

Polysemic Intimacy: Borges' Labyrinths and Random Encounters

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Abstract

This paper delves into the conceptual underpinnings and experiential dimensions of the immersive installation titled 'Polysemic Intimacy' (2023-2024) drawing inspiration from Jorge Luis Borges's labyrinths and the sensorial artistry of Olafur Eliasson, the installation emerges as a synthesis of intellectual depth and immersive aesthetics. The narrative unfolds within a physical labyrinth, embodying Borgesian themes of infinite possibilities, mirrors, and nonlinear storytelling. Colored lights, sequential panels, and reflective surfaces create disorienting effects, while thematic chambers echo Borges 'Garden of Forking Paths.' The incorporation of Eliasson's elemental influences introduces natural elements, spatial illusions, and collaborative storytelling, adding layers to the immersive experience. The paper explores the interplay of ambiguity and uncertainty in the design, inviting participants to navigate the possibility of random casual encounters driven by their inputs — text, light, and sound. through contrasting elements. The intention is to explore in the design of the installation, the integration of metaphysical inquiry, and philosophical reflections on identity, existence, and nature of reality in casual intimate encounters. The work emerges as a multidimensional exploration that transcends conventional boundaries, inviting participants to engage intellectually, emotionally, and sensorial, considering exploring the potential of interactive art to create transformative and contemplative experiences.

Keywords

Jorge Luis Borges, Labyrinths, Random Encounters, Interactive Installations, Perception of Time and Space, Intimacy, casual encounters.

Introduction

"I leave to the various futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths" [1].

According to Dr. Michael Delahoyde, Washington State University [2], writers connected to "magic realism" often credit Jorge Luis Borges as an inspiration. The prose fiction of Jorge Luis Borges in Argentina, as well as the works of writers like Gabriel García Márquez in Colombia and many other Latin American writers, Gunter Grass in Germany, and John Fowles in England, are all considered to be examples of magic realism, a term that was first used to describe a school of painters in the 1920s. These authors skillfully blend elements of fantasy and dreaminess, as well as elements drawn from mythology and fairy tales, with sharply etched realism in their depictions of everyday events and descriptive details.

According to Delahoyde, "Borges' metaphysical fictions open up ways of thinking about texts and textual issues, and they're enjoyable if you don't mind a mild conceptual vertigo." [2]. In Borges' short story "The Garden of Forking Paths," [1] an Asian acting as an Axis agent kills a random Sinologist in order to encrypt a message to Berlin about the significance of the city of Albert. Borges uses the agent's grandfather's invention of a textual labyrinth in a playful way. The massive riddle, or parable, "The Garden of Forking Paths" [1], whose theme is time, is forbidden to be mentioned for this recondite reason. Perhaps the most emphatic way to stress something is to never use a word, instead using weak metaphors and clear-cut periphrases. The symbolism inherent in the labyrinth, according to H. E. Lewald [3] "represents whose multiplicity or unknown factors exemplify a lack of order or apparent purpose." [3] In the absence of a theological interpretation, according to Lewald [3], these labyrinth forces preclude any rational or positivistic analysis that might diminish man's frustrations.

The series of experimental and embodied encounters by Olafur Eliasson, the Danish-Icelandic artist, site-specific "pavilions" as part of his solo exhibition *The Curious Desert* [4], which is on display at the National Museum of Qatar in Doha (19 March–15 August 2023) navigates the idea of the labyrinth in ways to that promote illusionary and factual interpersonal encounters. As Elliat Albrecht observes [4] this is Eliasson's first exhibition in the Gulf and is held both indoors and outdoors and features works on view inside the museum in Doha that include expansive light installations, photo series from Iceland, intricate geometric studies, watercolors, optical devices, and a sprawling research map.



Figure 1. Olafur Eliasson, *The Living Lighthouse* (2023).. Image by [4] [5]

In Olafur Eliasson, *The Living Lighthouse* (2023) [5] the light source is a low, circular structure in the center of the room that is more than three meters in diameter. Motorized shutters and colored glass panes are suspended beneath the dark top and rotate steadily. The walls are integrated into the artwork by the moving light curtain, which turns the exhibition area from a simple gallery for the art into a focal point in and of itself that offers a labyrinth of light for the audience to explore, replicating the presence in sequences of shadows on the top of the panels.



