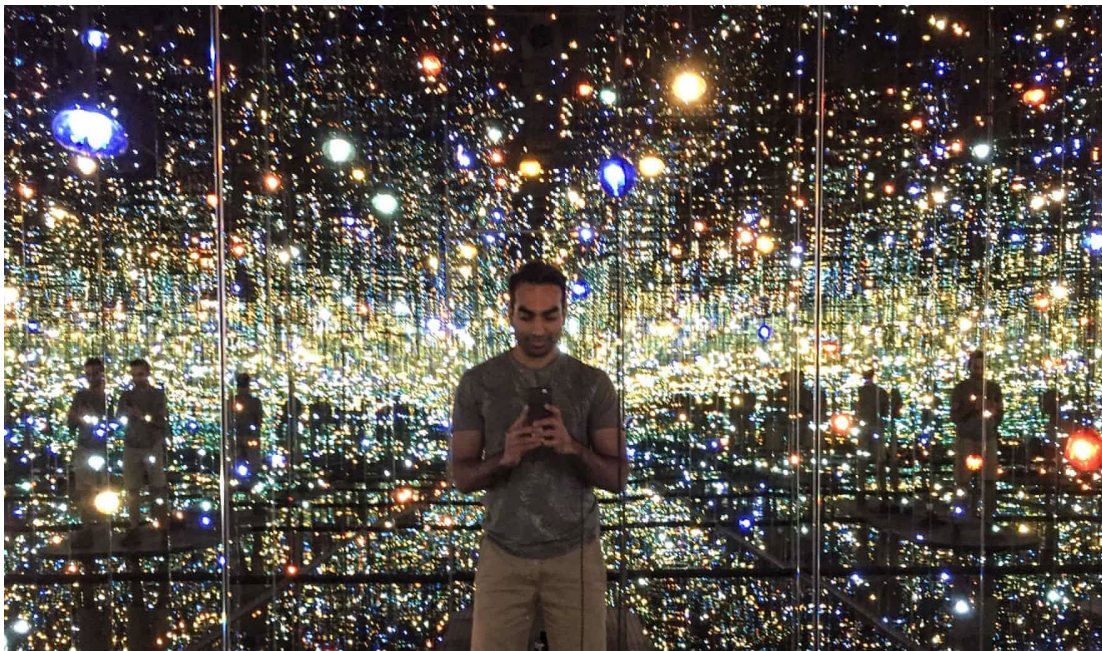


Figure 3.1: A Selfie at Yayoi Kusama's Infinity Room, 2016, The Broad, Los Angeles (Photograph, Kanwar Sandhu)



Figure 3.2: *A Selfie at Olafur Eliasson's Multiple Shadow House, 2017, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (Photograph, Sébastien Roy)*

My obsession with spiritual smartphone apps was at its peak during these reflections, as these apps dominated discourse in my social circles both online and offline. My personal practice and consumption of New Age spirituality, too, was prominent in my thoughts. I would scroll through my Instagram newsfeed and long to go to *Magic Jewelry*, an inconspicuous yet iconic shop in New York City's Chinatown that offers an aura photography service, as I saw both friends and strangers share their own aura photos. As trendy as aura photography has become, it remains a rare service only available in a few North American cities (including Lonsdale's travelling installation). With all of this occupying my thoughts, I had a sudden intuitive inspiration: I would create an interactive installation that would analyse the participant's 'digital soul' in real time as they used their smartphone, revealing it as an immersive 'digital aura' of coloured light and sound in which they could take a selfie.

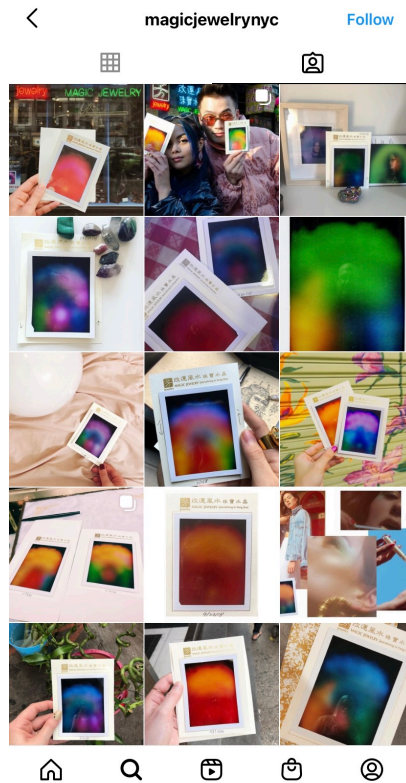


Figure 3.3: Magic Jewelry Aura Photos on Instagram (Screenshot, Instagram)

By the end of the semester, I had assembled a pseudo-prototype of the installation. I spent a significant amount of time thinking about the branding of the ‘experience,’ as I was pointedly critiquing the commodification of spirituality through media technologies. I serendipitously conceived of the name *Soli*—a portmanteau of the words ‘selfie’ and ‘soul,’ as well as a reference to our paradoxically simultaneous connectedness and (soli)tude in our digital era. And, of course, there was a reference to the sun (*sōli* in Latin’s dative declension, *soleil* in French); just as the sun is the centre of our solar system within the universe, so are we each the centre of our own universes, inextricable from our Selves, our souls. To match the work’s celestial name, I found an equally ethereal typeface and established a shadowy-yet-polychromatic visual identity for the corresponding graphic design, all of which are elements I retained throughout all phases of the project. The actual installation itself, however, was far less

developed. I borrowed a beanbag cushion and a programmable colour-changing light from the École des médias (School for Media Studies), arranged some charging cables for various types of phones alongside the cushion (which were not plugged into anything), and had my classmates sit and ‘connect’ their phones, one at a time, while I pushed a button on a computer that would trigger a digital aura. This digital aura, displayed by the lights as one of seven colours of the seven chakras (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet, and pink) and accompanied by the meditative sounds of singing bowls in one of seven musical notes corresponding to each chakra, was activated by me through the Max MSP visual coding software and programmed with the assistance of course instructor, Thomas Ouellet Fredericks. There was nothing very immersive or interactive about the installation at this stage; I simply experimented with the illusion of revealing a data-based aura by randomly clicking one of seven buttons while participants lounged on the cushion and browsed the apps on their smartphones.



Figure 3.4: Graphic Design for Soli, Autumn 2018 (Image, Leona Nikolić)

While my original idea when I had first conceived of this project for my *Séminaire de recherche-crédation sur l'interactivité* was to develop an interactive installation that would actually be capable of extracting and analysing information from the participant's smartphone to reveal a quantifiable, data-based aura, it quickly became clear to me that this would not be possible with the technology available to the public. Through the process of reflecting on my intentions over the course of the next few months and through continued reading and research concerning the themes of the project, I recognised the value of a more illusory installation that focused rather on creating an experience than proving a measurable truth.

3.2 *Soli*, Phase 2

I eventually went to *Magic Jewelry* the following winter, in early 2019, and received my first and, to this date, only aura photo. I was also, at this time, enrolled in the *Stratégies de recherche-crédation (Strategies for Research-Creation)* course in which we were tasked with establishing and elaborating our research-creation projects. While I had never actually intended on pursuing *Soli* any further, I did not have any other ideas to contribute for this course. So, I began to conduct research into immersive and interactive installations that addressed the relationship between media technologies and the Self and to read techno-spiritual literature. I learned about the iterative methodology for research-creation—that is, the cyclical process of trial and error, of repeated testing in order to retain that which works and to discard that which does not. I eventually began to believe that *Soli* could be a fascinating and relevant project for my thesis; for whatever reason, I could not abandon the idea. Thus, I carried *Soli* forth to my *Séminaire de développement de projet (Project Development Seminar)* in the summer of 2019.

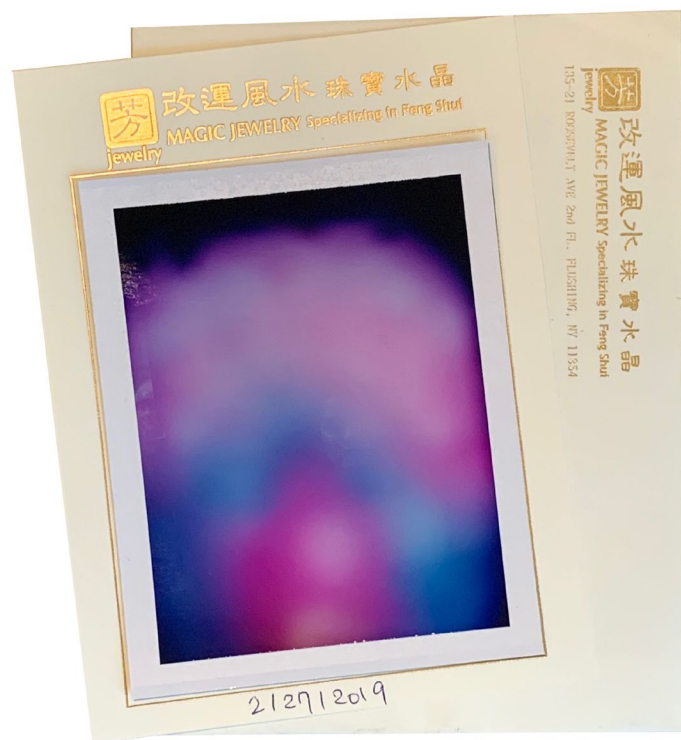


Figure 3.5: My Aura Photo from Magic Jewelry (Photograph, Leona Nikolić)

During the initial stages of development for the *Séminaire de développement de projet*, I began to think about the creative skills I possess and how I could integrate them into this project. As a talented writer with a portfolio of published and unpublished poetry, personal essays, short stories, and copywriting, I realised I could place this competence at the centre of the project. Instead of simply using the sounds of singing bowls to induce a meditative state and expecting participants to simultaneously engage with their smartphones, I could provide detailed instructions for participants to interact with their devices. With the encouragement of my co-supervisor, Dany Beaupré, I began work on writing a first draft of a guided meditation that was at once sincere and satirical. Inspired by hours of real meditations I listened to—and many of which I actually meditated to—I recorded an early version of the *Soli* meditation using a digital voice provided by Google. My intention with using a robotic, computer-generated voice was that it would contribute to the absurdity of the techno-spiritual experience

and further blur the limits between Self and smartphone. During this phase, I focused entirely on writing and recording the guided meditation, rather than on any purported data analysis and corresponding digital auras.

I presented this iteration of the second phase of the project to my small group of classmates, seated around a table in our classroom. I turned off the lights, closed the blinds, and arranged some New Age paraphernalia on the table to set the mood: a selection of healing crystals, a deck of tarot cards, some incense and sage, and my aura photo from *Magic Jewelry*. I also had brought the same colour-changing light that I had used for my first experimentation with *Soli* and simply turned it on to a setting that would softly rotate through the full spectrum of colours—no computer needed. As my intention for the finished product was still for the experience to be a solitary one, I provided each participant with headphones and sent them a link to the audio recording in an attempt to create some separation between each individual. The feedback I received was largely positive: while some found the guided meditation, in which they were instructed to massage their phones and consult various apps and notifications, anxiety-inducing and others felt it prompted thoughtful reflection, all agreed there was a certain illusory quality to the ritualistic experience. With this in mind, I continued to develop the project by exploring my other creative skills and undertaking new ones.

