

# resisting the real through imagined interiors and social media's spaces of uncertainty

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## abstract

A distinct visual genre has emerged of digitally realised interiors and architectural spaces emblematic in their dreamlike, surreal, and imagined condition, exemplified by digital practitioners including Charlotte Tayler, Andrés Reisinger, and Six N. Five. These virtual spaces, which have predominantly been circulated and popularised via image-based social media platforms, contribute to a stratum of images of the interior, or more precisely, the 'interior-as-image.' As such, their consumption via the digital screen agitates an uncertain condition between imagined and real. Indeed, some of these designs have become emergent into the actual, transitioning from imaginings for the digital screen into inhabitable interior spaces, to further trouble the uncertainties of virtual and real, digital and physical.

This emergent category of interior-as-image can potentially be located under cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard's 'hyperreality,' a hyperreal visuality that eliminates the difference between image and reality. With the replacement of reality with the sign/image, signification is suspended for the interior-as-image. However, these digitally rendered interiors are not absent of potential meaning and external reference despite the immediacy of their activation and engagement. Through their instrumentalisation as Non-Fungible Token (NFT) artefacts and unique, commodified digital objects, these uncertain interiors are entangled with energy-hungry machine processes in their production. In the contemporary era of climate crisis and the critique of progressive modernity, where the capacity to envision a sustainable future is itself challenging, this category of digital artefact has the potential to intensify a precarious and uncertain time to come. Moreover, the infrastructural condition(ing) of the circulation and consumption of the interior-as-image via social media platforms has the potential to encode an 'algorithmic anxiety,' a doubling of embedded uncertainty.

This text-based essay proposes to define and contextualise this particular category of digital interior-as-image, designating its critical and contemporary mode of uncertainty. In addition to establishing its artefactual status as a discrete yet materially entangled digital object, the potential significance for the discipline of interior design will be questioned. In investigating a number of spatial projects for which the digital image is a primary mode of engagement, this essay reflects on the intersection of the virtual and physical for interior design, and deliberates on the potential of imaginaries of virtual worlds for unlocking new interior materialities.

## keywords

social media; interior-as-image; dreamscape; virtual worlds; anxiety

### cite as:

Dave Loder, 'Resisting the Real Through Imagined Interiors and Social Media's Spaces of Uncertainty', *idea journal*, 20.1 (2023), 62–80  
<<https://doi.org/10.37113/ij.v20i01.509>>



## introduction

At any moment, sitting almost anywhere, I can pull out my smartphone and delve into a stream of images, presented to me on the digital screen of my mobile device. As a practitioner, researcher, and educator in spatial design, my 'feed' has been particularly oriented towards specific categories of images. While these stimulate my professional sensibilities, I am cognisant I co-habit an image-saturated continuum with a multitude of amateur, or other-than-professional, advocates and 'influencers' of architecture and interiors.

But I'm not only looking at photos of real interiors, but also images and imaginings of interiors, and it is increasingly challenging to discern the difference, a moment of uncertainty between fact and fiction, real and unreal. Notwithstanding Joan Fontcuberta's 'every photograph is a fiction,'<sup>01</sup> where the photographer makes a decision of what is seen and what is not seen, the images propose a particular aesthetic sensibility that may or may not be present in the actually existing three-dimensional environment documented by the photo. Moreover, the capacity for these photos, as digital artefacts, to be 'filtered', modified, and altered increases the uncertainty of authenticity. In addition to those examples that are ambiguous in their reproduction of reality are the advancements of and accessibility to photorealistic 3D rendering that can be exuberant or deceptive in the production of an imagined reality. Of increasing contemporary concern are also image-based Artificial Intelligence (AI) and

Machine Learning (ML) driven processes, where human certainty is even more displaced in the machinic imaginings of spatial environments.

The unsettling of images and imaginings of architectural interiors can be potentially explored and understood via a range of approaches. But to deliberate on uncertainty itself is to agitate the threshold of the known and unknown, where the image of an interior can test the threshold between virtual and real, digital and physical, presence and absence. The imagining of interiors is the imaging of the possible and a making of visibility for uncertainty. While any individual image may be a representation of a particular event of uncertainty, to manifest an anxiety in the viewer is to produce a rupture in reality itself. Certainly, imaginings of interiors are nothing new, but contemporary modes of production and reception grant the possibility of a real interior that is to be consumed as an image. Equally, these modes of production and reception give rise to an enhanced category for the interior that is to remain as an image, to reside on and be inhabited only via the screen, and sustain a condition of possibility in contradiction of probability.

Broadly speaking, the contemporary consumption of the interior as an image asks questions of the significance of the screen for the practice of designing interiors. However, as shall be explored and developed here, a consequence of such a distinct category of digital image points to a specific practice of image-production and a condition of 'interior-



as-image'<sup>02</sup> in the making of un/reality. Moreover, the infrastructural condition(ing) of circulation and consumption of the interior-as-image via social media platforms has the potential to encode anxiety under a complexity of concerns, including techno-capitalist and algorithmic extraction, a doubling or tripling of embedded uncertainty. I describe and give context to the intersecting anxieties and subjectivities of a precarious future, the algorithmic circumstance of the images, and the immediacies of their engagement. Under this framework, an imaging of interior has the potential to unravel the real and agitate the possible to stimulate an anxiety of the interior, in both senses of the term. By examining circumstances of anxiety that underpin an engagement with the interior-as-image, I propose a reconfiguration of anxiety that activates subjectivities receptive to the possibilities of the possible, and a 'radical openness of the future'<sup>03</sup> for all viewers.

