

# AvantGarden update

Towards the organic technology of cosmically bionic, prismatic virtual spherical gardens

**Tanja Vujinovic**

AvantGarden worlds are spread across the metaverse to explore ideas of recreation and regeneration, freedom, and see in person thought-provoking unique sculptural objects inspired by science, daily life, love of music, and ecology. From the ideas of how the possible first flower on Earth looked made according to scientific sketches, to imaginary machines that clean air and water, or track our emotions to help us be in tune with ourselves, each proto-machine, little helper, or even ourselves assuming roles of guardian gardeners or florists have a unique role in this reality workshop that has been experienced by thousands of people in the past.

Ultramono art label is a nonprofit studio and hub of multidimensional art practice for conceptualization production and showcasing my artworks, and in some instances, where my artwork forms a platform, like virtual worlds in social VR spaces, other individuals are also invited to participate, as consultants, collaborators, performers or active visitors.

My main mega-project past seven years is called AvantGarden, which is some sort of a laboratory of reality, with elements that I call cosmic and bionic, truly made of a variety of media - ambient sounds, techno tracks, digital sculptures, audio-visual artworks that form bigger spheres, events and gatherings. Events follow the idea of ever-growing techno-fantasy, along with the invitation to the audience to "become part of a work of art" by being active parts of happenings by dancing, carrying informal conversations, playing music, and participating in the direction of future events. Sometimes these events become "phygital" by merging physical installations in galleries and museums and online events with international participants and visitors.

Switching focus from years of presenting complex installations with custom-made electronics, in recent years all AvantGarden worlds are presented as online worlds, some with the possibility of social interactions of numerous visitors at the same time, while also featuring character building through avatars in virtual reality, augmented reality camera filters, and custom-made ambient sound compositions. All of these artworks also include a lot of learning and dissecting of these tools to be able to use them for creative applications in the domain of art and culture and education, to be able to keep on expanding this fractal and network-like ecosystem project and its individual units I call spheres. Previous projects had a lot of experimentation with haptic electronics, proto-augmented reality, and generative and real-time audio-visual compositions with physical components.

The spheres that AvantGarden is made of are all about regeneration, recreation, our technological twins realized as avatars, helpers, proto-machines, and ecological awareness. We could also think about spheres as life pods for rethinking the world. Being aware of the current, thinking about possible futures, being critical but allowing for positive envisioning of the future.

Symbolism and philosophical questions that appear throughout these worlds are there to inspire and provoke. By immersing ourselves into these environments within regularly organized (un)guided tours we think together with its objects and other visitors. Proto-machines, little helpers, Gardeners and Florists, patios, platforms, bubbles, and spheres are also meant to be taken lightheartedly because I deeply value the idea of play, games and celebrations, and learning and experiencing things in playful environments. By mixing critical thinking and playful environments, the result is always a speculative, hypothetical temporary upgrade of reality.

Emancipatory tools that enable us to express ourselves are usually and even more so with every update, included in the majority of social virtual reality and virtual worlds where people can freely explore identities and storytelling playfully, and engage, in the case of the AvantGarden, with the proposed topic on a variety of levels as ideas about future ecosystems, recreation and variety of technologically enhanced identities are scattered in each sphere.

Each new sphere starts with the "seeds" of the previous one - a small group of conceptualized digitally sculpted objects. You may ask yourself what is the initial seed? Does it come from the sketch of the first flower, appearing in the "Club"? Does it come from the sound samples from the "Genesis" Or is it a series of initial tape recordings of radio noise for the "Perfect Frequency" exhibition from way back in the year 1996? Seeds are stored in the internal seed banks of my memories, in folders, physical and digital, on documentary photos and old VHS tapes, and as if the timeline is twisting, at times, old, new, or ancient "seeds" and digital "plants" will begin to emerge from the computer keyboard, midi keyboard, mouse and drawing tablet. I always start with shaping a few objects and thinking about their placement within the future sphere world, and the world emerges from their relation and impact on the environment, calling new ones into existence. That is how the spheres are born, gaining consciousness themselves, waiting for people to populate them, explore the AvantGarden, and keep it in their memory, for its spiritual, aesthetic, scientific, and artistic layers. The sum of all of these elements merges to provoke our critical thinking with its expanded media and digital practice of daily living and reflection.