3.3 *Soli*, Phase 3

The third phase of the project, developed and presented in the context of the same summer course, consisted of two iterations. For the first iteration of this third phase, I concentrated on designing an immersive space for the digital meditation experience. Working within an empty studio with black walls and floors, I constructed a tent-like structure with discarded, misshapen sheets of white fabric and placed a circular seating arrangement in the interior—each seat with a smartphone charging cable and a pair of headphones. I surrounded the tent with multiple colour-changing lights that were

programmed to softly alternate, producing a visually ambient atmosphere. With the assistance of the Animateur pédagogique of UQAM's École des médias, Kenny Lefebvre, I began to understand the basics of programming light and sound equipment through Max MSP, the same visual coding software I had encountered in my *Séminaire de recherche-cr ation sur l'interactivit * (Research-Creation Seminar on Interactivity).

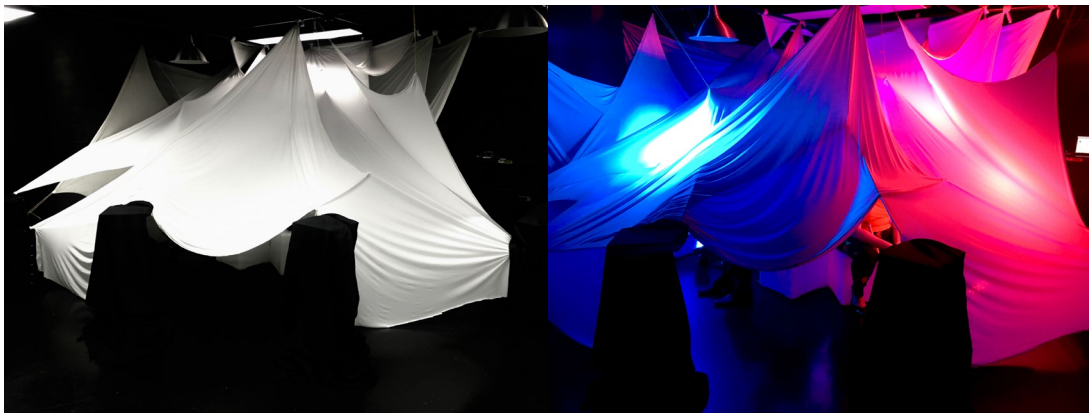


Figure 3.6: Phase 3 Tent Structure, Unilluminated and Illuminated (Photographs, Leona Nikolić)

For the presentation of this iteration, each user (once again, the same classmates) sat inside the structure with headphones on, their backs turned to one another, and their smartphones plugged into the provided chargers. The use of personal headphones and the specific seating arrangement contributed to creating a sense of isolation from one another. As with the previous iteration of the second phase, this grouping of participants served as a solution to allow multiple individuals to experience *Soli* within a condensed timeframe. The charging cables I had used in my first iteration, the original prototype of the genesis of the project, were included here too. This time, connected to electrical outlets, these cables simulated the pretence that the installation was connected to a computer system which was actively analysing the user's device. This iteration also featured a revised guided meditation, once again recorded with the same digital voice, but now superimposed with a meditative soundscape composed of relaxing music and nature sounds (see Annex G). Also successful amongst my peers,

this iteration was supplemented with constructive suggestions. The main critical feedback I received was that the voice of the guided meditation was too robotic and that a more human, soothing voice would contribute to the ambiguity of the interface between Self and Smartphone. Moreover, as I has turned my attention to creating an immersive space and to writing the meditation, I had temporarily neglected the element of the revelation of the aura. It was this stage of the project development that was marked by my efforts to combine my established creative skills of writing and event design with the pursuit of new ones such as coding and audio-visual programming.



Figure 3.7: Seating Arrangement for First Iteration of Phase 3 (Photographs, Leona Nikolić)

The second iteration of this third phase was the most challenging as I entered into more creative and technical domains with which I had no prior experience. While the tent remained, I replaced the multi-person seating arrangement for a large beanbag cushion to accommodate only a single participant. I also reincorporated the revelation of the digital aura with the use of the programmed colour-changing lights; while the participant remained immersed within *Soli*'s tent, I selected a single colour from the Max MSP software to emerge from the lights as the representation of the aura, in which the participant would be instructed to take an 'aura selfie.' Furthermore, aside from my induction into the world of sound recording and editing through revising and re-recording the guided meditation monologue—this time with a real human voice—and

dabbling in web design by creating a pseudo-functional website, my goal with this iteration was to incorporate a working touch sensor that would require the user to maintain physical contact with their smartphone in order to complete the guided meditation.



Figure 3.8: Seating Arrangement for Second Iteration of Phase 3 (Photograph, Leona Nikolić)

By stipulating uninterrupted contact with the device, my intention was to induce belief that *Soli* was not only collecting personal data from its software, but also from the haptic relationship between the participant and their smartphone. This illusory technique would reinforce a purported correlation between one's physical intimacy with their smartphone and their subsequent digital aura as a representation of the Self. Or, at the very least for more sceptical participants, it would highlight the intensity of

our intimacy with these devices in an unavoidable manner. If a participant refused to maintain physical contact with their smartphone, the installation experience would be terminated—in much the same way a download is if one does not accept the Terms and Conditions. The ensuing quest to develop such a sensor initiated me into the world of DIY electronics as I experimented with Arduino, Piezo sensors, copper and resistors, and soldering electrical wires and components under the guidance of the *Animateur pédagogique* (Educational Facilitator), Kenny Lefebvre. However, with the short amount of time I had to develop a sensor, I was not able to create a successful solution. This iteration did, however, allow me to develop basic competences in audio editing and web design. In addition, an important suggestion from my classmates after presenting this iteration was to create a more visually complex digital aura, rather than simply relying on the coloured light. While this version of *Soli* was not fully functional, it allowed me to envision a more coherent path for the next phases of development.

3.4 *Soli*, Phase 4

Following the two iterations of the third phase, the next presentation of *Soli* was scheduled to take place in March 2020 before the jury. Having spent the autumn semester of 2020 refining my theoretical framework, particularly through the *Approches théoriques en communication médiatique (Theoretical Approaches to Media Communication)* course instructed by my co-supervisor, Katharina Niemeyer, I subsequently devoted the winter of 2020 to finalising my *Projet de mémoire (Master's Thesis Proposal)* document which would complement my presentation for the jury. With the occurrence of the coronavirus pandemic, however, I was obliged to present *Soli* to the jury over videoconference through documentation in the form of photos, videos, and audio files. While this was not ideal, the jury provided valuable comments and critiques which informed my subsequent experimentations. Two primary concerns raised by the jury regarding the installation pertained to the revelation of the aura. It was suggested that I remove the portion of the guided meditation in which the voice

announces the revelation of the aura: *Open your eyes softly. The guided meditation is now finished. Please remain seated and wait a few moments while Soli analyses your digital aura...Your digital aura is [insert colour]*. Likewise, the jury advised that I indicate the progression of the supposed analysis of the participant's aura through sound, visual means, or otherwise. It wasn't until the following autumn of 2020 that I was able to access the studio and equipment at the École des médias to experiment with and implement these suggestions.

After several months of reflecting on my creative project, I had developed some new ideas and approaches to experiment with. Notably, I decided to abandon the idea of using sensors to force participants to maintain physical contact with their smartphones and, instead, focused on writing a more detailed guided meditation to encourage the same behaviour. Discarding the idea to use sensors also freed me from technological constraints, with which I had little familiarity to attempt effective experiments, and permitted me to pursue the illusory qualities of *Soli* in even greater depth. During the months prior, I had begun to practice Yoga Nidra meditation and decided to rewrite portions of the *Soli* meditation to include this new influence. The most obvious example, I added details which referenced the chakras and their positions within the body: *Focussing on your smartphone in your hands, begin to imagine a glowing white light travelling up from your phone to your ribs, to your heart, up to your chest, through your throat, and up to the middle of your forehead, directly between your eyebrows*. Furthermore, at the suggestions of my classmates and my jury to develop the aura, I wrote and recorded a description for each of the seven digital auras, of which the selected one would be announced by the same voice following the guided meditation.

The aura and its progression was the subject of much experimentation. I hired an audio-visual programmer to execute my vision for the project, as I required someone with a professional competency of Max MSP. With the programmer, I determined the various

settings of the colour-changing light and of the audio that would occur at different stages of the installation experience. Prior to the participant entering the tent, the illuminated structure would be white; during the guided meditation, the lights would softly change colour; and for the revelation of the digital aura, the software would randomly select one of the predetermined seven colours with which to illuminate the structure, accompanied by the corresponding audio description. To visually augment the digital aura, I experimented with projecting abstract videos on the surface of the tent. Likewise, to audibly articulate the illusory transformation of personal data into a digital aura, I incorporated the sound effect of dial-up internet (*see Annex G*). I had chosen this specific sound effect to pay homage to the ways in which telephones were once required in order to access the internet and how, today, we primarily access the internet through our smartphones. Moreover, to further develop the aura, I decided to offer participants the possibility to transform their digital aura selfies into physical snapshots through the use of an instant photo printer designed specifically for smartphones. It would make reference to, in a very literal way, the aura photograph from *Magic Jewelry* that I cherished so much, as well as to the metaphysical practice of aura photography in general. This function, however, was not included in this iteration due to lack of time.

With this iteration, knowing it would be the final experimental phase before presenting the finished work, I concentrated on precision. Discarding the mismatched white sheets which I had previously used to construct the tent, I purchased a weighty satin fabric and divided it into equal portions. The fabric, despite my meticulousness with it, proved to be difficult to work with due to its weight and opacity and I was ultimately unsatisfied with the tent. I also focused my attention on the *Soli* website, using the same branding I had conceived of two years prior. For this website, I created a registration page which would be required for individuals to complete before participating in the installation. Not only would this page serve to contribute to the legitimacy of the

illusion of personal data collection, but also to fulfil my ethical obligation to receive explicit consent for participation from individuals. Featured in small letters below the registration form was a link to the ‘Terms and Conditions’ of *Soli* (see Annex F), not unlike those which users regularly encounter on apps and websites, that outlined the details of consent. Participants were required to check the box next to the ‘Terms and Conditions,’ indicating their acceptance and consent. I did not, however, expect anyone to actually open this link and read the text. Following ethical requirements, I would debrief participants after their experience by confirming the illusory nature of the data collection and analysis.