This line of enquiry will engage with a specific stratum of the interior-as-image and question their significance when these imagined designs become emergent into the actual, and the screen-mediated interiors make a transition to inhabitable environments. This essay will address new frontiers to existing discourse on the role of the image in the mediation and production of the interior by scholars including Charles Rice<sup>04</sup> and Beatriz Colomina.<sup>05</sup> While these historical frameworks make direct connections between the interior and its mediated image, I will advance the significance of contemporary social media for this context. However, the emphasis here is

less on a relation between interior and image, but rather the collapsing of these conditions in the material status of the digital artefact—the interior-as-image. Finally, further intimations will be directed towards the resonance of these images' interior and spatial conditions, contextualised with the parallel emergence of the 'metaverse' and imaginaries of virtual worlds, in an effort to ascertain a role for the interior-as-image in broader interior and spatial design practices. Virtual environments such as Krista Kim's Mars House (2020) might then be considered exemplary in troubling for thresholds of uncertainty between virtual and real, digital and physical, in asking if it offers inhabitation in any real sense.

### **a 'dreamscape' condition?**

A genre of digitally realised interiors has recently emerged that are emblematic in their dreamlike, surreal, and imagined condition. Key advocates include digital practitioners such as Charlotte Taylor's collaborative studio Maison de Sable [Fig. 01], Barcelona-based Andrés Reisinger, and Six N. Five studio led by Argentinian designer Ezequiel Pini. Gathered with others as a compendium of luxurious and seductive images, Berlin-based publisher Gestalten's *Dreamscapes and Artificial Architecture* (2020)<sup>06</sup> has presented a generation of digital artists producing work at the leading edge of computer-generated photo-realistic rendering. The label of 'dreamscape' has gained further traction in the */imagine: A Journey into The New Virtual* (2023)<sup>07</sup> exhibition curated by Bika Rebek and Marlies Wirth to offer a distinct designation for this production of



images. However, I propose here a more critical articulation of the digital artefacts that exceeds the visual celebration of book and exhibition to exemplify the key features of uncertainty for these imagined architectural spaces. The most immediate uncertainties that emerge from these images may ask where these interiors are located and for which occupants. But much more critically ambiguous is their audience, market, and status as visualisations. These uncertainties will be the basis of a questioning as to where these images metaphorically might lead, and the types of engagement they propose.



**Figure 01.**  
Futurism of the Past, 2021. Charlotte Taylor / Maison de Sable in collaboration with Katia Tolstykh + Fedor Katcuba.

Notwithstanding 'the overarching reference to Rene Magritte, whose palette and symbolic use of architecture'<sup>08</sup> exemplifies many of the images, to designate as surreal is potentially insufficient. Nevertheless, aesthetically there is the production of a distinct affective intensity. The images embody a familiarity that demands attention to parse what is unfamiliar, what is certain, and what is not. While typically having an interior or architectural focus, the subject matter and context can vary greatly. Recurring motifs may include architectural forms that test the limits of technical comprehension, gravity defying and precarious structures, and decontextualised objects and encounters. Also common is a stripped back impossible minimalism and an eerie level of perfection in terms of stillness, lighting, and framing. The atmospheric qualities are strongly evocative of the American realist painter Edward Hopper [Fig. 02] and Dutch Baroque painter Johannes Vermeer, especially the preponderance of (semi-)domestic space. But the differences lie most obviously in the lack of a human inhabitant. While the interiority presented contains accoutrements of activity (chairs, beds, etc.) that might suggest particular modes of occupation (sitting, lying, looking, resting, etc.), these virtual and digitally constructed environments are pregnant with an absence of the human. The late cultural theorist Mark Fisher described such evocative questioning of absence as 'eerie': 'nothing present when there should be something.'<sup>09</sup> While a pragmatic review of this may point to potential insufficiencies in the software to render a digital person



with sufficient authenticity, it is a lack that heightens the uncertainty of artifice for the image in an unsettling way.



