Vissual Essay

On Display: The Strategy of 'Flattening' in the Selfie Museum and its Relevance for Architecture

Nitzan Zilberman

Welcome to the Selfie Museum!

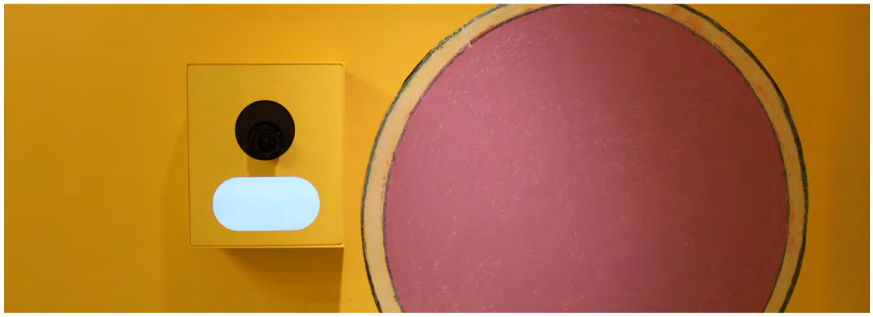
Traditional display systems, whether the theatre proscenium, museum diorama, cinema screen or shop vitrine, once served as a mediated moment between the spectator and the object on display. Holding two functions – division and camouflage – they separated the subject and the object on the one hand, and concealed all that is not meant to be seen on the other. In an increasingly digital world, governed by the 'experience economy', display systems necessarily transform two-dimensional representations into immersive experiences.[1] As these systems become increasingly enveloping, the division between subject and object is disregarded, yet the camouflage remains prevalent. This results in a world without a fourth wall but with a still-hidden backstage. Instead of attempting to rebuild the fourth wall, which has irreparably crumbled, I seek to fully dissolve a contemporary display system in order to reveal its apparatus. I will be doing this by dissecting the Selfie Museum, both as an architectural typology and as a socio-political entity.

The Selfie Museum is a physical building designed to produce virtual images. In the last three years more than twenty-five Selfie Museums have opened in the United States. These highly popular destinations consist of colourful sets that are arranged in a one-way maze typology, where visitors circulate from one room to another and take selfies against their chosen backdrops. Apart from the visitors' mobile phones, which participate actively in space, non-mobile cameras are placed in front of each set, inviting visitors to scan a card containing their personal data, have their photographs taken, and receive them branded with the museum and room logo moments later. [Fig. 1] These images are then distributed via social media, thereby creating an immediate distinction between the experience of the space and its sponsored representations. Due to the huge success of these museums, the distribution of these images, no matter what they display, are a way of claiming one's symbolic capital and stating 'I was here' while dissolving the very notion of what 'here' is since the selfie sets are, in actuality, nowhere and everywhere simultaneously.

Although the Selfie Museum as a typology has many precedents, the history of the contemporary Selfie Museum can be said to have started with the Museum of Ice Cream (2016), the first selfie destination to include the word 'museum' in its title. When asked why 'museum' was the appropriate word to use, the museum's founder Maryellis Bunn answered, 'We were looking at names and museum was something that people understood.'[2] While conventional museums most commonly display works of art, manufactured goods, and items from nature, selfie sets display rooms that have been commissioned to designers, sponsoring brands, and non-profit organisations.[3] The result is displays in which design, politics and advertising collide. The converging agendas of these three industries serve as a backdrop to the visitor's selfies, while actually embodying the foreground. For this reason, the Selfie Museum is not only a display of the museum visitors and their favourite selfie set, but a display of the consumerist society in the twenty-first century; our obsession with the image over the experience, our desire to make the physical look like the digital and our willingness to give our bodies to advertising and our data for archiving.

Fig. 1: Fixed cameras in the Selfie Museum: Flower People by James Rosa of LAND Gallery, selfie set no. 1, the Color Factory, New York, 2018. Photo: author.