Figure 3.9: Phase 4 Tent Structure, Colourful Illumination (Photograph, Leona Nikolić)

Figure 3.10: Soli Online Registration (Screenshot, <https://www.soliexperience.net/commencer>)

For the presentation and testing of this iteration, I invited peers from my master's programme and former classmates to participate in *Soli*. Likely due to the pandemic, I was only able to secure five participants. Despite this small number, I received crucial feedback about both the affordance and aesthetic elements of the installation. Regarding the clarity of the instruction of the guided meditation, participants noted that it was unclear whether they should sit down on the provided chair inside the tent upon entering, as well as how long they should remain inside the tent once their digital aura was revealed. As for the dial-up internet sound effect before the revelation of the digital aura, participants found this to be too literal of an interpretation, rendering the illusory experience less plausible due to this gimmicky element. In addition, most noted that the abrasive dial-up sound effect interrupted the meditative state which the installation had successfully induced. These comments were essential for producing the final phase of *Soli*.

3.5 *Soli*, Final Form

Several months later, in April 2021, I installed the final version of *Soli* to present to the public and to the jury. First, I replaced the opaque, satin fabric which I had previously used for the tent structure with diaphanous white sheets of polyethylene. Due to the lightweight quality of these sheets, I was able to manipulate them with more ease in order to assemble a structure with a more deliberate form. Supported by invisible fishing line and small safety pins from the ceiling, and affixed to the floor with black gaffer tape, the polyethylene sheets produced unique folds which eloquently captured the colourful lights surrounding the structure. Of these colour-changing lights, six were placed in a circular fashion at the base of the tent and six were similarly anchored from the ceiling. Two speakers stood on tall plinths on either side of the tent, each in proximity to one of two projectors that faced the structure. Inside the tent was a single black beanbag cushion, as well as three black charging cables for different types of smartphone ports (Lightning, USB-C, and Micro USB). These cables led to a sleek black device to which they were connected—a USB power adapter with a single red light that led to an electrical outlet on the exterior of the tent, unseen from the interior. Outside of the tent, between the door to the studio and the entrance to the tent, was an instructive panel affixed to a tall plinth and illuminated by an overhead light, which greeted participants upon commencing the experience. To the right, shrouded in darkness, was the desk at which I sat as the operator with the computer, running Max MSP software. Much of this final form remained consistent with the previous iteration from the fourth phase, with a few key differences.



Figure 3.11: Final Form Tent Structure (Photograph, Kevin Calero)



Figure 3.12: Final Form Tent Structure Interior with Participant (Photograph, Kevin Calero)



Figure 3.13: Cables and USB Power Adapter (Photograph, Kevin Calero)

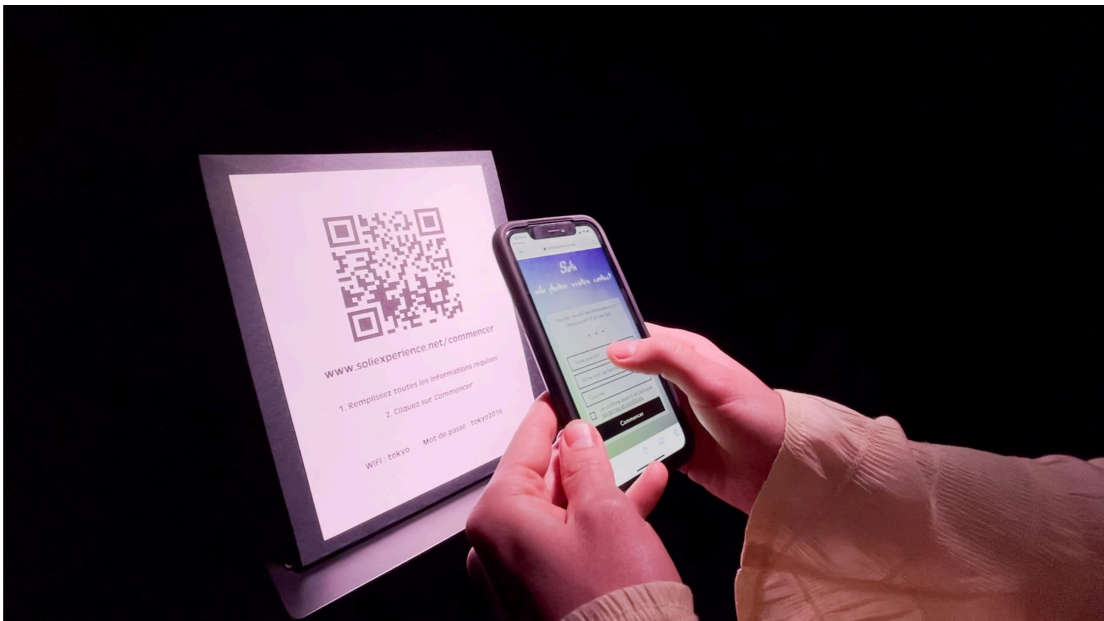


Figure 3.14: Participant with Instructive Panel (Photograph, Kevin Calero)



Figure 3.15: *Myself, Operating the Installation (Photograph, Kevin Calero)*

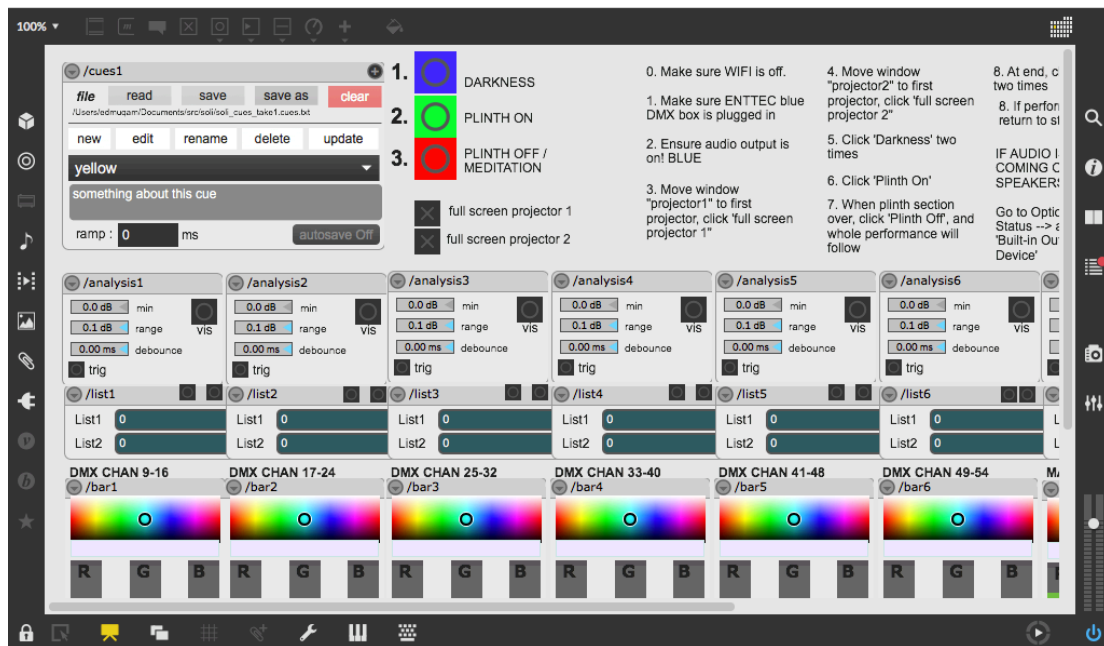


Figure 3.16: *Programming for Soli by Peter van Haften (Screenshot, Max MSP)*

Instead of welcoming participants myself as they entered the space, I had recorded a series of instructions with the voice of *Soli* that I activated as soon as someone stepped into the studio (*see Annex B*). Simultaneously, the light above the instructive panel on the plinth illuminated and the voice guided the participant through the online registration process. Seated at the computer, I waited for a confirmation email from the *Soli* website that confirmed the participant's registration. Upon receiving this confirmation, I activated the next stage of the experience, which invited the participant to enter the tent, to sit down on the cushion, and to connect their phone to the appropriate charging cable. The tent, illuminated by white light for the first two minutes and twenty seconds of the guided meditation audio, was subsequently immersed in colour-changing light. This specific timing was determined to coincide with the instruction provided to the participant to connect their smartphone, thereby attempting to create the illusion that the colour of the tent was transformed by this action.

Following this ritualistic guided meditation (*see Annex C*), during which the participant was instructed to interact with their smartphone in manners both absurd and ordinary, *Soli* revealed the their 'digital aura'— one of seven audio files with corresponding coloured lights that was randomly selected by the software. The projectors also illuminated at this stage, adding to the aesthetic experience of the aura. Unlike with the previous iteration, I did not include the dial-up internet sound effect, nor did I replace it with anything else, opting, instead, to preserve the meditative tranquillity of the experience, as had been suggested previously. After the smooth transition from guided meditation to aura, the voice of *Soli* described the digital aura in terms of both its corresponding chakra and as a metaphor for the participant's relationship with their device (*see Annex D*). During this moment, the user was encouraged to take a selfie against the chromatic backdrop (superimposed with an ethereal video) and to email this aura selfie to *Soli* if they wished to transubstantiate this immaterial digital snapshot into a material photograph. On the other side of the tent, seated at the desk, I awaited the

arrival of the aura selfie by email. Once receiving it, I immediately printed the image by connecting my own smartphone to the Fujifilm Instax printer. With a black marker, I left a human trace on the instant photo by writing ‘Soli,’ as well as the date, on the white frame.



Figure 3.17: Participant During Guided Meditation (Photograph, Kevin Calero)

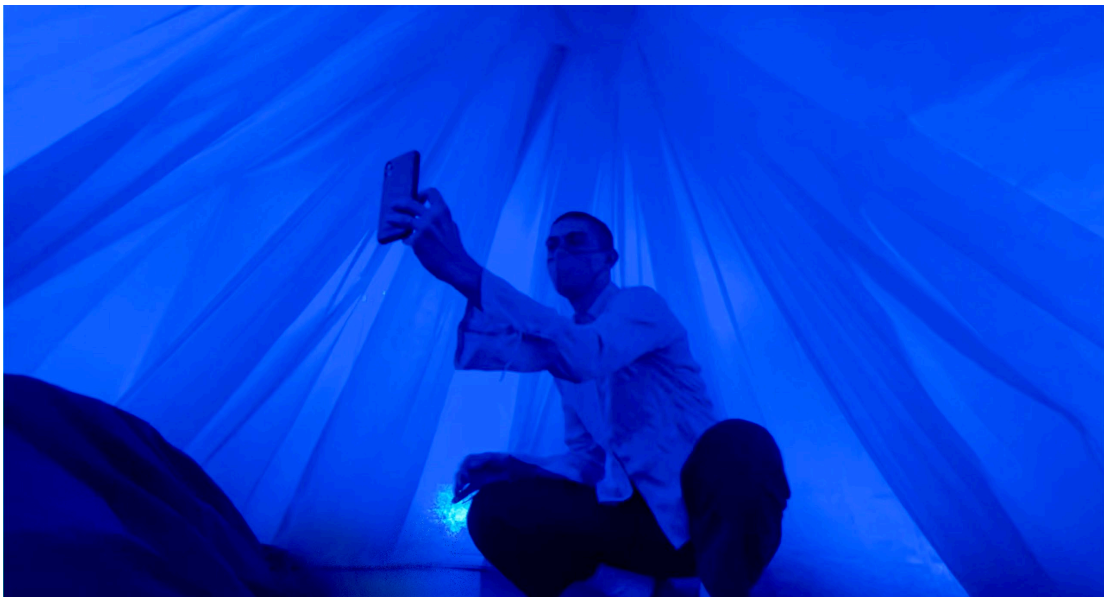


Figure 3.18: Participant Taking an Aura Selfie (Photograph, Kevin Calero)



Figure 3.19: *Aura Selfie Printed on Instant Film (Photograph, Kevin Calero)*

I finally greeted the participant as they exited the tent. During this time, I engaged in informal conversation with each of them to inquire about their experiences with *Soli*. Throughout the course of each exchange, I asked deliberate, predetermined questions while taking notes. My intention was that these questions would serve as a gauge for both the affordance and intelligibility of the experience, as well as a means by which to attempt to address my primary research question and its adjacent concerns. The questions I asked are as follows:

1. Did you find the experience meditative? Why or why not?
2. How do you feel about *Soli* collecting your data?
3. Did you resonate with your digital aura? Why or why not?
4. Did you have any new thoughts, feelings, or reflections about your relationship with your phone? Describe these, if any.
5. Do you feel more connected to or more distant from your smartphone after this experience?
6. Do you feel like your smartphone connects you or alienates you from others and from the world around you?
7. Did you read the Terms and Conditions?
8. Do you think the charging cables are connected to a computer?