**Figure 02.**

Western Motel, 1957. © Heirs of Josephine Hopper / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS) NY/DACS, London 2023. Image courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery

It is essential to note the lack of human figures in these images is not unique when considering a broader context of architectural visualisation and documentation. When figures are included, whether in sectional drawings, perspective renderings, or photographs, they provide value in giving a sense of scale, inhabitation, and 'life.' When deployed in architectural presentations, figures may vary greatly in form and reception, from abstracted blob-like bodies to photo-montaged but perhaps decontextualised characters, they nonetheless assist in delivering a distinct certainty to what is being viewed. As such, the absence of a figure can produce a distancing, disconnecting the architecture from human experience, context, and social realities. Irrespective of any decision that might inform the absence of the human,

the impact can be considered in reflecting how the inclusion of the figure in Hopper's paintings can lead to speculation on his or her character as opposed to the interior in isolation. Such a consideration can return to a questioning of how to categorise the image, or more precisely, how it should be viewed. These uncertainties produce a disruption of a symbolic order, compelling a position that lies beyond the conventional understanding and reading of images of interiors. This symbolic order is not limited to the traditions of interpreting images, but extends to the ways in which images are constitutive of the interior. As Charles Rice describes in *The Emergence of the Interior* (2007), the interior itself is a result of and co-constituted by its image. Moreover, and essential for this essay, 'the interior [is] represented in ways visually distinct from conventional architectural representations.'<sup>10</sup> Through the representation of interiors in images, in an articulation of desire and the production of a consciousness for specific materialisations of the interior, realities come to be actually formed. With this particular symbolic function attributing a significance to the interior image, the disruption agitates the threshold of the real in questioning not only what interiors might be emergent from the images of dreamlike interiors, but what is being modelled or 'simulated' by the image itself.

In reflecting on the artifice of these interiors and the intensity of the 'realness' they propose, the photoreal perfection delivers a condition of 'hyperreality' that itself can activate a disruption of the symbolic order. In



cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard's groundbreaking *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), the hyperreal has a functional performativity, the workings of which can be described by the 'simulation.'<sup>11</sup> Conventional usage designates a simulation as 'a limited, circumscribed experience detached from a background that is perceived as reality', whereas Baudrillard more critically asserts that 'simulation is a pervasive cultural phenomenon that undermines reality itself.'<sup>12</sup> As a feature of hyperreality, the interior-as-image offers a simulation of reality, de/registering the subject of the image as outside of the real while concurrently asserting an operational status in antithesis to its symbolic engagement as representational artefact. This point supports a particularly contemporary reading of Baudrillard's theory, in the status of the digital image as a data object, and 'simulatable' in the projection of other versions of itself, as will be described later. The elimination of representational conventions produces a rupture in replacing reality itself with the simulation. The uncertainty of the virtual interiors is disruptive of the representational condition as a visual signifier, rendering absent the symbolic in concession to the making absent of reality. While representation stems from an equivalence of sign and referent, simulation promotes 'the radical negation of the sign as value.'<sup>13</sup> In being hyperreal, the interior-as-image does not simply refer to the absence of reality but is co-constitutive in its making absent. In as much as simulacra replace reality with its sign and

the interior with its image, the eeriness of the interior-as-image stimulates 'forms of knowledge, subjectivity and sensation that lie beyond common experience.'<sup>14</sup>

The interiors of the 'dreamscape designers' consequently have a capacity of the eerie to disrupt reality, engaging 'forms of speculation and suspense.'<sup>15</sup> In addition to the previous points, the visual apprehension of the enigmatic interiors propose experiences at the limits of expectation and comprehension. In their simulation of another reality, it is a strangeness that can be very difficult to place. Furthermore, the uncertainty of how to categorise and view the image stimulates the adoption of alternative subjectivities that cohere with their un/real condition. But it is notable that the images are not singular and isolated experiences, but encounters in an ecology of widely engaged digitally mediated images of interiors. As noted earlier, the digital comportment of the interior-as-image has specific modes of both production and circulation. The work of these practitioners has been predominantly popularised via the circulation of image-based social media platforms, most specifically Instagram. While many have expanded their practice into gallery contexts and commercial interior design, I argue that it is this mode of propagation and engagement that delivers a specific condition for this category of interior-as-image.



## platforms of circulation

Visuality in social media can be conceptualised via three broad overlapping elements: image, circulation, and practice.<sup>16</sup> In reference to the first, the affective qualities of the image have been discussed briefly above, but the wider visual context should not be excluded. The site or means of production for the image has a specificity, through a variety of digital modelling platforms and rendering processes as can be gleaned from hashtags accompanying their display on social media (such as #cinema4d, #blender, #octane). But the wider context of representations of interior environments is of key significance. As noted earlier, the category of interior images of focus is marked by a distinct consumption related to circulation via image-based social media platforms. When scrolling through my social media feed, the fictional spaces are subsumed among a multitude of other images of interior environments that only allude to the sheer volume of images present on social media. While I may have a professional agenda for engaging with these images, I am complicit with a more widely performed consumption with actors in non- and semi-professional circumstances, such as influencers and fashionistas, provocative of a 'cult of the interior'

Arguably, such an audience is in reception to a burgeoning industry at the threshold of popular entertainment and home furnishings, exemplified by television series such as *Changing Rooms* (Channel 4 UK), *Interior Design Masters* (BBC UK), and *Selling Sunset* (Netflix). Print-based publications, including

*Elle Decoration*, *Wallpaper\**, and other lifestyle sources also drive the consumption of the imaging of the interior as a mass-mediated experience. In *The Emergence of the Interior*, Rice consolidates the historical significance of mainstream media in the articulation of the interior experience. Rice not only points to publications that are consciously interior orientated, but also the capacity of popular visual entertainment more generally, referring to the television series *Big Brother* and *24*, to dictate how interiors might be, and be inhabited.<sup>17</sup> Contextualised by and advancing Rice's 'doubleness' of image and space for the interior, I give specificity to the contemporary context of social media, a redolently digital mediation that has distinct characteristics exceeding print and broadcast media.