Figure 2. Olafur Eliasson, *Shadows traveling on the sea of the day* (2022). Image by [4] [6]

The glass panes are made of dichroic, or color-effect, filter glass, which lets some light through while reflecting other wavelengths. Because of this, the glass seems to have a different color depending on the position and angle at which light is observed. Disorienting effects like this can be used to translate the idea of the labyrinth in spaces that promote casual encounters in which the unknown plays a central role.



Figure 3. Olafur Eliasson, *Your Body of Work*, 2011. Image by Anders Sune Berg [7]

In conversation with Elliot Albrecht, Olafur Eliasson [4] considered offering, “Shadows traveling on the sea of the day” (2022), an alternative way of encountering it to the commercial experiences, spaces for “embodied experience and self-reflection.” [4]

The vast labyrinth “Your body of work” by Olafur Eliasson is reminiscent of an enlarged science lab from your old school, with its walls composed of colored plastic in the classic print technology colors of cyan, magenta, and yellow. But as Jonas Ekeberg points out, there’s no body, no playfulness, and no transgression here [7]. Even though this installation is only meant to be viewed with the eyes, it is fascinating in and of itself.

The Chinese artist Wang Wei in the installation 《和我一样》 *The Same as Me* (2008) [8] divided the space into two equal-sized rooms using a single mirror, the audience walks in, and the light controller will control the lighting of the two rooms.



Figure 4. Wang Wei in the installation 《和我一样》 *The Same as Me* (2008). Image by [8]

The audience in the dark space can see the opposite room through the one-way mirror, but at the same time, the audience in the bright room can only see the mirror reflection in their own space.

Polyssemic Intimacy: Random Encounters

The conceptual proposal for the installation “Polyssemic Intimacy” (2023-2024), considers incorporating mirrors strategically within the labyrinth, echoing Borges’ fascination with mirrors as metaphors for identity and infinite reflection. Visitors may encounter reflections of themselves, creating a sense of self-discovery and disorientation. Design pathways that branch off in multiple directions, mirroring Borges’ concept of a universe with infinite possibilities as in “The Garden of Forking Paths” [1], the paths can lead to different chambers or thematic areas, each representing a different narrative or emotion.

By experimenting with spatial illusions and distortions that challenge visitors' perceptions of space, "Polyssemic Intimacy" (2023-2024) invites us to explore the boundaries between the real and the perceived and challenge rigid and linear conceptions of time, so incorporate elements that play with scale, perspective, and geometry. Embracing nonlinear storytelling techniques, inspired by Borges' nonlinear narratives they use projections, audio snippets, and written text to tell fragmented stories that visitors can piece together as they navigate the labyrinth. Before entering the labyrinth, visitors type in a tablet, using an app coded in P5JS, phrases that will be projected onto the wall and on the ground that can catch other visitors' attention and promote random casual encounters inside the labyrinthine structure of the installation.

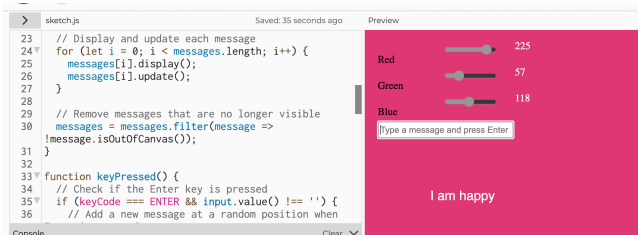


Figure 5. "Polyssemic Intimacy" (2023-2024) prototype of one of the control interfaces for room colors and input of words from users. Image by the author.

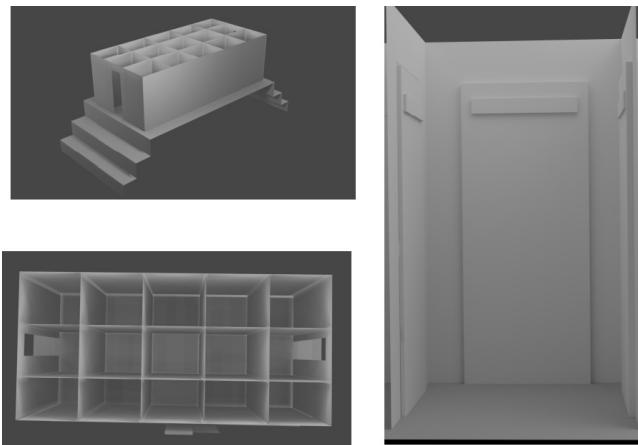


Figure 6. "Polyssemic Intimacy" (2023-2024) 3D model of possible configuration. Image by the author.