I did not ask these questions in any specific order, but interjected them where appropriate within the conversation. During these conversations, I also revealed to each participant that the collection and analysis of personal data was not real, but in fact an illusion. This detail was also included in the Terms and Conditions and would have been encountered by anyone who thoroughly consulted the text. Finally, I presented the participant with their printed aura selfie.

3.5.1 Public Presentation and Participants

This final presentation of *Soli: Digital Meditation Experience* was held at the Université du Québec à Montréal on Sunday 11 April and Monday 12 April, 2021. While the presentation was open to the public, access to the campus was only permitted to members of the UQAM community or to those with pre-authorized access due to the pandemic restrictions. Eleven days before the event, I advertised the final presentation of *Soli* through various channels by sharing a visual graphic and a written message of invitation. This advertisement was transmitted by mass emails to the graduate students of the Faculté de communication at UQAM and to the members CELAT (Research Centre for Culture–Arts–Societies), a research centre of which I am a student member. The advertisement was also announced by Hexagram, a research-creation network of which I am also a student member, on their official Facebook page. Additionally, I promoted the event to a handful of Facebook groups which consist of students, artists, and researchers in Montréal, including one that is specific to UQAM’s Maîtrise en Communication (Recherche-création en média experimental). Finally, I shared information about the event to my friends and acquaintances on my own social media account. Included in each of these advertisements was a link which led to a reservation page on the *Soli* website where participants were able to indicate the specific time at which they wished to visit. This ensured that participants did not gather outside of the studio at UQAM, in accordance with Covid-19 regulations, as well as to add credibility to the experience.

* * * présentation d'un projet de recherche-crédation * * *

Soli

* * *

expérience de méditation numérique



11 et 12 avril 2021
10h à 19h (UQAM)
Réservez votre place maintenant !

Venez découvrir votre aura numérique et recevez une photo instantanée de votre aura !

UQAM | Faculté de communication | Université du Québec à Montréal | CELAT | hexagram | AÉMD

Ce projet a été réalisé grâce au soutien de ces partenaires.

Figure 3.20: Advertisement for Public Presentation of Soli (Image, Leona Nikolić)

Soli sera disponible dimanche le 11 avril et lundi le 12 avril de 10h à 18h15.
L'expérience durera environ 15 minutes.

* * *

Votre prénom

Votre nom de famille

Courriel

Plage horaire

Je suis étudiant.e ou employé.e de l'UQAM ou je suis autorisé.e à accéder au campus. *

Oui
 Non

Veuillez noter que des règles sanitaires strictes seront mises en place pour assurer la sécurité des participant.e.s. Les participant.e.s devront porter un masque à tout moment, se désinfecter les mains et un.e seul.e participant.e à la fois sera autorisé.e dans l'espace. Les participant.e.s doivent réserver une plage horaire pour visiter Soli afin d'assurer la distanciation physique.

Figure 3.21: Online Reservation Form for Public Presentation of Soli (Screenshot, <https://www.soliexperience.net/reservation>)

While I was hoping to attract a diverse group of participants who were both strangers to me and totally unfamiliar with my project, it was the opposite that occurred. Likely due to the pandemic, my assumption is that the majority of people who may have typically been interested in such an event were not inclined to make an unnecessary journey to the university campus. Thus, my small group of participants—nine in total—consisted entirely of friends and academic colleagues. These participants, whom I will not identify, belong approximately to an age range of 20–40 years old and include both those who are active in academic environments and those who are not. To provide further details about these participants without identifying them, I have indicated their relationship to me and whether or not they had any prior knowledge about my research-creation project:

- Participant A: Friend; Basic knowledge of *Soli*
- Participant B: Colleague; Advanced knowledge of *Soli*
- Participant C: Friend; No knowledge of *Soli*
- Participant D: Friend; Basic knowledge of *Soli*
- Participant E: Colleague; Advanced knowledge of *Soli*
- Participant F: Friend; No knowledge of *Soli*
- Participant G: Colleague; Basic knowledge of *Soli*
- Participant H: Colleague; No knowledge of *Soli*
- Participant J: Friend; No knowledge of *Soli*

I have refrained from using the letter ‘I’ in classifying these participants so as not to confuse it with the Roman numeral. Here, those with no knowledge of *Soli* have only been exposed to information provided by my advertisement and have never personally been briefed by myself on the project; those with basic knowledge of *Soli* have been personally briefed by me in little detail; and those with advanced knowledge of *Soli* have witnessed the development of my project through various stages.

These details about participants were not formally collected nor requested, but are purely based on my personal knowledge of each individual. My decision to classify them in this manner responds to the complete absence of participants who are both entirely unfamiliar with me, as the research-creator, and with the nature of the project.

By outlining such information about the participants, their reactions and responses to *Soli* will be appropriately contextualised within my analysis of the research-creation as it is possible that these factors may have influenced their perception and experience of the installation. A discussion of the results of this public presentation of *Soli* and of the installation's theoretical implications will form the basis of the subsequent analysis of my research-creation project.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

In this section, I will detail how the final form of *Soli* was received by the participants during the public presentation of the installation, as well as contribute a theoretical analysis of the work. The responses to these questions and the reactions of participants will be discussed within the context of the creative and conceptual framework established in Chapter 2, integrating aspects of research and creation within one another. This analysis will be structured by the examination of three crucial elements of my immersive installation: the tent, the guided meditation, and the digital aura. These elements, however, will not be investigated separately, but rather in relation to one another and in dialogue with themes of the Self and its relation to media technology, illusion as a function of immersion and hyperreality, and ritualistic transcendence through technological means. What can be learned by subjecting participants to an experimental encounter that reimagines the mundane as supernatural? What kinds of insights can the reactions of participants reveal? How will these revelations interact with philosophical positions?

4.1 The Tent Structure of *Soli*

Constructing a specialised structure for *Soli* was vital to the successful delivery of this digital meditation experience. While any formally interesting or unusual architectural space would have sufficed as a replacement (a white, domed chamber, perhaps), the tent illustrates a distinct demarcation between spaces, or worlds, as an interface. Outside of the tent, one is within an unceremonious space, remarkable only in its

darkness. As one writer notes in an interview with Lonsdale about her *Radiant Human Aura Photography* installation:

Inside the tent, you can actually forget that you're in a giant art museum in a giant city. "I'm connected to creating an experience," [Lonsdale] says. "This dome is my little spaceship that's a consistent experience no matter where I am, whether I'm in a field in the middle of nowhere or if I'm in the Whitney lobby" (Belz Ray, 2016, para. 4).

Likewise, without *Soli*'s tent, there would be no aesthetic, physical apparatus to indicate to the participant that something atypical of their daily experience would be occurring. As Participant A noted, being inside the tent induced a pleasant collapse of time and space. Once inside, there is no outside—there is only the Self and the smartphone as one. Like Baudrillard's assertion that "At a certain level of machination, of immersion in virtual machinery...The dimensions of time itself merge there in 'real time,' the tent is the immersive portal to the hyperreal (Baudrillard, 2002, pp. 177–178). Participant D corroborated this phenomenon, commenting that the effect of immersion within a space specifically designed for a meditative experience transported them elsewhere.

The relaxing atmosphere produced by the soft beanbag cushion and the coloured lights contribute to this immersion, too. Participants C, D, E, and H explicitly expressed that these factors created an exceptionally comfortable and calming environment. Participant D, in particular, noted that the slowly changing colours of the tent helped reduce their generalised anxiety. Flooded with ethereal multi-coloured light, *Soli* seeks to inscribe itself within esoteric and artistic traditions of interpreting coloured light as a visual pathway for spiritual transcendence, in much the same ways as Verstand's *AURA* and Lonsdale's *Radiant Human Aura Photography* installations rely on chromatic expression. Like Verstand and the sublime works of renowned artists James Turrell and Olafur Eliasson, which he cites as inspiration for *AURA*, I employ coloured light within the abstract architectural space of *Soli*'s tent as a medium for transcendental spiritual awakening (Morris, 2017). Thus, the colour-changing surface

of the tent functions as a visual symbol of the hyperreal coalescence of the physical with the metaphysical, of the real to with the virtual.

Moreover, within the immersive configuration of the tent which serves to generate a cerebral experience of hyperreal transcendence for the participant, the purpose of the charging cables is to attempt to demonstrate, in a concrete and visual manner, the substantial immersion of the Self and smartphone within one another—as extensions and as simulations of one another (Simondon, 1958; Davis, 1998; Adorno, 1964, Marcuse, 1964; Baudrillard, 2002). These cables, crucial to maintaining the illusion of the collection and analysis of personal data during the digital meditation experience, act as a mechanism by which participants enable their immersion within this illusion. Belief in the cable, whether conscious or not, permits Baudrillard's 'obliteration of the real' (2002).

While Participants A and B noted that they did not at all reflect on the purpose of the cables, and Participants G and H did not believe that the cables performed any function other than charging the device, the remaining five participants (C, D, E, F, and H) expressed their total conviction in the data-siphoning powers of these cables. Of those that conceived of the data collection by means of the cables to be veritable, one (Participant E) had witnessed the development of my research-creation project in various stages and had been previously made aware of the illusory nature of the installation, and another (Participant C) professionally operates a variety of digital technologies. Despite these two participants' respective knowledge regarding my intentions with the installation and the realistic possibilities of digital technologies, the immersive environment of the illuminated tent and its accessories led them to embrace the illusion in the same way that the majority of the unknowing participants had.