Prismatic insight into the current state of the project I have been working on for seven years now is revealing the importance of several things I was trying to achieve with each element and its presentation. Developing these mixed reality bionic techno environments is made for audiences and participants from all walks of life to immerse themselves and regenerate, while celebrating life, interactively playing with the environment, and participating in the field of creativity and self-expression through visual art, sound installations, music,

and avatar expressions. Mixed realities nowadays cover expanding areas of research and practices from virtual, augmented, artificial intelligence art, and various crypto-based initiatives combined with web 3.0 elements, all-encompassing what previous eras of multimedia accomplished. We are finally seeing some of the mixed media elements we dreamed of come to life by stepping into our daily lives.

As "noosphere", a layer of total connectedness that our ancestors were dreaming about is slowly progressing from the early stages of the Internet into upgraded, more complex but also complicated nets of immense quantities of data, we are heading into directions not yet defined - there are so many new questions springing up with each new upgrade.

As natural and artificial are getting into even more intriguing entanglements than before, we are continuing to develop these new symbiotic metaphors and exploring this dichotomy as visible in every corner of popular culture. As if people deeply want to merge, untangle, and again remix the natural world with the seemingly newly emerging synthetic computation and populate these environments with avatars apparitions of semi-humans, alien creatures, and humanoid machines, all symbolizing our unease about losing control over our data, and personal lives.

Like shell growing layers of non-organic matter that protects its organic parts, so is our noosphere being woven from compounds of crystals, minerals, plastic, metals, data, and flesh, and packaged as sometimes mythological, stories. Nature, seeping through every pore of technological screens and apparitions, presents itself as overgrowth, darkness, roots, branches, leaves, twigs, and petals. Mythologies of expanded nature break through shaders, transparencies, polygons, and layers of interfaces. Surreal, ultra-real, divine, and underground, every myth and symbol from the past gets to be reinvented into a new echoing life.

Fusion of a variety of realities - mythological, surreal, imaginary, narrated epic, or poetic is also possible through a very specific class of virtual objects we love to call avatars among other things. They are made to represent us but also do so many other things. Avatars are our bridges into the unknown matter, the dense layers of "noosperic" shells. These magical players we spawn into the life grid of expanded realities have so many tasks we need them to fulfill. Representing and hiding us at the same time, they are also excellent forms of expression and creativity that seduce, inform, dance, shop, or protect.

I have witnessed many times the variety of tremendous effects someone's avatar can have in their lives - from therapeutic, to uplifting, to relaxing to life-changing. If used thoughtfully with care and love, engaging in virtual domains through the usage of avatars can make lives richer and enable us to understand so many metaphors taking shape around us. This also enables us to look at the history of art and design and popular culture with in-depth insight into stories surrounding imaginary characters. From literature characters to ancient statues and idols and characters from popular culture, to

newborn melanges and inventions, we are seeing imaginary creatures profoundly come to life, enhancing our lives.

Some areas of contemporary art nowadays, similar to historical experimental and avant-garde art, are all about pushing boundaries, curating the entire experience of stepping into, enjoying, contemplating, and reflecting on our surroundings, and getting in touch with a variety of phenomena around us.

For years I have been thinking of these forms of companions that dwell in imaginary-real environments and can be "summoned" upon our request, and over the years I have been assigning various roles and forms to them. Within the AvantGarden context, I conceptualized these little helpers as "friends", "ambassadors of goodwill", Gardeners and Florists through which I explored ideas of alien bioforms that converge from mythology, speculative thinking, inclusivity, tolerance, and respect of organic and non-organic entities, sometimes even with shamanic properties.

