

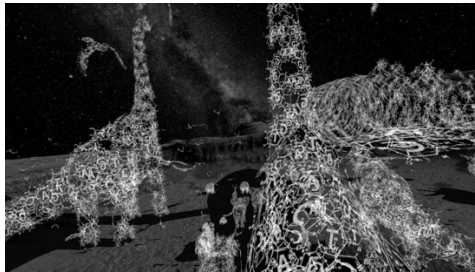
Artists Laurie Anderson And Hsin-Chien Huang Take Visitors On A Virtual Reality Voyage To The Moon

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I write about luxury, art and culture.

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It may have been created to pay tribute to the 50th anniversary of the first manned mission to the moon in 1969, but the starting point behind the immersive virtual reality artwork *To the Moon* is actually a story about an ancient Chinese painter who spent his entire lifetime making an elaborate vertical landscape painting of a steep mountain with a winding road, spiky pine trees, pilgrim huts, fishermen and the sea using a single-hair badger brush. When it was finished, he walked into it and vanished. Grammy Award-winning American musician, multidisciplinary artist and filmmaker, [Laurie Anderson](#), who co-created the 15-minute-long piece with Taiwanese new media artist, Hsin-Chien Huang, explains, “The way we’re using this technology allows you to be free and that’s the biggest thing about VR that I love: it’s that you are not presented with a work of art as is that can’t change, but you walk into it, fly into it, you become it. This is what we want people to do. We want them to walk into works of art and wander around inside them and see what they can see. I have a secret goal, which is that people feel free and they’re not trapped by their minds.”



Dinosaurs, bears, elephants, birds, a whale, a giraffe and other creatures composed of a latticework of DNA molecules
PHOTO COURTESY OF HTC VIVE ARTS

So we the viewers embark on our own moon landing. As the earth falls away, we’re an astronaut flying to a make-believe moon and exploring mountainous terrain under zero-gravity conditions, figments of Anderson’s and Huang’s imaginations. The moonscape is not meant to be realistic, as Anderson points out, “It’s the mind that can jump. It’s your imagination, so this is a work about that.” We’re exposed to different facets as we plunge into unknown territory, including the dark side of the moon. Constellations appear as symbols of things that have already or are on the verge of disappearing – a ship, a bee, a polar bear, a gemstone, infinity and democracy – as what we believe to be permanent is actually fragile and can easily be lost.

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We slide into another scene where DNA molecules reconstitute as extinct (or soon-to-be) animals, in a Noah's Ark-like parade of dinosaurs, bears, elephants, birds, a whale and a giraffe, which then transform into a Cadillac as commentary on human use of carbon, oil and other natural resources. When that explodes, we find ourselves in a universe of piles of trash recalling NASA's 5,000-year plan to send earth's radioactive waste to the moon, which demonstrates mankind's propensity for self-destruction.

Referencing literature, a giant stone rose floats in the air with the moon circling around it, which was inspired by the French novella *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Then we climb a Chinese snow mountain complete with its own reflection, where our astronaut body falls away from us and we see it plummet into space in a nightmare scenario. But that's not the end. Cut to a donkey ride on the moon with diamonds falling from the sky like a meteorite shower and national flags are being planted. The experience concludes in a fireworks spectacle in which the stars explode and go out.



The moon transformed into a dumping ground for all the radioactive waste from earth

PHOTO COURTESY OF HTC VIVE ARTS

Huang notes, "One of the most important things in Western art is that the human body is always the central topic, so this being a VR work, first you will get a body and become an astronaut, but later on, about three quarters of the way in, you actually lose your astronaut body and gain a new body, which is composed of the largest prime numbers. Also in one of the scenes, your arms become very long, like space alien tentacles. I think that's a very interesting way to use VR because instead of seeing things, you actually feel your body is changing. I think that only VR can do that. When you're dreaming, I think a lot of people dream they're flying. I think VR can really make that happen. What we're trying to achieve is not just that it's very stunning or makes an impact on our senses, but actually when people experience it, I hope that they will feel it's really touching their hearts."