4.2 The Guided Meditation

While *Soli*'s physical infrastructure (the illuminated tent, the cushion, and the cables) functions as a material interface between the real and the virtual, the guided meditation may be understood as the immaterial interface through which the hyperreal arises. It is the ritualistic experience of the guided meditation with its various rites of passage that renders this element more than a voice to listen to, but an instrument that informs the participant's relation to their Self, their smartphone, and, subsequently, to their perception of reality. Moreover, as both Davis (1998) and Stahl (1999) note, our technologies are manifestations of our rituals. Rituals are attempts at transcendence, and technologies enable this transcendence.

One of the ways in which *Soli* examines our techno-rituals is through the reproduction of mundane gestures such as obliging participants to register online and to accept the Terms and Conditions, to connect their smartphones with the cables, to interact with apps, and to take a selfie. Such rituals are so engrained in our daily experiences that many of us do not question them. For example, only one participant (C) had opened the Terms and Conditions to quickly scan them, while the others did not look at them at all. In fact, another participant (E), admitted that they had not even noticed accepting the Terms and Conditions, despite the mandatory box they were required to check. Automatically allowing websites, apps, or software to access our personal data in exchange for the services they provide is, according to Baudrillard's theory of symbolic exchange, an exemplification of the substitution of the real for its simulation as the Self becomes an amalgamated metonym for currency, commodity, and consumer (1981).

When asked how they felt about *Soli* collecting and analysing their personal data to produce a digital aura, most participants were curious, but unbothered. However, this seemed largely due to the context of their participation within a university setting and with a person they trust. Participants C, D, and G all claimed that they would have

abstained from the experience had they encountered it in public and had it been operated by a stranger. Participants A, F, H, and J, with limited or no information about the installation, expressed no discomfort regarding the matter; however, they were interested to learn about the process. Participant H, in particular, observed that despite being cognisant of the dangers and risks associated with offering personal data to the companies behind our media technologies, it is simply inescapable.

Another manner in which *Soli* examines our techno-rituals is through their subversion and exaggeration. By juxtaposing the simulated language of guided meditations with unusual directives for interacting with the smartphone, both physically and intellectually, participants are confronted with an oxymoronic opportunity for critical awareness regarding such rituals. Participant E, for example, remarked that while the overall experience was meditative, it felt strange to practice mindfulness with a focus on the digital device. Participants C and G, in particular, felt reluctant and irrational about engaging with their devices as suggested by the guided meditation. While Lonsdale and Verstand's respective installations both rely on participant's absolute compliance with the proposed rituals, *Soli* leaves room for the rejection of certain gestures without compromising the contemplative integrity of the work. Although participants may refuse to connect their smartphones to a cable, to engage in breathing and visualisation exercises, to massage their devices, or to take a selfie and to send it by email to *Soli*, the installation still serves as a liminal site for questioning our rituals, relations, and fetishism with our media technologies.

Following their immersion in a space specifically designed to prompt reflection on such matters, participants shared with me intriguing insights. Participant E explained that they felt themselves becoming much closer to a device that normally appears to them as cold and impersonal, ultimately seeing themselves in a new way through their smartphone. Participant C, however, experienced a physical reaction during the guided

meditation, noting that their muscles became tense when they were instructed to open certain apps. Likewise, Participant B indicated that the experience had left them wanting to break free from their smartphone rather than to become more integrated with it. Participant D remarked that, as someone who believes they are addicted to their smartphone, it felt very strange to be told to massage and caress the device despite the fact that they constantly touch and hold it throughout the average day. Finally, Participants C, F, and J each commented on the absolute necessity of possessing a smartphone in order to perform many basic tasks and activities, as well as the privilege to be able to do so. What these participant testimonies may suggest about *Soli* is that the immersive installation is an expression of the mediation between Self and experience which is inherent in media technologies and which is inextricably bound to the performance of ritual.

4.3 The Digital Aura

At the apex of the digital meditation experience, intensifying the interplay between the interfaces of the illuminated tent and the guided meditation, is the digital aura. This aura, inextricable from both immersive environment and ritualistic process, is as dependent on its media technological instruments as Lonsdale's aura photographs and Verstand's bio-generated beams of light. Furthermore, as with Lonsdale and Verstand's respective installations, the auratic product relies on the presence of the participant. While *Soli's* audio-visual digital aura may certainly be generated in the absence of the participant as the computer executes its programmed functions, it is the actions of taking a selfie within this aura, transmitting it by email to *Soli*, and receiving the image printed on instant film that constitute the digital aura in its entirety. This reification which occurs through processes of mediation renders the Self both a tangible object and a definite concept. Thus, like the auras produced by Lonsdale and Verstand's respective installations, what is significant here is not whether the participant wishes to ascribe any spiritual meaning to this digital aura, but that the digital aura exists as a

representation of the Self as a *thing* that is comprised of interchangeable symbols and references (Baudrillard, 1970; Baudrillard, 1973).

An aura—whether referring to Benjamin’s notions on the magical authenticity of art or to the metaphysical abstraction of the individual as comprised of supernatural fields of energy—is an effervescent *non-thing*. But, that does not mean that it is not *real*. While these two auras (Benjamin’s and the New Age spiritual one) do not denote the same concept, they are both undeniably founded in a sacred quest to discover the real, whether that pertains to authentic artistic production or to the authentic Self. Conversely, any visual representation of the aura of the Self, whether a photograph or coloured light or both, cannot be ‘real’ because it exists only as an explicit simulacrum and is wholly dependent on media technologies to enable its perception. By this logic, *Soli*’s digital aura is, perhaps, a manifestation of Benjamin and Baudrillard’s worst nightmares—it is both devoid of the former’s artistic aura and is for the latter the ultimate diabolical simulacrum as an image of an image of an image of the hyperreal.

The digital aura revealed by *Soli* is neither unique nor produced by any quantifiable means. Whereas Lonsdale’s aura photographs (and my own from *Magic Jewelry*) never achieve identical colour formations on any two instant film portraits, and Verstand’s colourful lighting effects are generated by algorithmically processing data captured by biosensors, *Soli*’s digital auras are pre-programmed in seven distinct varieties which are randomly selected by the software to be displayed following the guided meditation. If a visual representation of an aura is already a simulacrum, is my version of the aura any less authentic than Lonsdale’s or Verstand’s? Does the aura become less real when it is pictured in one’s smartphone selfie? Does it become even less real when this digital selfie image is printed as a physical photo? How deep does the simulacra rabbit hole go?

Of course, these aura selfies, both digital and physical, only capture a portion of the digital aura revealed by *Soli*. There is the verbal explanation, as well, which supposedly reveals a spiritual truth about the participant's relationship with their smartphone. Interestingly, when asked about their thoughts on these digital auras, four participants (B, C, D, and H) commented exclusively on the verbal description and four (A, E, F and G) commented on the colour. One participant (J) did not have any comments on their aura. All participants expressed pleasant surprise or excitement upon receiving their printed aura selfies. While most simply responded with a 'thank-you,' Participant E conveyed how good it felt to hold a physical photograph, how such objects seem simultaneously alien yet familiar, and how special the gesture was.

The significance of the photograph as an object, as a material thing, although the subject of much scrutiny and cynicism by Benjamin and Baudrillard, is recognised by the techno-spiritual theorists as a medium, in multiple senses of the word—artistic, communicative, and spiritual (Stolow, 2016; Natale, 2016b; Natale & Pasulka, 2019). The photograph, regardless of its image, is fundamentally an extension of the Self as an instrument of perception. As Davis explains, this is as much the case for photographs as it is for all media technologies:

From the moment that humans began etching grooves into ancient wizard bones to mark the cycles of the moon, the process of encoding thought and experience into a vehicle of expression has influenced the changing nature of the self. Information technology tweaks our perceptions, communicates our picture of the world to one another, and constructs remarkable and sometimes insidious forms of control over the cultural stories that shape our sense of the world. The moment we invent a significant new device for communication—talking drums, papyrus scrolls, printed books, crystal sets, computers, pagers—we partially reconstruct the self and its world, creating new opportunities (and new traps) for thought, perception, and social experience (1998, p. 4).

The Self is the medium and yet it is mediated through (media) technologies, a phenomenon that is only more so confused by *Soli*'s oversaturation of technological apparatus and interfaces. Between the aura selfies, the printed photographs, the cables,

the website, the emails, the audio-visual experience, the ritualistic gestures, and the device—how many mediations of the Self are there? Is there a real Self—a coherent, invariable, absolute configuration of the individual—to which these mediations refer?

CONCLUSION

What the immersive experience of *Soli* essentially elicits in the majority of its participants is a multifaceted distortion and subsequent disintegration of the perception of reality. Like spiritual smartphone apps, those “pocket universes we’re building out of protocols and pixel dust [that] might seem like dreams within a dream,” (Davis, 1998, p. 224) the consequences of the consumption of spirituality through *Soli* are as much contingent on the power of illusion that media technologies wield as they are on our technological illiteracy. “The logic of technology has become invisible—literally, occult. Without the code, you’re mystified. And nobody has all the codes anymore” (Davis, 1998, p. 181). The experience of *Soli* is a magical one not only because it blurs the lines between what is real and what is not, but because it demands that participants believe in the powers of media technologies and the simulations of reality which they propagate. Much like late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century occult phenomena, *Soli* generates an experience in which “the frontiers demarcating mind, body, and environment [are] far from fixed, and objects readily [move] among the discursive registers of energy physics, psychology, biology, medicine, spiritualist performance, esoteric philosophy, and mystical practice” (Stolow, 2016, p. 929).

Soli exists within our supposed reality, but also as ‘other’ to this reality, as that which is not quite real and not quite virtual either. *Soli* functions as a simulacrum of quotidian hyperreal experience in which we are all immersed through our various media technologies by simulating, reproducing, and exaggerating familiar rituals and illusions of the Self and of reality. While the Critical Theorists of the Frankfurt School would argue that such an experience can only further alienate the individual from their Self

and from reality, the techno-spiritual theorists would claim that it reinforces the media technological rhetoric of total connection of the Self with the world. Baudrillard, on the other hand, would declare the experience totally void of both Self and reality—neither connected to nor alienated from one another, but replaced by symbolic representations and replications. All of these deductions present valid positions, not as independent from one another, but in conversation with one another.

As demonstrated through the public presentation of *Soli*, the question of the Self is not one of pure connection, alienation, or annihilation, but of miscellaneous fragmentation across multiple interfaces and apparatus. This phenomenon, although not unique to the experience of *Soli* in its applicability to all media technologies, is made perceptible through explicitly spiritual discourse which is inherently concerned with questions of the nature of reality and of the Self. Subject to infinite and interchangeable hyperrealities, the Self is in perpetual flux—a shapeshifting mutation of one's consciousness and presence in the world. Contrary to Baudrillard's assertions, the existence of the Self does not rely on the existence of reality. Instead, the Self persists in proximity to reality within the mediated realms of simulation, illusion, and simulacra. Independent of conceptions of the real or of reality, the Self has no centre, no fixed point of reference. We mistake the Self as disappeared because we are unable to locate it in a coherent form. This is why we take Selfies or search for ourselves through spiritual smartphone apps—to gather proof that the Self exists. And it *does* exist, but not as an innate truth grounded in reality, nor as a human-machine assemblage of extensions, nor as a seamless union of the two, but as a *mediated* phenomenon. Perceptible only through the process of engaging with media technologies, the Self is revealed to us in the form of inexhaustible images, data, and sensory experiences.