Concerning the envisaged interaction, the installation will consist is a darkened space with two entrances for two people at a time. The installation is divided into 15 small spaces, each with 2-3 doors. The work encourages visitors to contribute to the narrative that is part of the environment by interacting with it and facilitating the interaction.

Two people need to enter the labyrinth with headphones, after which they need to choose the next direction to go based on the ambiguity in front of them, and when they arrive at a certain space they may trigger a small sound device, which will lead them into a conversation with each other.

Additionally, there is the possibility of being guided by text, making them meet each other, reach a dead end, or go back to square one. In addition to leaving a message, visitors can use the P5JS app to change lighting effects or trigger audio elements, thus fostering a sense of co-creation and co-exploration.

The work encourages visitors to contribute to the narrative that is an integral part of the environment and drives interaction. by interacting with the environment. Additionally to leaving messages, the visitors can, using the application in P5JS, alter lighting effects, or trigger audio elements, fostering a sense of co-creation and shared exploration. In the application coded in P5JS, users can click on the canvas and enter a text message. The entered text will then be displayed as a floating message that moves across the canvas. Sliders control the background color.

Final Considerations

Embarking on a conceptual journey inspired by Jorge Luis Borges and the immersive artistry of Olafur Eliasson, the proposal for the interactive installation "Polyssemic Intimacy" (2023-2024), is intended to help explore perception as a sensorial incursion that intricately weaves labyrinths, mirrors, and infinite possibilities with spatial illusions.

Navigating through a physical labyrinth, visitors encounter a kaleidoscope of disorienting effects—shifting colored lights, reflective surfaces, and sequential panels projecting fragments of Borges' nonlinear narratives. Mirrors, symbolic of identity's labyrinth, prompt introspection, while branching pathways, reminiscent of the 'Garden of Forking Paths,' lead to diverse thematic chambers.

Eliasson's influence is felt in the manipulation of natural elements—spatial distortions challenging perceptual certainties. Collaborative storytelling emerges as visitors contribute to the evolving narrative, embracing ambiguity and uncertainty. The installation invites us to explore duality, contradiction, and the metaphysical.

As a labyrinth of mirrored realities, the proposal beckons participants into an ever-changing environment, where the unknown plays a central role, inviting them to question, reflect, and co-create within the possibility of random encounters driven by a non-linear and deconstructed narrative influenced by the visitor text and space customization (light and sound) inputs.

References

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Authors Biographies

Born in 2001 in Guangdong, Kaixi Lu is a fourth-year undergraduate at Roy Ascott Studio SIVA/DETAO in Shanghai. Passionate about the intersection of art and intimate relationships, her inspiration stems from literature, painting, and spatial installations. Her interest in researching remote intimate connections was ignited by the book "Personal Connections in the Digital Age." Influenced by Olafur Eliasson's "Shadows Traveling on the Sea of the Day" and Wang Wei's "Same Like Me," Kaixi adeptly uses diverse artistic techniques, including imagery, installations, 3D rendering, programming, and cinematography. Her work delves into the discourse surrounding remote intimate relationships in contemporary society, showcasing a commitment to exploring the nuanced complexities of modern interpersonal connections.

Michelle Lewis-King is a Professor of New Media, a performance artist, therapist, and scholar. Her projects draw on her experience as a media artist, Chinese medicine physician, and scholar. She re-stages the Chinese medicine encounter within a digital performance context to create immersive spatial audio environments that catalyse new social encounters with technology and medicine from cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives. Michelle has exhibited at international venues and festivals such as the V&A Museum and Ars Electronica, is a leading researcher in the emerging field of art, Chinese medicine, and technics, and is a represented artist at 4DSOUND, Budapest.