Recently making its Asian debut at [Art Basel Hong Kong](#), *To the Moon* was presented by [HTC VIVE Arts](#), launched in 2017 and led by director Victoria Chang, which harnesses new technology to change the way culture is experienced. Working with leading artists to craft interactive pieces and exhibits, it has established nearly 40 partnerships with major cultural institutions, including Tate Modern in London, Musée d'Orsay and Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris, the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the National Palace Museum in Taipei and the ArtScience Museum in Singapore. Coming up, *To The*

Moon will be shown at the Cannes Film Festival in May alongside the artists' two earlier VR pieces (*Chalkroom* and *Aloft*), and thereafter at the Manchester International Festival in July 2019.



A stone rose inspired by imagery from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's novel "The Little Prince"
PHOTO COURTESY OF HTC VIVE ARTS

Q&A with Laurie Anderson and Hsin-Chien Huang

Tell me about your initial meeting in 1994 and why you decided to work together.

Hsin-Chien Huang: At that time, I created a multimedia piece called *The Dream of Time* and submitted it to a competition. Laurie was the judge. She also wanted to collaborate with a CD-ROM company called Voyager, but they didn't have a designer for it, so when she saw my work, she said she would like to collaborate with me. That's how we first met and started to collaborate, and we've worked together on six or seven projects now. After we had done our first VR piece *Chalkroom*, which won the Best VR Experience at the Venice Film Festival, we started to feel that VR has so much potential. I think that technology-wise, it's changing the way we perceive art. It's making people experience art in totally different ways, so we would like to do more and see how far we can push the boundaries.

Laurie Anderson: I met Hsin-Chien through Bob Stein who was having a digital art contest, and the most amazing artist was Hsin-Chien. Bob was convinced that it was going to be a great idea to bring artist videos to the public, so he started an electronic publishing company called Voyager. Hsin-Chien and I helped to launch it with a CD-ROM sponsored and commissioned by Bob called *Puppet Motel*. It was all these stories and all sorts of images and music, like an electronic book, which had been my dream forever to make one. When I met Hsin-Chien, I realized here's a person I first of all liked so much, that I thought what an interesting, wonderful mind. Secondly, he is an amazing artist, so I thought what a great privilege to work with him. Since then, I've collaborated with Hsin-Chien on several different kinds of projects. When he called me three or four years ago and said do you want to do some VR things, I wasn't sure because tech artwork has a tendency to disappear with that tech. I didn't want to make something again that would be inaccessible the way for example CD-ROMs are no longer really accessible. So I said no at first, and then I said I didn't like VR, it's too brutal, people don't look real, but if we could make something that looked like some kind of dark drawing, then maybe I could. Of course Hsin-Chien knew exactly what

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I was talking about. He's a kind of mind reader and he showed me some ways that we could do that, so I immediately got very excited about VR. We've done three now: *Chalkroom*, *Aloft* and *To the Moon*.



Grammy Award-winning American musician, multidisciplinary artist and filmmaker, Laurie Anderson

PHOTO COURTESY OF HTC VIVE ARTS

What was it like being NASA's first-ever artist-in-residence in 2002?

LA: What a strange gig. Somebody called me up one day and said would you like to be the first artist-in-residence at NASA. I didn't believe him, so I hung up the phone. Eventually I realized that they were asking me to do this and the job was completely vague, so I thought what a wonderful chance to make up a job. I took it and for about three years, I was a kind of fly on the wall at the jet propulsion lab in Pasadena, mission control in Houston and the Hubble Space Telescope in Baltimore. I got to meet a lot of the engineers and scientists and realized that they were already doing works of art like a stairway to space or the greening of Mars. A lot of the research that's being done at NASA is of course military-related, but it's almost still science, so that was what I was mostly focused on. What I got out of it was the thrill of being able to do something that involved so much technology and so much dreaming, and such a visionary way of looking at what you could do with that technology.

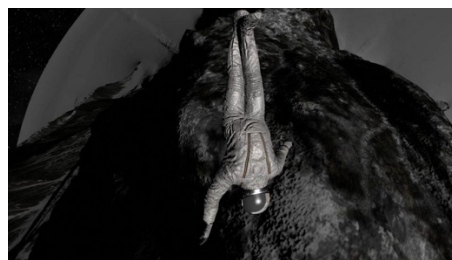


Taiwanese new media artist, Hsin-Chien Huang PHOTO COURTESY OF HTC VIVE ARTS

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Describe *To the Moon*, how it combines art, science, literature and politics, and how it offers viewers an immersive, out-of-body experience.