Within pavillions, meadows, pathways, and forests of the AvantGarden they have appeared in forms of totally abstract shapes like some sort of "Proto-machines", to characters that resemble abstracted human forms, to highly stylized, toy resembling entities that I have been working with ever since the beginning of "Discrete events" series and Supermono installation.

From cloud computing to the generation of scents, to ergonomically shaped sculptural objects, to bionic machines that resemble high-tech "plantoids", these entities were always scattered within the virtual environments of the AvantGarden. Depending on the individual sphere, they would assume particular roles and allow us to "think-with" them.

AvantGarden is about inspiring others and being inspired, about crystalizing thoughts and forms that are liberating and enriching, that nourish and cherish and regenerate. It is about giving someone a reason to be there, to (co)-create the moment, where each moment is important, where time becomes the key element of the development of work, and simultaneously erases itself. Immediacy is becoming eternity and vice versa, time stretching is our focus, and seems like our tools are in our hands, at least temporarily. Prismatic, spectral, holographic, like "being in the womb of an alien"\*, that's how it feels like. A feeling of being in uncharted territory. Some elements are familiar, some foreign, yet everything should feel welcoming, and one should feel protected.

Each step forward in making a new piece of work: a digital image, electronica experimental soundscape, techno tracks, a sculpture, or an installation, is a significant one as it always brings new growth out of the seed of the previous one. It has been an honor to be able to do what I have been given a chance to do in life - taking a journey every day towards another view, different angles, twists and turns of each object, tone, waveform, and gratefulness and love is infused into every step I take. I couldn't be more grateful for everyone and everything supporting the constant development of my vision. All of these

amazing journeys I had with people in recent years are cherished and infused back into the newly created artworks.

My initial experiences of virtual reality environments were all about a tremendous sense of freedom and seemingly endless space, the sublime beauty of landscapes, and interiors that usually encourage discovery and exploration, similar to free hiking in nature. While in virtual reality, some of those emotions that might occur while exploring natural landscapes could be experienced. After working on virtual worlds in desktop mode for many years, I started developing art installations for virtual reality, exported as standalone applications to be experienced by one visitor at a time. After spending significant time in these worlds while testing and developing these artworks, and increasingly felt the need and almost necessity to make their works accessible to multiple visitors at the same time, and that led me to the exploration of social virtual reality platforms, that will not only enable multiple visitors to experience the work but also meet online at the same time from wherever they are located, as long as they have those applications (VRChat, Sansar, Somnium Space) installed.

Digital sculptures are scattered all over my virtual reality pavilions called spheres. Each sphere is an art installation, that following the principles of fractal forms, holds smaller artworks, encouraging lighthearted exploration in a profound way through virtual reality technology. Slowly shifting from physical sculpture to 3D prints, drawings on paper, and paintings with acrylic and oil paints was a long road of introducing new media materials and tools over the past two decades into my art practice. From early on, I was using resampled and remixed sound presented as multichannel audio compositions, to textile and 3D printed objects with custom electronics, to interactive custom-made software made with a variety of elements from software programs like Processing, Max/Msp/Jitter, Quartz Composer, Unity3D and Blender, that I continued using to this day. Starting from works made in game engines that can be experienced only by one individual at a time, I decided to explore options of creating artworks that can be viewed by multiple visitors simultaneously, and instead of continuing to develop standalone Unity3D applications for desktop and VR presentations, I additionally started exploring publishing art installations on social VR and virtual world platforms. Not only these presentations were successful, but over time I started organizing regular events and art presentations as hybrid events under the umbrella of my non-profit art hub studio called Ultramono. These virtual art installations have been presented to thousands of visitors from all over the world in the last few years. Alongside the visual and sensorial shaping of the experience, I also extended the art practice toward custom techno and experimental soundscapes as the vital part of the immersion. While searching for appropriate music for my hybrid DJ sets that always feature my visual compositions made in Blender and other video editing programs like Resolume, I started making elaborate sound compositions to add to my DJ sets performed mostly in my own installations online in front of the virtual audience.