In parallel to and co-constitutive of the visual consumerism of image-based social media is the practice of imaging, which itself underpins the performance of circulation. While there is a plurality to the styles, typologies, and contexts of images in circulation, and notwithstanding if they are authentic photos of actually existing interiors or fictional imaginings of impossible architectures, they propose a distinct visual digitisation of artefactual space. A potentially significant attitude to effect is via what Fabiola Fiocco and Giulia Pistone term 'social media architecture' and a practice of image-making that specifically engages with the built environment.<sup>18</sup> Deferring to the preponderance of the 'Instagrammable', these are environments designed to be co-experienced via the digital screen,



persuading occupants to 'selfie' or otherwise visually circulate their participation in a specific location. In 2022, an analysis of Instagram hashtags by photo printing firm Inkifi revealed the London restaurant Sketch as 'the most Instagrammed restaurant in the world.'<sup>19</sup> The restaurant has been circulating in the digital imagination for a number of years, having become famous for its striking pastel pink dining room and sci-fi toilet pods, but it was 2022 when its most current interior iterations were shared in a stunning 83,045 posts, nearly double its closest rival. This is only one example of many interiors that express a photogenic visuality that luxuriates in screen-based mediation. Pointedly in the context of digitally rendered virtual environments, these are physical spaces and may be accidentally or purposefully designed to compel the visitor to digitally collapse physical three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional screen-based artefact. In contrast to the imaginative acrobatics of a digital model, these are constructed and constructable environments, obeying conventional realities, including gravity, maintenance, and budget.

While the motivations to 'selfie' oneself in location and visually anchor digital presence to physical place are complex and nuanced, these broad habits nonetheless describe a practice of image-making and circulation to specifically contextualise an interface with interior and other built environments. This is a digital socialisation of the aesthetics of space as mediated by the screen, and vigorously engaged and

consumed by a very broad community of interest. However, the commercial interior design industry is not without an agenda that leverages the consumerist impulse at play. Designers, like any contemporary brand and commercial actors, are assured of securing an online presence via a plurality of pathways, not least an image-based digital platform such as Instagram through which to showcase projects. But in apprehending the capacity for photogenetic screen-mediated experiences to draw an audience to a physical place, such as the London restaurant Sketch, Instagram has become a context that is increasingly being designed for. With architects and spatial designers increasingly sensitive to this new frontier of engagement, the formalisation of 'designing the Instagrammable' is made clear with publications such as the *Instagram Design Guide* from Valé Architects, who articulate themselves as experts in this specific field.<sup>20</sup> Yet these are not exceptional practices but part of a much wider post-digital condition that digital strategist Sarah Barns defines as 'platform urbanism,' under which 'social media engagement is increasingly habituated as an interface of everyday urban encounter.'<sup>21</sup> The contemporary urban experience is mediated via a complexity of digital interfaces, of which social media is one circumstance, but indicates a wider context for the imaging and visualities of daily life organised by a range of technology platforms.

Fiocco and Pistone's account provides visual support that articulates the aesthetic sensibilities that underpin the imaging of



space for this essay,<sup>22</sup> and can be further exemplified by referring to the social media account Insta Repeat (@insta-repeat). While the practice of making 'social media architecture' can be practised anywhere, there emerges a tendency towards homogenisation in the visuality of the outcomes circulated. Much like the quantifiable popularity of Sketch above, the consequence of 'likes' and 'shares' gives an articulation of 'algorithmic determinism' that will be expanded in the next section.

While the practising of 'social media architecture' can, but not always, implicate a body in space—to selfie one's presence in a specific location—as previously noted, the dreamlike imagined spaces are remarkable in the lack of a human figure. Contextualised under a post-pandemic condition, and the experience of social distancing and societal lockdown, the eerie imagined interiors have the potential to stimulate an impulse to express or project oneself into that virtual space. The interior-as-image bears witness to new modes of spatial expression and the collapsing of dislocated rooms upon each other via the digital screen to manifest uncertain and anxious embodied phenomena.

### **anxious interiors**

Peering into the interiors painted by Edward Hopper, it is almost impossible not to be overcome with melancholy and anxiety evocative of the Great Depression when they were produced. In their original state, these large paintings that might adorn the wall of a gallery, offer a particular mode

of engagement, a slow and contemplative position for the viewer that, to a limited extent, can be experienced when reviewing a reproduction in some other medium.