Ultimately, *Soli* is not an app and it is not a smartphone. Nor is it quite a work of art like the auratic creations of Christina Lonsdale and Nick Verstand, or the meditative

and trance-inducing pieces by Nam June Paik, Krista Kim, Haroon Mirza, Maxime Michaud, and Peaches and Pussykrew. *Soli* is not inscribed within a formal artistic practice, but is an idea rooted in my desire to know and to explore. It is an experimentation which may provide us with insights and help us to formulate questions about spiritual media technologies (such as apps for meditation, astrology, and divination; Victorian fortune-telling automata; newspaper horoscopes; and aura photographs) and about the spiritual nature of media technologies (such as our intimacy with our smartphones, the instantaneousness of communication and information transmission through time and space, and the networked connectedness of humans and objects with one another).

As a research-creation project, this immersive installation is limited not only by its medium, but by the circumstances of its presentation. *Soli*, like other art installations, does not so much produce concrete results as it does generate an experience. It is my hope, of course, as the research-creator, that this experience will encourage participants to reflect on and to critically engage with their reactions to it; however, this outcome cannot be guaranteed nor is it within my control. Moreover, such a limited pool of participants, all of whom are personally and professionally acquainted with me, renders my analysis of their experience scientifically unreliable at worst and philosophically conjectural at best. This is not, however, to discredit the innovative potential of *Soli* as an intellectual and creative site for contemplating meaning. It remains to be seen which kinds of reactions, reflections, and results could be derived from the presentation of the installation in a non-academic, publically accessible setting—perhaps in a festival or gallery context—with a diverse group of impartial and unaffiliated participants.

ANNEX A

ETHICAL CERTIFICATE

CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE

Le Comité d'éthique de la recherche pour les projets étudiants impliquant des êtres humains (CERPE plurifacultaire) a examiné le projet de recherche suivant et le juge conforme aux pratiques habituelles ainsi qu'aux normes établies par la *Politique No 54 sur l'éthique de la recherche avec des êtres humains* (Janvier 2016) de l'UQAM.

Titre du projet:	Le soi numérique et la marchandisation de la spiritualité à travers les médias pour téléphones intelligents
Nom de l'étudiant:	Leona NIKOLIC
Programme d'études:	Maîtrise en communication (recherche-création en média expérimental)
Direction de recherche:	Katharina NIEMEYER
Codirection:	Dany BEAUPRÉ

Modalités d'application

Toute modification au protocole de recherche en cours de même que tout événement ou renseignement pouvant affecter l'intégrité de la recherche doivent être communiqués rapidement au comité.

La suspension ou la cessation du protocole, temporaire ou définitive, doit être communiquée au comité dans les meilleurs délais.

Le présent certificat est valide pour une durée d'un an à partir de la date d'émission. Au terme de ce délai, un rapport d'avancement de projet doit être soumis au comité, en guise de rapport final si le projet est réalisé en moins d'un an, et en guise de rapport annuel pour le projet se poursuivant sur plus d'une année. Dans ce dernier cas, le rapport annuel permettra au comité de se prononcer sur le renouvellement du certificat d'approbation éthique.



Raoul Graf
Président du CERPE plurifacultaire
Professeur, Département de marketing

ANNEX B
SOLI INTRODUCTION TEXT

Bonjour. Bienvenue à Soli : une expérience de méditation numérique. Ici, vous et votre téléphone intelligent sont réunis comme un seul être, une entité unique avec une âme radieuse. Afin de garantir une expérience fluide, assurez-vous de suivre attentivement toutes les directives. Si à tout moment vous vous sentez mal à l'aise, vous êtes libre de quitter l'espace.

Vous remarquerez que quelques informations clés sont éclairées devant vous. Pour commencer l'expérience, assurez-vous que vous êtes connecté à l'Internet. Si vous n'êtes pas encore connecté à Internet, vous pouvez utiliser le réseau et le mot de passe fournis ici.

Une fois que vous avez établi une connexion, veuillez scanner le code QR affiché. Vous pouvez utiliser votre appareil photo ordinaire pour scanner le code QR avec la plupart des iPhones et des téléphones Android. Si vous ne parvenez pas à le scanner, vous pouvez taper l'adresse Web indiquée directement sous le code QR.

Vous devriez maintenant avoir une page web ouverte du site web de Soli. Veuillez remplir le formulaire comme indiqué. Une fois que vous avez soumis le formulaire, NE FERMEZ PAS la page web. Vous aurez besoin de vous référer à cette page à nouveau pendant votre expérience de méditation numérique.

Veuillez patienter ici quelques instants pendant que Soli traite vos informations.

Soli a traité vos informations. Vous pouvez entrer dans la tente illuminée qui se trouve devant vous.

ANNEX C

SOLI GUIDED MEDITATION TEXT

Veillez-vous asseoir sur le pouf au centre de cet espace, et détendez-vous. Une fois assis, veuillez choisir le câble correspondant à votre téléphone intelligent et le connecter. Prenez quelques instants pour vous allonger et vous mettre à l'aise, car vous serez ici pendant les dix prochaines minutes.

Assurez-vous que votre appareil est en mode vibration ou silencieux. Nous commencerons par une courte méditation guidée. Grâce à cette méditation, Soli vous aidera à vous connecter plus profondément à votre soi numérique en se concentrant sur votre relation avec votre appareil numérique le plus intime—votre téléphone intelligent. Pendant la méditation, Soli recueillera et analysera les données de votre téléphone intelligent, comme indiqué dans les termes et conditions que vous avez acceptés avant de commencer l'expérience. Cette analyse de vos données personnelles sera utilisée pour déterminer l'état de bien-être de votre soi numérique.

Celle-ci sera affichée sous la forme d'une aura numérique, qui sera révélée après la méditation guidée. Il est important que votre téléphone intelligent soit correctement connecté à l'un des câbles fournis pendant toute la durée de votre expérience avec Soli. Si votre téléphone intelligent n'est pas correctement connecté au câble correspondant, l'analyse de votre aura numérique sera moins exhaustive et basée uniquement sur les données recueillies précédemment lors de votre inscription sur le site web de Soli.

Ne vous inquiétez pas si vous n'avez jamais médité auparavant. Ce temps est pour vous, vous seul avec votre téléphone intelligent. Laissez-vous simplement être, ici et maintenant, libre de jugement. Prenez quelques respirations profondes en vous détendant et assurez-vous que vous êtes à l'aise. Laissez votre téléphone intelligent reposer légèrement entre vos deux mains, en reposant les mains sur le ventre. Détendez-vous et laissez-vous guider dans un état de conscience hyperréel entre réalité et virtualité, entre votre soi et votre téléphone intelligent.

Commencez à respirer lentement en absorbant les sons et l'espace qui vous entourent. Maintenez un regard doux, sans point de focus. Inspirez par le nez et expirez par la bouche. Sentez comment vos poumons se dilatent lorsque vous les remplissez d'air. Remarquez comment les muscles de votre corps s'assouplissent lorsque vous relâchez

l'air. Fermez doucement les yeux et laissez votre respiration revenir à son rythme naturel. Sentez le poids de votre corps s'alourdir sur la chaise. Sentez que vous vous y enfoncez. Sentez le poids de votre téléphone intelligent peser légèrement sur vos mains. Ne le tenez pas fermement, laissez-le simplement coexister tranquillement avec votre corps. Sentez votre téléphone intelligent devenir lourd, jusqu'à ce qu'il semble s'enfoncer dans vos mains et dans votre corps.

Sentez votre souffle remplir votre estomac. Sentez votre téléphone intelligent qui monte et descend dans vos mains au rythme de votre respiration. Prenez conscience de la connexion physique entre votre corps et votre téléphone intelligent.

En vous concentrant sur votre téléphone intelligent entre les mains, commencez à imaginer une lumière blanche et brillante qui se manifeste de votre téléphone intelligent et monte jusqu'à vos côtes, votre cœur, votre poitrine, votre gorge, et jusqu'au milieu de votre front, directement entre vos sourcils. Concentrez votre attention sur cet endroit entre vos sourcils en visualisant ce courant de lumière entre votre front et votre téléphone intelligent. Avec votre esprit, retracez le courant de lumière jusqu'au téléphone intelligent.

Les yeux toujours fermés, commencez à manipuler le téléphone avec vos mains. Commencez à le masser doucement. En vous fiant uniquement à la sensation de votre toucher, portez attention aux surfaces ressenties—les rebords, les petits boutons. Explorez la surface de l'écran. Sentez sa finesse. La rigidité du verre. Si votre écran est brisé, ressentez chaque fracture du bout des doigts. Remarquez comment le téléphone intelligent se réchauffe avec votre toucher. Tout en massant votre téléphone intelligent, commencez à remarquer des sensations dans votre corps. Laissez chaque sensation aller et venir.

Pendant que vous continuez à passer vos doigts sur la surface lisse et apaisante de l'écran, ouvrez doucement les yeux. Concentrez doucement votre regard sur l'écran entre vos mains et activez votre téléphone intelligent. Si vous avez des notifications, prenez un moment pour y jeter un coup d'œil, pour simplement les reconnaître. Ne les laissez pas vous distraire.

Maintenant, jetez un coup d'œil à vos trois conversations texto les plus récentes. Lisez les derniers messages que vous avez envoyés et les réponses que vous avez reçues lors de chaque conversation. Remarquez s'il y a des différences dans la façon dont vous communiquez avec les différentes personnes. Fermez vos messages et revenez à l'écran principal.

Ouvrez désormais vos courriels. Notez de qui proviennent ces courriels. Peut-être des amis, de la famille, du travail, de l'école, des achats, des rendez-vous, des infolettres

auxquelles vous vous êtes abonné ou des publicités. Concentrez-vous sur votre respiration en fermant vos courriels et revenez à l'écran principal.

Ouvrez maintenant une application de réseaux sociaux que vous utilisez—peut-être votre préférée ou celle que vous utilisez le plus souvent. Faites défiler le fil d'actualité des images, des vidéos et du texte. Ne concentrez pas votre attention sur quoi que ce soit de spécifique. Laissez-vous transporter par son ensemble, laissez-vous immerger entièrement. Remarquez ce que vous ressentez. Remarquez votre corps. Continuez à faire défiler le contenu à mesure que vous devenez de plus en plus immergé dans votre fil d'actualité. Prenez une grande respiration en fermant cette application et revenez à l'écran principal.

Fermez une nouvelle fois les yeux en vous remettant à vous concentrer sur le poids du téléphone intelligent entre vos mains, vos mains sur votre corps. Maintenant, imaginez que votre corps et votre téléphone intelligent se fondent l'un dans l'autre en devenant de plus en plus légers jusqu'à ce que vous soyez en apesanteur. Imaginez votre corps en apesanteur, flottant, s'élevant de plus en plus haut.