SCAN YOUR
CARD HERE

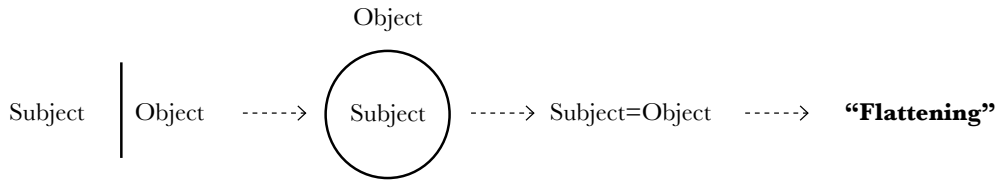



STAND HERE


FLOWER PEOPLE
JAMES

In her recent book *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*[4], the media theorist Giuliana Bruno describes the sensation of viewing works of art that use projection methods, such as Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project*[5] and James Turrell's *Ganzfeld*[6], as one of 'public intimacy'.[7] Bruno indicates how 'in the digital age we start thinking of the visual in a material way' and explains how two-dimensional surfaces have now been transformed into three-dimensional, emotional and affective experiences. I would argue the opposite: in the digital age, we have begun to think of the material in a visual way. Our bodies put on display demonstrates what I refer to as a 'flattening' rather than Bruno's 'materialising'. [Fig. 2] I see flattening as a liminal condition that helps describe material moments in the Selfie Museum and social moments in life. My definition of flattening is informed by computer graphics, in which flattening is a process whereby many separate layers are combined into a single image. This is in contrast to the more common binary view of flattening in which there is either a flattened or an unflattened state. I will highlight two examples from The Color Factory Selfie Museum in New York (2018) that illuminate my definition of flattening: the first is what I call the 'two- and the three-dimensional' and the second example is what I call 'pictorial and the panoramic'. [Fig. 3]

Fig. 2: Flattening diagram. Source: author.



Production

Material flattening:

1. To think of 3D in 2D (Shape)
2. Panoramic in pictorial terms (space)
3. The kinetic as a static moment (time)

+

Distribution

Social flattening:

1. The way we display (Culture)
2. The way we perceive our bodies (Self)
3. Tourism in the 21st century (Experience)

Chapter 1 - Material as Visual

The Selfie Museum as a cultural destination

Selfie set:
"Balloon wishes", Selfie set #4 The Color Factory, New York City, 2018
Historical display method:
Shop vitrine
Issue: Museum display, culture
Questions:
How is the Selfie Museum influencing the way we display art and the meaning of the cultural institutions at large?

Can flatness become an architectural opportunity? Can redaction, for instance, serve as a technique to blur the lines between two and three dimensions?

Chapter 2 - The exhibitionary complex

The Selfie Museum as a mechanism of display

Selfie set:
"Ball pit" The Color Factory, New York City, 2018
Historical display method:
Cyclorama
Issue:
Branding, Surveillance
Questions:
Who is on display in the Selfie Museum and how does this affect the way we perceive our bodies?

Architects are increasingly designing with the pictorial, instead of the spherical view in mind. How will this spatial shift in perception shape the aesthetics of future construction?

Chapter 3 - Staged authenticity

The Selfie Museum as a tourist destination

Selfie set:
"Complementary Compliments" The Color Factory, New York City, 2018
Historical display method:
Daguerreotype and diorama
Issue:
Symbolic Capital, Tourism
Questions:
What do we lose and gain by converting the temporal experience into a set of images and to what degree was an "authentic" experience ever desirable?

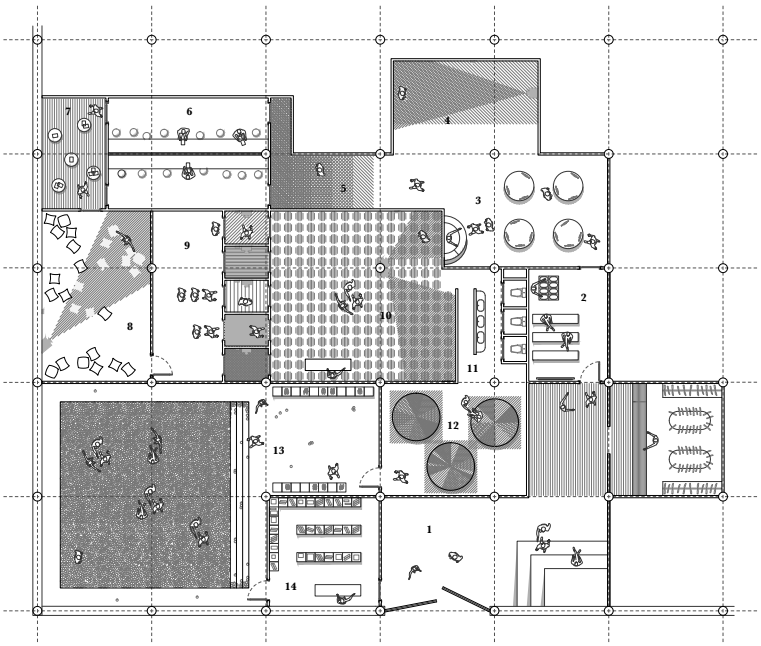
Nowadays many architects prefer to refer to themselves as "experience designers". How will this affect the agency of the architect?