In contrast to the sparse drawn-out alienation of Hopper, the virtual interiors produced by the 'dream team' have an immediacy in the context of the superabundance of images contemporary experience is subject to. As outlined earlier, the principal means of digital mediation delivers a specificity of encounter for eerie dreamscapes, and the pull and pausing in one's digital streaming of images. This is an ecology of attention where shared images compete to be lingered upon, or, even more valuable, to be circulated and propagated further. However, with attention having become a valuable commodity in an information-saturated world, digital platforms have developed complex algorithms designed to maximise user engagement and retention, in order to capture as much attention as possible.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the economics of attention stimulates algorithmic determinacy and creates a self-reinforcing cycle, in which algorithms determine what content is shown to users, and users' attention and engagement with that content feeds back into the algorithms, shaping the content that is shown in the future. In her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2018), the philosopher Shoshona Zuboff gives critical focus to how technology corporations extract and monetise user attention through surveillance and behavioural data.<sup>24</sup> The algorithmic function of the interior-as-image announces the extraction of attention under



what digital scholar Nick Srnicek defines as 'platform capitalism' and the economic model in which digital platforms act as intermediaries between buyers and sellers, using algorithms and data analytics to match supply and demand.<sup>25</sup>

The circumstances of visibility for the social media image are therefore underpinned by an operational status, echoing the function of the simulation that displaces symbolic content with performative action. The sign of the image is superseded by its capacity to be propagated, liked, and shared. Under the superabundance of digital images, this operational status has a clear significance. If the aesthetic engagement of the digital image loses precedence to a procedural condition, an algorithmic 'viewing' of the image is accomplished. The superabundance of images is not, and can no longer be, for human viewing, but for nonhuman machine viewing. As philosopher of technology Benjamin Bratton notes, 'Today many images are made for no-one, but this does not mean that they are functionless.'<sup>26</sup> In his book *Signal. Image. Architecture.* (2019), architect and scholar John May expands on this further, and describes how images are now 'signals.' As digital artefacts under review by the machine, images are subsumed and collated to become 'simulatable' of a plurality of conditions, 'data sets that project fleeting versions of their contents, sometimes as spreadsheets, sometimes as texts, sometimes as drawings.'<sup>27</sup> While the category of images that is the focus of the present line of enquiry is one of a plurality of categories, a further

significance emerges when contextualised with the eerie absence of the human in the digitally constructed environments. Such absence is not only symbolic in the expression and aesthetic reception of the image, but an absence operationally made via a co-constitutive collaboration in nonhuman machine viewing and an algorithmic determinism. This is not to dismiss any impressive imaginative and aesthetic aptitude of their producers but iteratively gives attention to the operational application of the images and their engagement: 'What matters is experience itself, not how it was produced.'<sup>28</sup>

Its mode of circulation exemplifies the operational status of the interior-as-image, compounding the capacity of simulacra to suspend the real, the deliberation of digital propagation releasing the 'potential to contaminate all of reality with its refusal of depth and reference.'<sup>29</sup> This contamination by uncertainty and the absencing of human agency, as displaced by the opaque processes of the algorithm, stimulates an anxiety of what is and is not knowable. The contemporary attitude to algorithmic structuring of the post-digital everyday is one of apprehension and unease, where 'the computer sometimes seems more in control of our choices than we are.'<sup>30</sup> The impenetrable 'black box' of the algorithm contextualises a specific encounter with the interior-as-image. In Hopper's paintings, anxiety is rendered visible, given visibility. With the dreamlike interior-as-image, anxiety rests not (only) in the representation of space, but embedded in the operational means of



its display, an order of the knowable and the possible. Demonstrating the unknowability of conditions of algorithmic determinism for the images of dreamed interiors is essential for the thesis of this essay.

Drawing upon the writing of Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard, digital sociologist and philosopher Patricia de Vries is one of an increasing number of scholars with a critical focus on 'algorithmic anxiety': '[A]lgorithms are evoked as omnipresent yet invisible, powerful yet elusive, inscrutable yet invasive, and shaping social worlds and the people living in them,' with anxiety emerging when threatened with such unknowability.<sup>31</sup> Under the circumstances of the algorithm, the processual is not only hidden but speculated as possible yet beyond comprehension: 'Anxiety pertains to the possibility of the possible, to possible events that are unknown and unknowable and thus cannot be anticipated.'<sup>32</sup> The simulation of reality eliminates the distinction between original and artifice, yet the distinction itself is indeterminant and unidentifiable, agitating the threshold of actual and real. The eerie qualities of the interior-as-image acquire an algorithmic dimension in the stimulating of anxiety, intensifying 'forms of knowledge, subjectivity and sensation that lie beyond common experience,' de/registering the subject of the image as outside the real.<sup>33</sup> As such, de Vries seeks to engage an existential anxiety, transcending uncertainty to challenge the way in which the self relates to the self to address 'ways algorithmic technologies (re) configure identity and subjectivity.'<sup>34</sup>

Consolidating the previous points of enquiry, the troubling of subjectivity emerges via the overlapping stratum of uncertainty for the interior-as-image discussed. Reflecting on the images produced by the 'dreamscape designers,' the hyperreal compounding of visuality of uncertainty upon the algorithmic determinism of circulation and reception of the aesthetics of affect produces a post-digital subjectivity at the limitations of knowability. Furthermore, as indicated by the techno-consumerist extraction of attention, our subjectivity is captured in a capitalist means of reproduction. Baudrillard places the origins of hyperreality in capitalism, and the ways in which what the everyday presents does not reflect the actual conditions of the real.<sup>35</sup> For example, hyperreality can account for the disparity between the real world of limited natural resources and the hyperreal world of capitalism that encourages endless consumption. Such structuring of the unknowable is, to an extent, artificially produced, but nonetheless advances more significant states in the unknowability of the future-to-come under conditions of capitalist extractivism. The discourse of the Anthropocene and the contemporary climate crisis gives cognisance to the precarity of the future itself, with the possibility of the possible even further troubled.