Experiments and research into alternative ways of presenting contemporary art are something I have always been interested in - since the 90s. I experimented with works displayed on pages of a fashion magazine, on LED screens in public spaces, and in city centers as 24-hour projections that can be viewed by passers-by through windows of galleries or stores, broadcasted upon request in free phone call services, or on billboards. As I continue to innovate and explore the boundaries of digital art and its perception and reception, I always invite the audience to see my multiple art installations freely available on platforms like Sansar and VRChat where my many art installations continue to attract visitors. Many keep adding Ultramono worlds to favorites and keep returning with words of praise and feedback on how they relate to artwork, feel touched, and are also inspired to explore more, all being a part of the fantastic democratization of contemporary art.

One of the central subjects in my work has been the complex idea of well-being with each of the projects expanding some aspects of regeneration and recreation of the human condition, like for example research into historical medicament compounds, contemplation through exploration of virtual worlds, relaxing sensorial environments, embodiment through music and dancing through recreation of elements of rave culture online, and contemplation and relaxation within virtual parks and gardens. Wellbeing can be achieved through many means like introspection, contemplation of the outside world, enjoyment of art, and music, recreation through physical activity like dancing, and contemplation of effects that objects, environment and interactions have upon us. Mythological stories surrounding organic and non-organic matter and sculptures can significantly impact how we perceive the world and what is our placement in our environment, and they can indeed make us feel invigorated and recreated. By navigating different strata of virtual worlds we enter forms and become part of the environment, and by being able to move and shape our environment we feel touched and inspired.

## Footnotes

\* Someone's comment about the Ultramono event in AvantGarden virtual reality art installation in VRChat

## References

- '17 Flowers That Look Like Something Else', n.d. <https://www.boredpanda.com/flowers-look-like-animals-people-monkeys-orchids-pareidolia/>.
- 'Bobject', n.d. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bobject>.
- 'Language of Flowers', n.d. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language\\_of\\_flowers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_of_flowers).
- 'Musica Universalis', n.d. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musica\\_universalis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musica_universalis).
- 'Noosphere'. In Wikipedia, 5 December 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Noosphere&oldid=992389119>.
- 'Other (Philosophy)', n.d. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Other\\_\(philosophy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Other_(philosophy)).
- 'Spheres Trilogy', n.d. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spheres\\_trilogy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spheres_trilogy).
- 'Zen', n.d. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zen>.
- Alejandro Jodorowsky: Film, Comics and Conversation, n.d. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJHdOxgS-Vg>.
- Badmington, Neil. Alien Chic: Posthumanism and the Other Within (version New edition). New edition. Routledge, 2004.
- CDM Create Digital Music. 'Automated Techno: Eternal Flow Generates Dance Music for

You', 29 April 2019. <https://cdm.link/2019/04/automated-techno-eternal-flow/>.

GTA Online: Tale of Us Live from Los Santos, n.d.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZxGGyS0j5g>.

Jodorowsky, Alejandro, Rachael LeValley, and Alejandro Jodorowsky. *Psychomagic: The Transformative Power of Shamanic Psychotherapy*. Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2010.

Macdonald, Fiona. 'NASA Unveils Mind-Blowing Video of Orion Spacecraft Blazing As It Returns to Earth', n.d. <https://www.sciencealert.com/nasa-unveils-mind-blowing-video-of-orion-spacecraft-blazing-as-it-returns-to-earth>.

*Simulation and Its Discontents*. Simplicity. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2009.

St. John, Graham. *Global Tribe: Technology, Spirituality and Psytrance*. Studies in Popular Music. Sheffield, UK ; Bristol, CT: Equinox Pub, 2012.

*The Inner History of Devices*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2008.

Turkle, Sherry, ed. *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (version Reprint). Reprint. The MIT Press, 2011.

Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (version Reprint). Reprint. Simon & Schuster, 1997.