Two- and the three-dimensional: the Selfie Museum as a cultural institution

In a classic shop vitrine, the transition between dimensions is vibrant, and there are several moments in which two and three dimensions merge, both in the image of the vitrine and in its commercial appeal. The shop vitrine became an integral part of city life in the early nineteenth century, first in London and Paris and later in Manhattan and Chicago. The very first displays were confined to the width of the standard shop and framed in decorative iron. Technological advancements such as the production of large sheets of plate glass widened storefronts, along with their displays, and, thus made the gap between the consumer and the products less apparent.[8] Concurrent to the emergence of these new technologies, urban boulevards became a popular phenomenon in the city and public life was relocated to the street. Among the first stores in Manhattan to develop window shopping as a distinctive leisure activity was the department store Macy's, whose annual Christmas window arrangement became a popular downtown attraction. In the 1940's, the Manhattan department store Bonwit Teller realised they could draw a wider crowd by commissioning artists to design their window displays. This led to collaborations with artists such as Salvador Dali [Fig. 4], Andy Warhol and Jasper Jones, whose famous representation of the American flag was, surprisingly, exhibited in a Bonwit Teller window display before it became the work of art *Flag on Orange Field* and only later exhibited in a conventional museum.[9]

Fig. 3: Layout of the Color Factory, New York, 2018. Source: author.

Fig. 4: Salvador Dali window display in a Bonwit Teller department store, New York, 1939. Photo: Google open source images.



Key:

1. Entrance and waiting hall.
2. Projection room showing a video that explains the selfie museum rules of conduct.
3. Data booths where you enter your details in order to receive a rectangular card you can scan in any one of the fixed cameras and get the picture sent straight to your e-mail account.
4. Room #1 by artist James Rosa.
5. Hallway shown in image (9).
6. Room #2 by artist Phillip Man.
7. Room #3 by artist and musician Lakwena+Abimaro.
8. Room #4 sponsored by children's clothing brand Gymboree.
9. Room #5 individual photo booths.
10. Room #6 sponsored by makeup brand Maybeline.
11. Restrooms.
12. Room #7 by artist Andrew Kuo.
13. Room #8 Ball pool.
14. Gift shop.

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

This blurred line between space, image, commerce and art, is exemplified in the fourth room of the Color Factory Selfie Museum called Balloon Wishes, and which is sponsored by the children's clothing brand Gymboree and designed by the museum's three artistic directors. In this set, all features of architecture are treated with similar camouflage; doors, air conditioners, pipes and exit signs are washed away in hot pink and orange. The redaction of the space using colour eliminates detail and creates the illusion that the three-dimensional space is in fact a flat coloured canvas. [Fig. 5] The Selfie Museum also reverses this process by strategically placing the camera booths in front of a corner or a column to create an effect of a layered space rather than that of a flat backdrop, resulting in a photograph of a space resembling a bump-map.[10] [Fig. 6] By using this method, the Selfie Museums make the case that they are not simply a green screen into which anyone can Photoshop themselves, but a physical and constructed spatial occurrence. [Fig. 7] Just like the shop vitrine, the room and the photograph are flattened one on top of the other and are recognised as both a space and as an image; as two-dimensional and as three-dimensional; as both art and commerce.

Fig. 5: Photo: "Color Factory NYC - Balloon Wishes sponsored by Gymboree" (https:flickr.com) by Dave Pinter, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Fig. 6: A layered space rather than a flat backdrop: Branded photograph for Gymboree taken in the space by a fixed camera and sent directly to the visitor's email account. Photo: fixed camera.