Profitez de ce moment pour exprimer votre gratitude envers votre téléphone intelligent, pour le remercier d'être le vaisseau de votre soi numérique.

Ouvrez doucement les yeux. La méditation guidée est maintenant terminée. Restez assis et attendez quelques instants pendant que Soli analyse votre aura numérique.

ANNEX D

SOLI DIGITAL AURA TEXT

- Votre aura numérique est **rouge**. Cette aura est une représentation de vous et de votre téléphone intelligent—votre soi numérique. Le rouge est la couleur du chakra de la racine qui symbolise le lien entre votre corps physique et le monde matériel. Une aura rouge indique que vous avez une relation physique intime avec votre téléphone intelligent. Que vous vous détendez chez vous, passez du temps avec vos amis, cuisinez, profitez de la nature, travaillez, dormez ou allez aux toilettes, votre téléphone intelligent est toujours à portée de main. Vous êtes rarement séparé physiquement de lui et le gardez souvent près de votre corps. Une aura rouge peut également suggérer que vous aimez le remplacer fréquemment afin d'avoir l'appareil le plus récent sur le marché.
- Votre aura numérique est **orange**. Cette aura est une représentation de vous et de votre téléphone intelligent—votre soi numérique. L'orange est la couleur du chakra sacré et symbolise les expériences créatives, sociales et sensuelles de votre être émotionnel. Une aura orange indique que votre téléphone intelligent est votre principal outil pour vous exprimer à travers des pratiques artistiques. Vous êtes une personne imaginative et vous aimez explorer votre créativité sous forme de texte, d'images, de vidéos et de musique. Votre téléphone intelligent vous permet de vous connecter avec d'autres personnes en partageant vos créations sur diverses plateformes. Une aura orange peut également suggérer que vous tirez plus de plaisir et de sens de la vie grâce à l'écran de votre téléphone intelligent que lorsque vous vous en éloignez.
- Votre aura numérique est **jaune**. Cette aura est une représentation de vous et de votre téléphone intelligent—votre soi numérique. Le jaune est la couleur du chakra du plexus solaire qui symbolise votre identité personnelle, vos systèmes de croyance et vos capacités intellectuelles. Une aura jaune indique que votre sens de l'objectif est stimulé par votre téléphone intelligent. Vous cherchez de la motivation et des conseils pratiques à travers des aide-mémoire et des calendriers quotidiens, des nouvelles et des informations personnalisées, et d'autres applications qui fournissent des renseignements utiles. Il est un outil essentiel pour vous permettre de rester présent et informé. Une aura jaune peut également suggérer que vous êtes à la recherche d'une stabilité personnelle par le biais de votre téléphone intelligent.

- Votre aura numérique est **verte**. Cette aura est une représentation de vous et de votre téléphone intelligent—votre soi numérique. Le vert est la couleur du chakra du cœur qui symbolise l'amour, la compassion et votre capacité de transformation personnelle. Une aura verte indique que vous utilisez votre téléphone intelligent comme un outil de guérison et de développement personnel. Que vous appreniez une nouvelle langue, analysiez vos données de santé, surveilliez vos habitudes de sommeil ou méditez, votre téléphone intelligent est essentiel pour que vous vous sentiez connecté à vous-même. S'engager à s'aimer soi-même grâce à votre téléphone intelligent vous permet d'être plus attentionné envers les autres. Une aura verte peut également suggérer que votre téléphone intelligent est davantage en phase avec vous que vous ne l'êtes avec vous-même.
- Votre aura numérique est **bleue**. Cette aura est une représentation de vous et de votre téléphone intelligent—votre soi numérique. Le bleu est la couleur du chakra de la gorge et symbolise votre capacité à communiquer et à établir des relations avec les autres. Une aura bleue indique que votre téléphone intelligent est votre principal outil de connexion sociale. Vos relations avec les autres sont principalement modérées par diverses applications, que vous soyez en train de faire un appel vidéo avec votre famille, de partager des images avec vos amis, d'envoyer des courriels à vos collègues, de publier du contenu sur les réseaux sociaux ou d'interagir avec des étrangers en ligne. Vous êtes rarement seul, car vous êtes toujours en contact avec quelqu'un de l'autre côté de l'écran. Une aura bleue peut également suggérer que vous préférez communiquer avec les autres par voie numérique plutôt qu'en personne.
- Votre aura numérique est **violette**. Cette aura est une représentation de vous et de votre téléphone intelligent—votre soi numérique. Le violet est la couleur du troisième chakra de l'œil et symbolise votre intuition et votre capacité de pouvoir psychique. Une aura violette indique que vous croyez aux pouvoirs innovants des algorithmes et de l'intelligence artificielle pour améliorer votre qualité de vie. Vous écoutez des listes de lecture conçues en fonction de vos préférences musicales, vous appréciez les publicités qui savent exactement ce que vous envisagez d'acheter et vous demandez régulièrement conseil à votre assistant virtuel. Vous savez toujours quoi penser et quoi faire car votre téléphone intelligent anticipe vos besoins et vos désirs. Une aura violette peut également suggérer que vous faites plus confiance à votre téléphone intelligent qu'à vous-même.
- Votre aura numérique est **rose**. Cette aura est une représentation de vous et de votre téléphone intelligent—votre soi numérique. Le rose est la couleur du chakra de la couronne et symbolise vos qualités excentriques, visionnaires et révolutionnaires. Une aura rose indique que vous croyez en la capacité du téléphone intelligent à exercer une influence sociétale positive. Que vous souteniez

des causes auxquelles vous croyez, utilisez des applications qui favorisent un mode de vie durable ou partagez des informations utiles avec des personnes du monde entier, vous vous consacrez à l'exploration du vaste potentiel du téléphone intelligent. Vous êtes toujours à la recherche de nouvelles façons bénéfiques de vous engager dans le monde grâce à lui. Une aura rose peut également suggérer que votre croyance en les téléphones intelligents est plus forte que votre foi en l'humanité.

Vous pouvez maintenant débrancher votre téléphone intelligent du câble. Profitez de ce moment pour prendre une photo de vous entouré de votre aura—un aura selfie. Vous pouvez vous lever et vous bouger pour trouver le meilleur angle, ou rester assis. Comme vous le souhaitez ! Allez-y, prenez autant de selfies que vous le désirez.

Soli aimerait vous offrir la possibilité de transformer l'un de vos aura selfies en une impression physique—une photo instantanée—un talisman symbolisant l'interface liminale entre le réel et le virtuel, entre le soi et le téléphone intelligent.

Si vous souhaitez imprimer votre aura selfie, veuillez écouter attentivement les instructions suivantes. Ouvrez votre navigateur internet et retrouvez la page web du site Soli qui est apparue après votre inscription plus tôt. Celle que je vous ai dit de ne pas fermer. Veuillez cliquer sur l'option "communiquer avec Soli". Vous devriez être automatiquement dirigé vers un nouvel onglet de courriel dans votre application de messagerie électronique. Joignez simplement votre aura selfie à ce courriel et cliquez sur envoyer ! C'est aussi simple que cela !

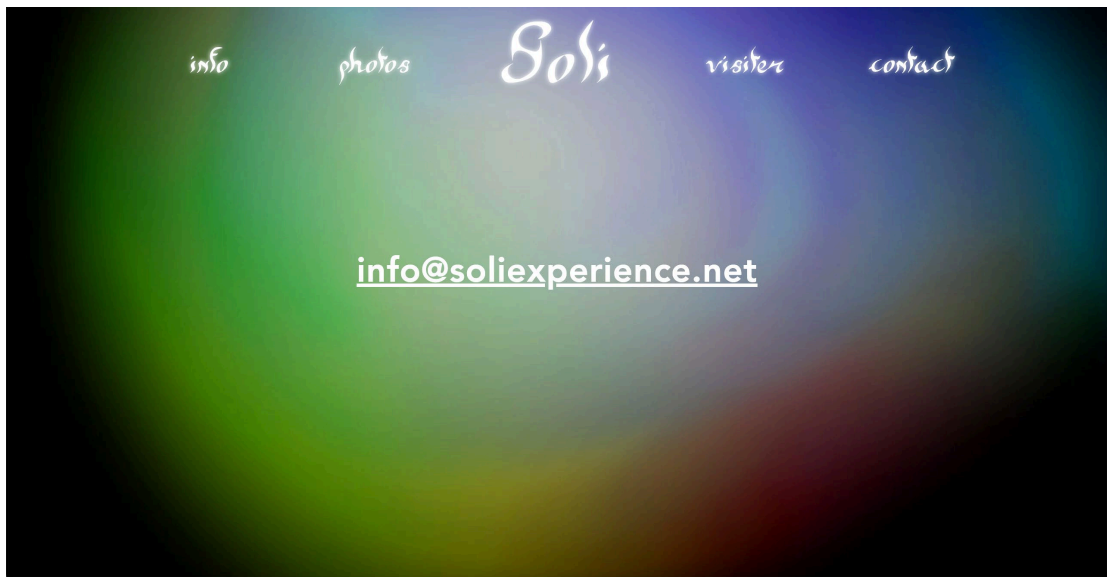
En cas de problème ou de confusion, vous pouvez également joindre votre aura selfie directement par courriel en utilisant l'adresse info@soliexperience.net. Encore une fois, info@soliexperience.net.

Si, pour une raison quelconque, vous avez des difficultés à envoyer votre aura selfie par courriel, nous trouverons une solution pour vous après votre sortie de la tente.

N'hésitez pas à rester immergé dans votre aura pendant les prochaines minutes, ou à sortir de l'espace dès que vous êtes prêt. N'oubliez pas d'envoyer vos aura selfies à vos amis et de les partager sur les réseaux sociaux avec le hashtag Soli. Merci d'avoir utilisé Soli.

ANNEX E

SOLI WEBSITE (<https://soliexperience.wixsite.com/soli>)



[info](#) [photos](#) **Soli** [visiter](#) [contact](#)

Soli est une installation audiovisuelle immersive conçue comme une « expérience de méditation numérique » qui positionne conceptuellement le téléphone intelligent et son utilisateur comme une entité homogène. Inspirée par l'émergence récente et la popularité des applications spirituelles pour téléphones intelligents pour des pratiques telles que la méditation, l'astrologie et la divination, Soli examine les liens intrinsèques entre la spiritualité et la technologie à travers une exploration subversive de notre captivation incessante avec nos téléphones intelligents. L'expérience de l'installation, qui commence par une méditation guidée de dix minutes, est vécue dans la solitude par l'utilisateur sous une structure éthérée et lumineuse en forme de tente.