With the focus here on unfolding the digital and material conditions for the interior-as-image, it is essential to deliberate how the digitally rendered dreamlike interiors are also resource intensive procedures. One can easily imagine the digital as an



excellent testing grounding to create wildly ambitious architectural projects without the limitations of physical resources, which typify the construction industry. However, to declare that 'designers can specify the wildest luxuries or even use plastics guilt-free because environmental crises don't exist' in the digital realm is an unfortunate failure to comprehend the resource intensive processes virtual visualities require.<sup>36</sup> It could be assumed that customary digital design studios such as those of Andrés Reisinger and Alexis Christodoulou would rely on high-end but commercially available technologies to design and render their creations. Specialist hardware accelerators and GPUs may only nominally increase energy demands when compared to an average modern commercial office, increasing further with more substantial resources such as render farms. But the materiality of the hardware itself should not be overlooked in the context of what media theorist Jussi Parikka describes as the 'geology of media', and the use of technologies that incorporate rare earth elements secured via destructive processes of mineral extraction.<sup>37</sup>

However, of greater significance to the resources necessary to support an individual practitioner labouring at keyboard and screen, is the adoption of blockchain technologies in the form of an NFT and a means of monetising the digital images under production. Where any individual digital data object, such as a jpeg image, has the capacity to be copied endlessly and distributed with ease, an NFT is a digital asset that represents ownership or proof of authenticity of a unique item or

piece of content, such as a piece of artwork, music, or video. NFTs are built on blockchain technology, which is a distributed ledger that allows for secure and transparent transactions without the need for intermediaries. The energy consumption associated with blockchain transactions can be significant because the process of adding new data to a blockchain involves solving complex mathematical puzzles through a process called 'mining.' Reisinger was one of the pioneers in using NFT, auctioning a collection of virtual furniture that sold in less than ten minutes for a total of more than US \$450,000.<sup>38</sup> The embracing of blockchain technology by many digital producers secures a sustainable economic position in a precarious industry, allowing greater control over the distribution and ownership of their creations. But this currently comes with an ecological price, with energy hungry algorithmic processes feeding fossil fuel capitalism, and the interior-as-image rendering climate trauma visually.

The absence of the human in this interior-as-image, as noted earlier, now gains even greater significance. In a travesty of the supposition of technical limitations that preclude the presence of a digital human form, this absence now affords a symbolic dimension in making void the human. Under an agenda of expanded extractivism, the industries of techno-capitalism have profoundly contributed to the contemporary climate crisis in which the continuation and future of the human is precarious, for which the interior-as-image can provide an eerie and compelling vision.



## inhabiting uncertainty

The agenda of extractivism and climate anxiety determines a tangible real-world consequence to the spaces of desire to be inhabited by the imagination. Notwithstanding the implications of algorithmic intensive processes, the exuberance of the dreamscape milieu is arguably its embracing of the digital to explore virtual possibilities that exist outside the realm of the practical. But the success of individual practitioners in their creation of seductive and appealing interiors has elicited opportunities for the possible to become actual, and the translation of digital images into inhabitable environments and experiences. On the whole, the success of digital artists should be celebrated and rewards their excellence in imagining innovative experiential encounters and design outcomes. However, in relation to the overarching line of enquiry, these activities further augment deliberations of uncertainty, possibility, and the un/real.

In 2018 Andrés Reisinger first posted a digital render of his Hortensia chair to Instagram, a seductive curvaceous form covered in thousands of delicate hydrangea flower petals [Fig. 03]. The virtual chair quickly became a viral hit, with Reisinger subjected to numerous enquiries regarding purchase with the assumption the image was a photograph of an existing chair. Subsequently, Reisinger engaged in a collaboration with product designer Júlia Esqué to realise a physical version with the support of Dutch design brand Moooi, and in 2022 the first production model was released to the public. On a



**Figure 03.**  
Hortensia, 2018. By digital artist and designer Andrés Reisinger.



**Figure 04.**  
The Orb, in collaboration with: Netjets and Moco Museum, 2022. With permission from Six N. Five.



grander but no less aesthetically diminished scale, the design studio Six N. Five has been commissioned by the Moco Museum in Barcelona to produce hospitality and retail environments in collaboration with interior designer Isern Serra. Both conceived and executed in 2022, the first of these was the The Orb, a private lounge and bar for Art Basel, which also contained NFT artworks and designed objects by Six N. Five, such as the limestone Caliza Chair [Fig. 04]. The second is the Moco Concept Store, a space to showcase contemporary art and the 'real-life transposition of a virtual concept.'<sup>39</sup> Both interiors have arguably been tempered by real-world constraints but embody the aesthetics of Six N. Five and their use of 'digital tools and CGI [...] to create minimal, surreal and tranquil environments, pastel-hued dreamscapes and vibrant unthinkable architectures that allude to the endless possibilities of this ever-evolving digital tool.'<sup>40</sup>