Fig. 5

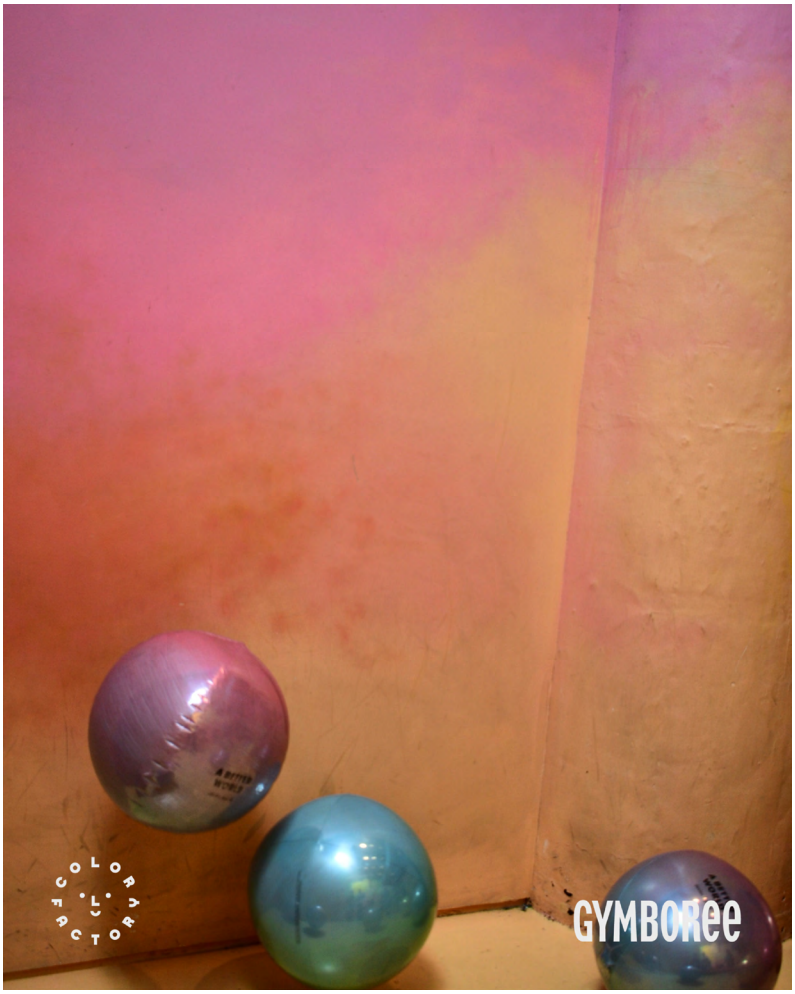
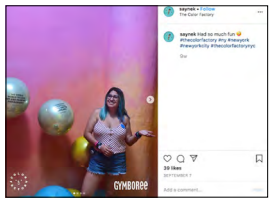
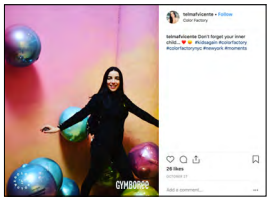


Fig. 6

While famous images from pop art are often a visual reference for the production of Selfie Museum sets, the displays of art museums are now influenced and shaped by the ever-changing circulation of these sets on social media. The Cooper Hewitt Design Museum, for instance, incorporated an 'immersion room' that allows visitors to browse the museum's wallpaper collection digitally, and project it onto the walls of the room, enabling a backdrop for visitor's selfies.[11] By contrast, in the Museum of Selfies in downtown Los Angeles (2018), a full-size version of Van Gogh's *Bedroom in Arles* that visitors can enter into has been constructed. Not too long ago, museums banned camera flashes due to possible harm the light might cause to the art; today, instead of penalising, museums capitalise on visitor's photos and use social media tagging to help promote and advertise the institution.[12] This commercial and cultural shift has significantly changed the curatorial process as museums leverage the allure of selfies to attract larger crowds. One might think that contemporary museums aim to display the museumgoers rather than the works of art and privilege the preservation of the photographed moment rather than that of the painting.

Fig. 7: Not simply a green screen into which anyone can Photoshop themselves, but a physical and constructed spatial occurrence: Instagram uploads using the #balloonwishes hashtag. Photos: Instagram.



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Pictorial and the panoramic: the Selfie Museum as a mechanism of display

A cyclorama is a panoramic painting on the inner facet of a cylindrical platform, designed to give viewers standing at its centre a 360° view of the painting. [Fig. 8, 9] From an observation gallery in the centre of the room, the cylindrical perspective creates the illusion that the viewer is on a beach overlooking the sea, on a hill overlooking a green field, or on a tower overlooking a city. A foreground of fake terrain around the viewing gallery hides the base of the painting and makes the illusion even more convincing. While the panoramic image encompasses the full extent of the circle, a pictorial moment is only one of its frames.