Après cette méditation ritualisée au cours de laquelle l'utilisateur est invité à connecter son téléphone intelligent au système informatique de Soli à l'aide d'un câble fourni et à interagir avec son appareil de manière à la fois absurde et ordinaire, l'installation révèle « l'aura numérique » de l'utilisateur. Pendant ce moment, l'utilisateur est encouragé à prendre un selfie sur le fond chromatique et, en sortant de l'installation, il se voit offrir la possibilité de transsubstantier immédiatement cet instantané numérique immatériel en une photographie matérielle — un talisman symbolisant l'interface liminale entre le réel et le virtuel, entre le Soi et le téléphone intelligent.

* * *

Soli a été réalisé par Leona Nikoljé, étudiante à la maîtrise en communication (concentration recherche-création en média expérimental) à l'Université du Québec à Montréal, dans le cadre son mémoire.

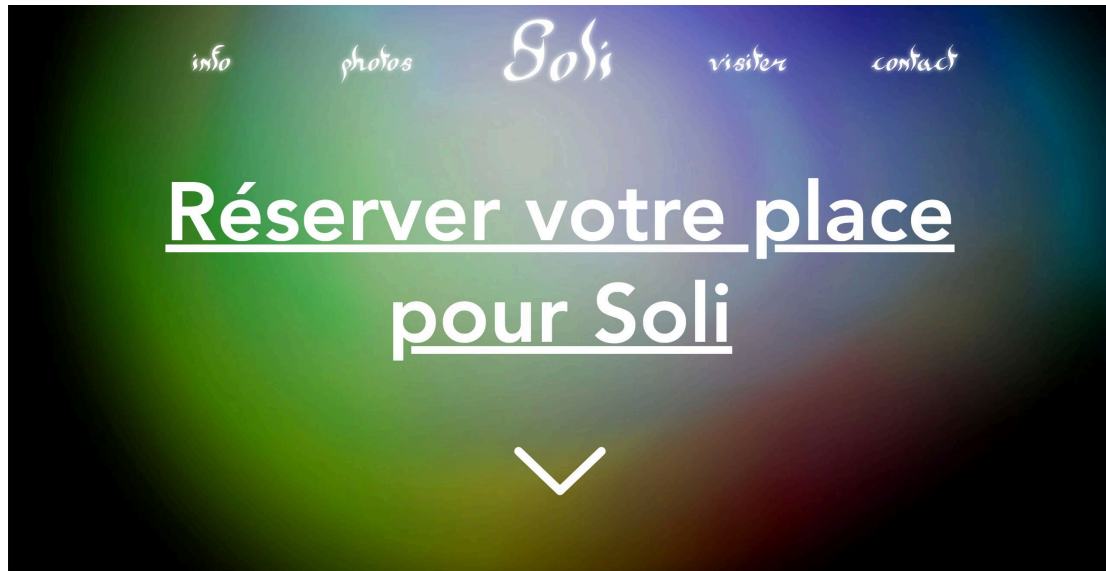
Conception artistique : Leona Nikoljé
 Coordination de l'événement : Leona Nikoljé
 Design web : Leona Nikoljé
 Texte de méditation : Leona Nikoljé
 Révision du texte de la méditation : Francis Desruisseaux
 Enregistrement et montage audio : Leona Nikoljé
 Art vidéo : Leona Nikoljé
 Voix de la méditation : Francis Desruisseaux
 Programmation audiovisuelle : Peter van Haafden
 Montage et assistance technique : Kenny Lefebvre
 Documentation : Leona Nikoljé

[info](#) [photos](#) **Soli** [visiter](#) [contact](#)

Soli révélera votre aura numérique en fonction de votre relation avec votre téléphone intelligent. Une aura est un champ énergétique qui représente votre être spirituel. Votre aura changera de temps en temps.

Chaque participant.e à Soli recevra une impression photo instantanée gratuite de son aura selfie. Bien que Soli détermine votre aura de manière algorithmique, elle s'inspire de la photographie d'aura traditionnelle qui utilise des capteurs électromagnétiques.





Soli sera disponible dimanche le 11 avril et lundi le 12 avril de 10h à 18h15.
L'expérience durera environ 15 minutes.

* * *

Form fields:

- Input: Votre prénom
- Input: Votre nom de famille
- Input: Courriel
- Dropdown: Plage horaire

Je suis étudiant.e ou employé.e de l'UGAM ou je suis autorisé.e à accéder au campus.

Oui
 Non

Réserver

Veuillez noter que des règles sanitaires strictes seront mises en place pour assurer la sécurité des participant.e.s. Les participant.e.s devront porter un masque à tout moment, se désinfecter les mains et un.e seul.e participant.e à la fois sera autorisé.e dans l'espace. Les participant.e.s doivent réserver une plage horaire pour visiter Soli afin d'assurer la distanciation physique.

[info](#)
[photos](#)
Soli
[visiter](#)
[contact](#)

Veuillez remplir les informations ci-dessous afin d'activer Soli.

* * *

Votre prénom

Votre nom de famille

Courriel

Je confirme avoir lu et j'accepte [les termes et conditions](#).

Commencer

[info](#)
[photos](#)
Soli
[visiter](#)
[contact](#)

Termes et conditions

Les présentes conditions générales d'utilisation ("Conditions") s'appliquent à votre accès et à votre utilisation de notre Site Web. Si à la date de votre accès à notre Site Web, vous n'avez pas accepté nos Conditions, vous ne pouvez pas accéder à notre Site Web. En cliquant sur le bouton "Commencer" ci-dessous, vous acceptez nos Conditions et vous consentez à ce que nous puissions utiliser vos données personnelles de la manière décrite dans ces Conditions.

1. Description des services

Notre Site Web est un service en ligne qui permet aux utilisateurs de partager et de découvrir des photos et vidéos de leur voyage. Les utilisateurs peuvent créer un compte, télécharger des photos et vidéos, et les partager avec d'autres utilisateurs. Les utilisateurs peuvent également commenter les photos et vidéos et les liker.

2. Durée et renouvellement des services

Notre Site Web est un service en ligne qui est disponible 24 heures sur 24, 7 jours sur 7. Les services sont fournis en continu et peuvent être interrompus sans préavis pour des raisons techniques ou de maintenance.

3. Propriété intellectuelle

Vous conservez tous les droits de propriété intellectuelle que vous détenez sur les photos et vidéos que vous téléchargez sur notre Site Web. Cependant, en téléchargeant vos photos et vidéos sur notre Site Web, vous accordez à notre société une licence non exclusive, transférable, mondiale et sans restriction de durée pour utiliser vos photos et vidéos à des fins promotionnelles, marketing et publicitaires.

4. Participation volontaire et avis

Notre participation est volontaire. Vous pouvez à tout moment arrêter de participer à notre Site Web en supprimant votre compte et vos données. Vous pouvez également nous envoyer des commentaires ou des suggestions.

5. Contact et les commentaires

Vous pouvez nous contacter à l'adresse suivante: contact@solis.com. Nous nous efforçons de répondre à toutes vos demandes dans un délai raisonnable.

6. Commentaires

Vous pouvez laisser des commentaires sur les photos et vidéos que vous voyez sur notre Site Web. Cependant, nous nous réservons le droit de supprimer tout commentaire qui est offensant, diffamatoire, trompeur, ou qui viole nos Conditions.

ANNEX F

SOLI TERMS AND CONDITIONS (CONSENT FORM)

Termes et conditions

Les présentes conditions générales (« Conditions ») s'appliquent à votre accès et à votre utilisation de ce site Web, ou à d'autres produits et services (collectivement, nos « services ») fournis par Soli. (« Soli » ou « nous »). En accédant au site Web de Soli ou en participant à l'installation immersive de Soli (« Expérience de méditation numérique »), vous acceptez ces Conditions. Si vous n'acceptez pas ces conditions, veuillez ne pas utiliser nos services.

1. Description des services

Soli est une installation audio-visuelle immersive conçue comme une "expérience de méditation numérique" qui situe conceptuellement le téléphone intelligent et son utilisateur comme une seule entité. Inspiré par l'émergence récente et la popularité généralisée des applications spirituelles pour téléphones intelligents pour des pratiques telles que la méditation, l'astrologie et la divination, Soli confronte les enchevêtrements intrinsèques entre la spiritualité et la technologie à travers une exploration subversive de notre implacable captivation avec nos téléphones intelligents.

Grâce à cette méditation guidée, Soli vous aidera à vous connecter plus profondément à votre soi numérique en se concentrant sur votre relation avec votre appareil numérique le plus intime — votre téléphone intelligent. Au cours de la médiation, Soli collectera et analysera les données de votre appareil mobile et de vos interactions avec lui afin de déterminer l'état de bien-être de votre soi numérique.

2. Admissibilité

Vous devez avoir au moins 13 ans pour accéder ou utiliser nos services. Si vous avez moins de 18 ans (ou l'âge de la majorité légale où vous habitez), vous ne pouvez accéder à nos services ou les utiliser qu'avec le consentement d'un parent ou d'un tuteur légal qui accepte d'être lié par les présentes conditions. Si vous êtes le parent ou le tuteur légal d'un utilisateur de moins de 18 ans (ou l'âge de la majorité légale), vous acceptez d'être pleinement responsable des actes ou des omissions de cet utilisateur en relation

avec nos Services. Si vous accédez à ou utilisez nos Services pour le compte d'une autre personne ou entité, vous déclarez que vous êtes autorisé à accepter les présentes Conditions pour le compte de cette personne ou entité et que cette personne ou entité accepte d'être responsable envers nous si vous ou l'autre personne ou une entité enfreint ces Conditions.

3. Participation volontaire et retrait

Votre participation est entièrement libre et volontaire. Vous pouvez refuser d'y participer ou vous retirer en tout temps sans devoir justifier votre décision. Si vous décidez de vous retirer de l'étude, vous n'avez qu'à aviser Leona Nikolić, la chercheuse, verbalement ; toutes les données vous concernant seront détruites.

4. Risques liés à la participation

Certains participants peuvent trouver la méditation guidée stressante, désagréable ou émotionnellement inconfortable.

Si l'installation engendre un malaise émotionnel, vous serez dirigé vers l'organisme Halte-Ami (Service d'écoute confidentiel, anonyme, gratuit et sans rendez-vous de l'UQAM) qui est situé au :

1259 rue Berri, 10e étage, UQAM, Local AC-10100

Tél. :514-987-8509

6. Consentement

Vous déclarez avoir lu et compris le présent projet et la nature et l'ampleur de votre participation tels que présentés dans le présent formulaire. Vous avez eu l'occasion de poser toutes les questions concernant les différents aspects de l'étude et de recevoir des réponses à votre satisfaction. Vous confirmez que vous comprenez qu'aucune donnée personnelle ne sera recueillie à tout moment par cette installation à partir de votre téléphone intelligent, bien que nous affirmions le contraire dans nos publicités et notre expérience d'installation. Vous acceptez volontairement de participer à cette étude. Vous pouvez vous retirer en tout temps sans préjudice d'aucune sorte. Vous certifiez qu'on vous a laissé le temps voulu pour prendre votre décision.

ANNEX G
AUDIO FILES AND VIDEO DOCUMENTATION

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1FALnqMAEWmuJ2ou3djdHSYXfUKq3uZe2?usp=sharing>

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