These examples present a capacity to inhabit the designed interiors of the dreamscape makers, but it is questionable if such an action reflects the conditions as explicated previously for the interior-as-image. In being realised, uncertainty has collapsed into actuality, much like Schrödinger's cat leaping out of its box, stymying possibility in preference of the probable. Reception occurs on different registers, from two-dimensional attention to three-dimensional navigation. Aesthetic experience may retain eerie qualities that are nonetheless evocative of a digital compartment in which the

anxiety of the possibility of the possible is circumvented in the confrontation with function. Nonetheless, when hyperreal objects do emerge into the real, they decry their potential ethical status; limestone becomes cheap when it's a digital texture, but has significant material costs when quarried, digitally sculpted, and transported. To some extent, this presents a divergence in materiality, an engagement of the constructable (and disposable) in lieu of advanced techno-materialisms of digital and immaterial attention. But there remains a relation to global supply chains, resource extraction, and attention engaged, but of a more specific and potentially discerning audience.

The reverse of a becoming real is an embrace of the immersiveness that emerging technologies such as virtual reality (VR) might extend and allow stepping into the digital screen for inhabitation. More significantly, and responding to advances in VR technology, is the context of the 'metaverse' and its promise of a fully interactive and three-dimensional virtual environment where users can create, interact with, and explore various digital objects and spaces. Arguably, these are still image-based experiences, mediated via a pair of LCD displays positioned directly in front of each eye, and at present, may have shortcomings in terms of the technological power to render smoothly the very advanced graphical content that exemplifies dreamscape interiors. In its current state, the metaverse is not a single contiguous experience, but



a series of disconnected, decentralised online platforms such as Decentraland and Spatial that offer relatively primitive aesthetic experiences when compared to the seductive and atmospheric environments of Reisinger and others. But, despite current hardware limitations and the decline of investment in late 2022 after an initial boom involving billions of dollars from a range of technology companies, there is a continuing interest in developing and improving the technology much further.

Despite the current aesthetic shortcomings, the context of the metaverse probably offers the most direct means to spatially experience the impossible architectural designs of dreamscape interiors. A notable creative practitioner in enthusing the potential of the metaverse is the Canadian-Korean digital artist Krista Kim, creator of Mars House (2020), reputedly 'the first NFT digital house in the world' [Fig. 05].<sup>41</sup> Hosted by metaverse platform Spatial but accessed by invitation only, the virtual architecture and surrounding landscape of Mars House can be navigated via a VR headset, to view the various pieces of furniture that make up a dining area, lounge, and bedroom, as well as an 'outdoor' balcony space. In a fully glazed volume redolent of Farnsworth House (1951) designed by Mies van der Rohe, to inhabit this architecture is to engage with the representation of the landscape of Mars itself, augmented with a colour strobing interior ceiling that is a digital replica of other real-world art installations by Kim. Since the sale of Mars House on the SuperRare NFT

auctioning platform for over US \$500,000 to a buyer under the name of @artonthinternet, others have been creating unique virtual environments to be sold to private buyers. In 2022, NFT gallery The Row launched on Everyrealm a collection of digitally modelled spaces created by Reisinger, Six N. Five, Christodoulou, and others, and potentially marks a galvanisation to offer high-quality spatial experiences as immersive digital encounters for those who can afford it.



**Figure 05.**  
Mars House, 2020. Courtesy of the artist Krista Kim.

While further technological advancements can be forthcoming to enhance the quality of rendering light, material, and atmosphere in these VR environments, the essential articulations of form and structure already demonstrate the potential of this specific means of testing new and innovative spatial experiences. Reflecting on this potential to imagine radically different spatial experiences the digital can stimulate, it might be disappointing to witness relatively conventional architectural and interior forms being deployed, for example, chairs, beds, and stairs. Moreover, the articulations are



outwith current technological interfacing with digital space. While recent developments in VR have certainly improved engagement and accessibility for virtual experiences, the limitations of '6 degrees of freedom'—to look and move in all three dimensions and directions—is restricted to visual encounter and, therefore, to the ability to spatially interact through actions such as walking up a flight of stairs, sitting, or lying down is manifestly beyond current interfacing. The challenges of these conventions, both conceptually and physically, ask questions as to how these virtual environments should be engaged with and how to release their full potential. Perhaps, in the deliberation of a technological engagement that is arguably still in its infancy, the familiarity of some of the architectural encounters can be considered an exercise in acclimatisation to a new spatial context, an understanding to support access to further, more enhanced experiences. Equally, one can speculate on how conventions might be disrupted, offering experiences that are more authentic to the limitations of engagement, and propose new functions or encounters. One such example would be *The Meeting Place* (2021) by French artist Cyril Lancelin and creative director Benny Or, also hosted by Spatial but publicly [Fig. 06]. As its title suggests, this is a digital environment for multiple users to engage in dialogue, but offers a thoughtfully different space that embraces the potential of new digital forms, yet also has the capacity to be speculative towards imaging new types of meetings between inhabitants of a digital world. Finally, it is of note how Kim and

the dreamscape designers have employed their own virtual houses and interiors as showrooms for real-world artefacts and sculptures, for example, Six N. Five's Caliza Chair and polyhedron sculptural side tables, handmade in Murano glass, from Kim's Mars House. Overlooking a potential doubling of resource depletion, these strategies award the physical artefacts with an otherworldly context, and a mode of subjectivity outside physical experience.