In 'The ball pool' selfie set in the Color Factory designed by artist Tamara Shopsin, the panoramic view is substituted with a pictorial view, transforming the complex space into one single image. [Fig. 10] An Instagram search for this specific room tag yields images that, although produced by different people, are nearly identical. [Fig. 12] Combined in photogrammetry, these images create a homogeneous overlap, while the few photographs that have captured a different perspective are dismissed. [Fig. 11]. Using the same tool to combine ordinary photographs taken during a site visit enables the reconstruction of the entire space. [Fig. 13] Just like the cyclorama, the panoramic and the pictorial views are collapsed into one another, thereby creating a flattened space where the solid physicality of infrastructure and dissipating magic are dismissed by the eye of the lens.

Fig. 8, 9: A large cylindrical tank-shaped building with a 42 feet high roof, the painting stretched around its interior wall: The Brooklyn Gettysburg Cyclorama, Paul Philippoteaux, Chicago, 1883. Photo: Google open source images.

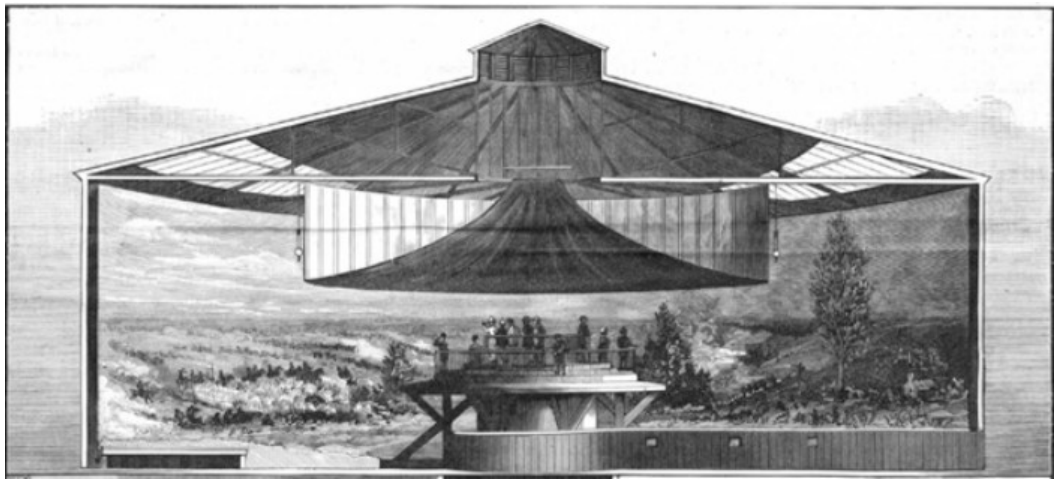

Fig. 8

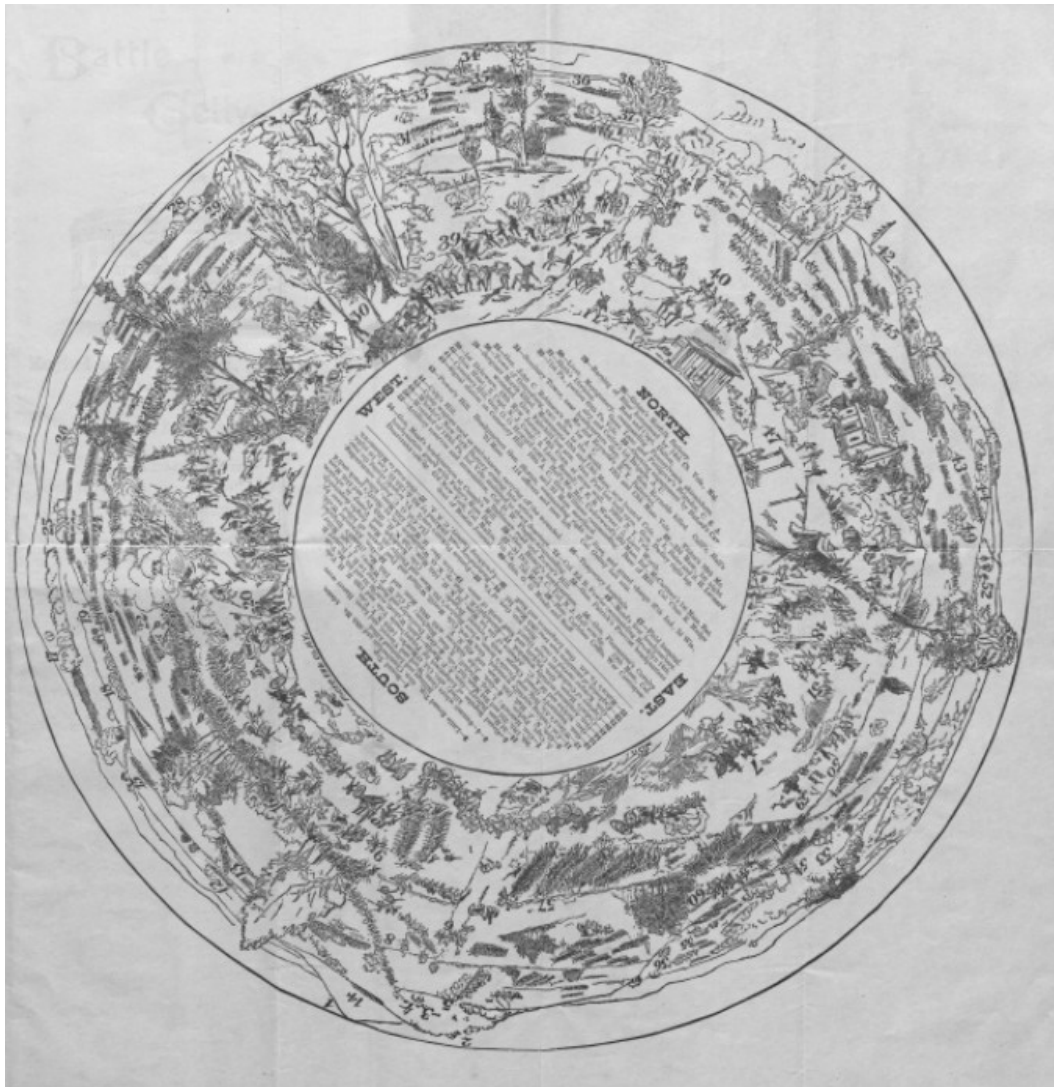

Fig. 9

The panoramic view has been addressed in some canonical projects in architectural history. The logic of the panopticon, a system of control designed as prison buildings by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century, derives from the efficacy of the panoramic view. Although the guard has only one pictorial view, the scheme of the design enables him to have a 360° observation of all inmates at once. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault uses the panopticon as a metaphor for modern disciplinary societies and their normalisation of pervasive observation.[13] The Selfie Museum's cameras, symmetrical sets, and spatial objects are watchtowers that silently indicate where to place our bodies in space and how to enjoy our time. These elements reflect our subordination to the new regime – not to the gaze of a person, but to the gaze of the selfie.

In *The Birth of the Museum*, the sociologist Tony Bennett introduces the exhibitionary complex where the exhibition is curated in a dual manner: as an act of a public display of works of art and as the place where the display of the audience occurs.[14] Bennett describes how in the eighteenth century, both the museum and the department store served as places to view not only the objects on display but also the crowd of one's peers. This act of power and control is made possible by the display-like architectural features such as mezzanine floors and transparent materials. The Selfie Museum takes on similar complexity by merging the object and the subject, and by placing only our bodies on display, cunningly advertising brands that appear in the photo with us. In this way, the Selfie Museum replaces the glass of the conventional window display with the screen of our phones, and the illuminated products with our own bodies, narrowing the self into what it really is – circulation and advertising. However, the subject is not only objectified in the Selfie Museum. Rather, this new advertising technique can also be seen as a twisted manifestation of the Hollywood dream of fame: elevating visitor's identities by transforming them into celebrities for the price of an admission fee. Who, then, is on display in the selfie museum: are these our bodies, advertising the brands that sponsor the different selfie sets? Is it our data, which we willingly hand over to both the commercial entity and to the social media platform? Or perhaps it is the people, returned home, revisiting the photos they have taken on their phones within this contemporary flattened space of the Selfie Museum?

Fig. 10: Photo: "Color Factory NYC - Into the Blue illustrations by Tamara Shopsin" (https://flickr.com) by Dave Pinter, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Fig. 11: Photogrammetry constructed out of fifty Instagram uploads with the #ballpool hashtag. Source: author.