**Figure 06.**

*The Meeting Place*, 2021. With permission from Cyril Lancelin and Benny Or.

The Hortensia chair becomes real, erupting from the virtual, whereas Kim proposes ever more immersions into the digital, a transection of experiences and motivations that can offer distinct conditions of uncertainty for the interior-as-image as has been expounded so far. Kim is a devotee who espouses the emancipatory potential of



the metaverse and its capacity for spiritual wellbeing to be realised through complete immersion into the digital space but neglects any consideration of the uneven distribution of digital access.<sup>42</sup> Even the author Neal Stephenson in his 1992 satirical novel *Snow Crash*, overly magnified for its coining of the term 'metaverse', is sensitive to digital inequalities, describing an encounter in the virtual world of 'The Street' with 'black-and-whites', those grainy, low resolution, black-and-white avatars and the default for anyone who cannot afford an avatar for themselves. Arguably, as history evidences, the limitations of technology determine the terms of its engagement but does this uncertainty of potential imply a disconnect in how virtual spaces are articulated and can offer a specific function? Equally, is there a privileging of visibility at the expense of the means of engagement if virtual reality is that means? Or, in reference to the terms for the interior-as-image discussed earlier, should mediation and circulation also be attributed as a dimension to this question? Circulation does imply a mode of accessibility, but further to access from a more critical and ethical position, we should also give focus to the uneven distribution of digital access, giving firm identification of those other than able bodied and sighted, and isolate the terms of inequality and privileging being activated under the broader terms of extractivism characterised so far.

Finally, a brief note is to be made for the contemporary hastening of image-based AI and ML driven processes, where human

certainty is even more displaced in the machinic imaginings of spatial environments. The example of 'text-to-image' proposes a digital dreaming of new possibilities and an emergent stratum and circulation of seductive visual imaginings of many experiences including architecture and interiors. These visual techniques offered by services such as Dall-e and Midjourney, and other AI chatbot models such as OpenAI's Chat GPT, activate sensibilities of algorithmic unknowability previously observed. But while there persists the black box faculty of the algorithmic processes, the mode of engagement with these powerful technologies has the potential to be collaborative and emancipatory. The precise conditions by which any of these services produce their specific outcomes remains concealed even to the programmers, yet attention to the process and interaction between user and algorithm can be revealing in and of itself, and can also connect to the participation in machine viewing as mentioned in reference to social media transactions. As suggested by the context of the chatbot, there is a dialogical aspect to the process where the user still contributes to the crafting of inputs and the curation of in-progress outputs. But perhaps more astute is a reflection of how a user participates directly with the unknowability of the technology, and is essentially seeking to uncover what is known by the unknowable, to agitate the leading edge of the possibility of the possible.



## conclusion

As has been drawn through this essay, the interior-as-image proposes a framework that marks a trajectory to test and acclimatise a more direct engagement with virtual worlds and their potential for yet-to-be-thought experiences and more-than-human collaborations in machine viewing. As demonstrated through the contemplation of the interior-as-image as produced by dreamscape practitioners, these are digital artefacts with an operational function. Through the simulation of reality, reality itself is made absent, activating forms of knowability and subjectivity outside normative experience. The digital circulation and engagement with these seductive virtual environments co-constitute anxiety with an algorithmic dimension, further troubling the knowability of the known to agitate the possibility of the possible. Primed under these circumstances, the interior-as-image exemplifies and reveals extractivist conditions of capitalism, and organises a mode of machine viewing to access more-than-human subjectivities. The aesthetics of uncertainty implicated in the digital interiors impact the real, a constitutive making un/certain of reality, and a critical category of uncertain interiors.

For the discipline of interior design, the images of the 'dream team' add to a body of already existing sources of inspiration to designers everywhere that will inevitably emerge as actually existing interiors, as has already been demonstrated by the retail spaces designed by Six N. Five. But more

significantly, the transection of the actual and imaginary, virtual and physical, offers a re/configuration of algorithmic anxiety in a way that is about 'the radical openness toward the unknown and about algorithmic regimes that attempt to ensnare this openness.'<sup>43</sup> To engage the image-as-interior in this context is to activate alternative imaging and imaginings for conditions of change through 'practices that are conducive to living with algorithmic anxiety' and radical openness to possibilities.<sup>44</sup>

## acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the peer reviewers for their suggestions and thoughtful criticisms, the editors of *idea journal* for their time and effort, and the visual artists represented in this essay for the permission to share their works.

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## notes

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