Fig. 10

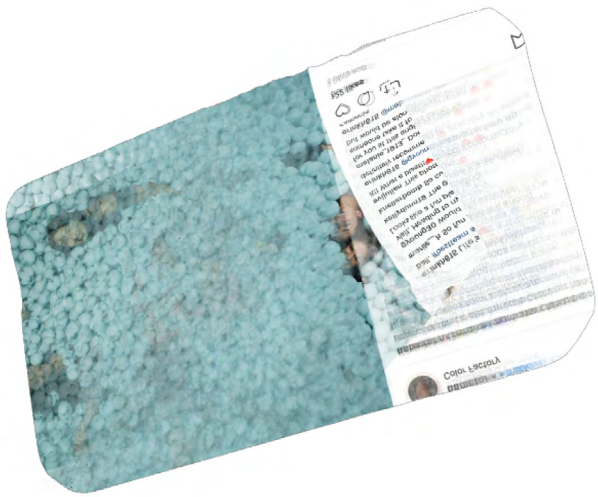

Fig. 11

Conclusion

Selfie Museums epitomise the popular turn from the display of objects to the display of environments, a change that blurs the line between the body and the display, and questionably absorbs the subject into the object. Immersive display systems now create ever-changing hierarchies between spectator and work of art, brand and consumer, and citizen and power structure. These nascent social and cultural dynamics result in conflicting object-subject relationships in which the main beneficiary is usually social media. In the Selfie Museum, subject and object are no longer the sole dichotomies that are conflated: physical space combines with virtual image; the still moment merges with the temporal experience; and two-dimensional projections are overlaid onto three-dimensional structures. This combination of apparent oppositions can be viewed as a potential new set of tools that can help rethink aspects of architectural design and offer terms such as 'redaction' or 'panoramic/pictorial' as legitimate types of aesthetics. Tying together the material flattening, which takes place in the production phase of the museums, with the social flattening, which happens during their distribution, can enable architects to materialise to the new complex social relations of our digitally-mediated world. Etymologically, 'to display' denotes to unfold, scatter, reveal. With this discussion, I hope to have unfolded new understandings about architecture using the Selfie Museum, as well as new observations on the Selfie Museum using the medium of architecture.

Fig. 12: The virtual space: Instagram uploads using the #ballpool hashtag. Photos: Instagram.

Fig. 13: Photogrammetry constructed out of fifty of my own photographs, taken during a site visit. Source: author.

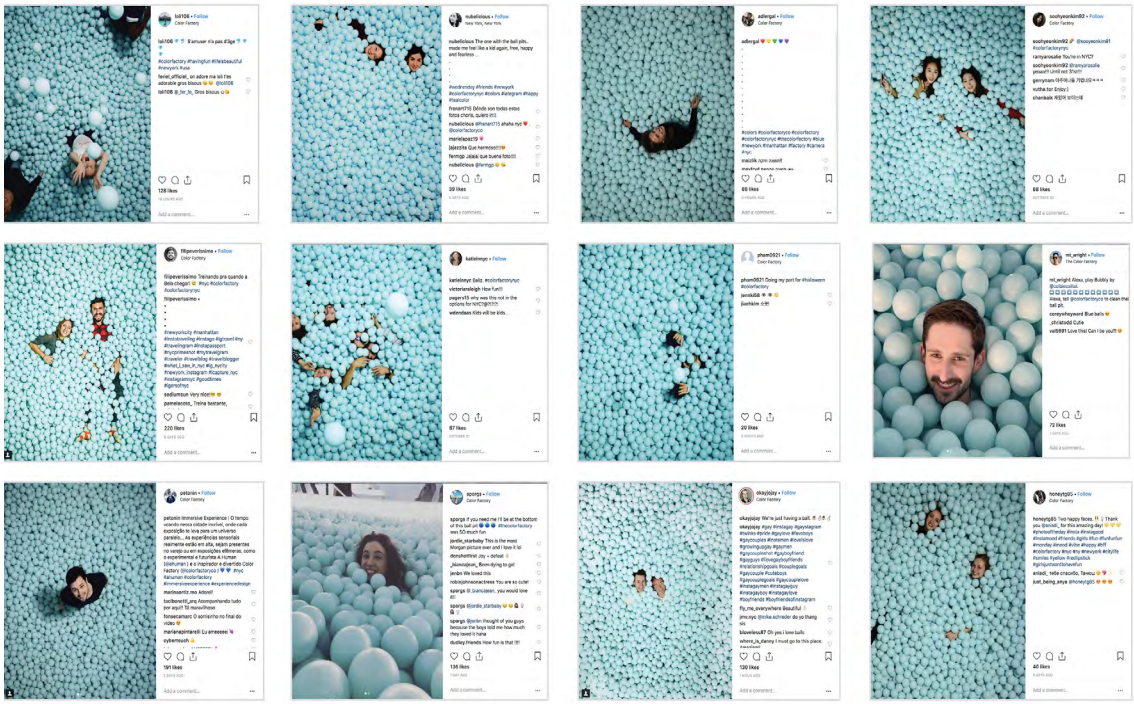

Fig. 12

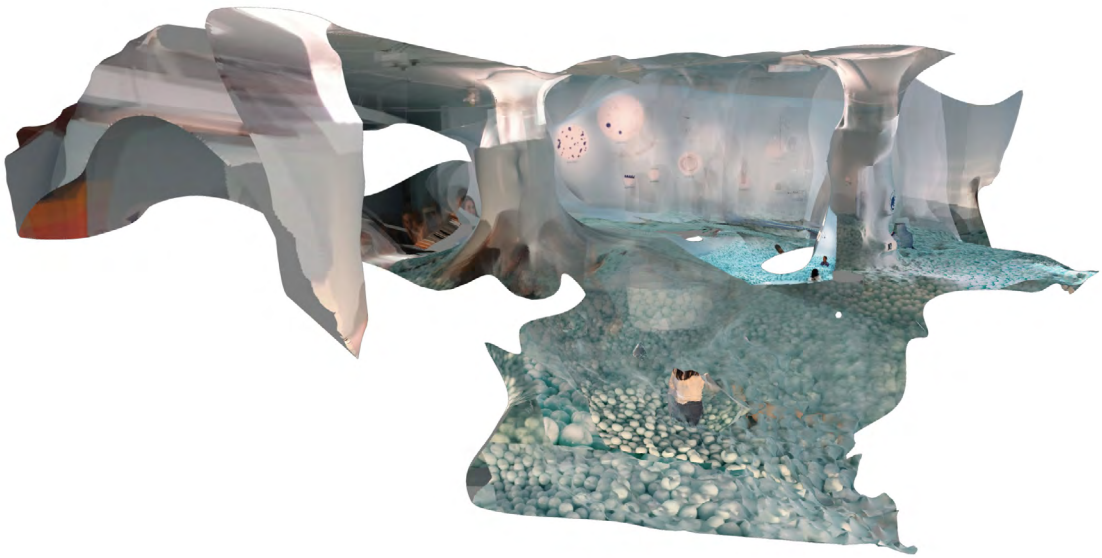

Fig. 13

Notes

1. Joseph B. Pine. and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard Business Press, 2011).
2. Susan Adams, 'The 25-Year-Old Behind The Museum Of Ice Cream', *Forbes Magazine*, 19 May 2017, https://forbes.com.
3. The non-profit organisation Planned Parenthood, for instance, was the sponsor of one of the rooms in the first edition of 29 Rooms, a Selfie Museum by digital media and entertainment company Refinery29, Brooklyn, 2017.
4. Giuliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
5. Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project* (2003), Tate Modern, London.
6. James Turrell, *Ganzfeld* (2013), LACMA, Los Angeles.
7. Bruno, *Surface,* 143.
8. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, trans. Angela Davies, *Disenchanted Night: the Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1998 [1988]).
9. Jasper Johns, *Flag on Orange Field* (1957), Museum Ludwig, Cologne.
10. Bump mapping is a technique in computer graphics for simulating bumps and wrinkles on the surface of an object. The result is an apparently bumpy surface rather than a smooth surface although the surface of the underlying object is not changed.
11. Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, 'Immersion Room', 15 March 2016, http://cooperhewitt.org.
12. Vincent van Gogh, *Bedroom in Arles* (1888), Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
13. Michel Foucault, trans. Alan Sheridan, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1977 [1975]).
14. Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 2009).

Biography

Nitzan Zilberman is an architect from Tel Aviv, currently based in New York. She has recently been awarded her Master of Science in Architecture Studies from the MIT School of Architecture and Planning where she has been researching different types of display systems, including the Selfie Museum. Apart from working in architecture offices such as Studio PEZ and HQ Architects, she has helped to curate, design and produce for various international exhibitions including the Brazilian Pavilion in the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale and Countryside by Rem Koolhaas/AMO at the Guggenheim Museum. She is presently working on exhibitions for the designer Neri Oxman and the Mediated Matter Group at MIT Media Lab.