LA: Like all VR, it's a unique combination of art and technology, and there's a lot of programming and serious number-crunching that goes into this. Now Hsin-Chien is the one who's really making these things. We collaborate in terms of what we're doing as well as how we're doing it. We each bring our interests to it. For myself, the study of nature of mind, which I do as a Buddhist, and in terms of Hsin-Chien, a really wide knowledge of literature and poetry. The political things that made their way into *To the Moon* are the idea of some people to take all of the messy manufacturing that's polluting the earth and put it on the moon, so we made a big trash mountain section to show what that would look like and feel like, and how disturbing it is to take a pristine, untouched-by-human planet and fill it with our garbage. Also, I couldn't resist putting in the scene that's in every single space movie you've ever seen, which is the astronaut needs to make some repairs, he crawls out onto the wing of the craft, his cable gets cut and he tumbles away into space. I wouldn't call it an "out-of-body experience". I would call it an "in-body experience" because this is a very visceral work, maybe more than other types of VR, because we really focused on what it means to identify with your hands in this experience, what it means to be able to fly and also you have the illusion that your body is moving. When you move your hands in certain ways to fly in this work, you stretch them out Superman style, which is a very bodily experience. I know that some people want to do EEG experiments, in other words just thoughts being able to control your body. I love the body controlling the mind and vice versa, the back and forth between mind and body that VR offers when you use your body to enter it, so I find that very exciting and with many potential uses. Of course, there are lots of different types of VR. There's medical uses for it, educational uses, journalistic ways to do it. A lot of companies are now trying to represent artist works on the VR platform. What we do is different. It's fiction. It's the difference between a documentary film and a fiction film. We're doing fiction and so we're not obliged to do anything except amaze you.



An astronaut tumbling into outer space PHOTO COURTESY OF HTC VIVE ARTS

How did you divide your roles on this project?

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HCH: The rough division is that Laurie came up with the music, the stories and some directions, and I came up with some directions, the programming, 3-D and the final integration, but our collaboration was very organic. We took turns asking each other's questions and also took turns to answer them.

What do you want for visitors to take away from *To the Moon*?

HCH: The whole work is about freedom – freedom to fly, freedom from gravity and freedom from boundaries – when you lose what you think is most important, like your body. Nobody can experience themselves without a body except in VR. There's a Buddhist saying that you have to lose all your desires in order to be free, so I think this is my interpretation, that you can be free, fly free, but also you need to wear these gadgets just like an astronaut.



A snow mountain with its own reflection PHOTO COURTESY OF HTC VIVE ARTS

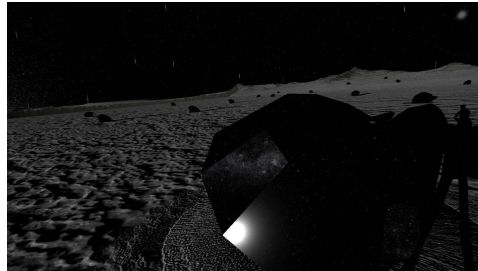
You are pioneers of the use of technology in the arts. What are the possibilities of virtual reality for artists?

LA: The possibilities are limitless, but I think they're limitless no matter what medium you work in. And I try not to idealize virtual reality because my goal as an artist is to lose myself in a work of art. You can get lost in a Russian novel, you can get lost in a pencil drawing, you can also get lost in virtual reality – these are different ways of getting lost in works of art. New technology always promises to do things that other art forms can't, and I think that's a little bit unrealistic frankly. One of my favorite quotes is if you think technology is going to solve your problems, you don't understand technology and you don't understand your problems. For me, my problem is not that I need to go faster and be more efficient, which is what technology generally does for you – I would like to go slower and take more time.

HCH: We are at the very early stages of this medium. I will make an analogy. If VR is a movie, we are at the beginning when cinema was just invented. When the Lumière brothers showed their first film, which was a train entering into a station, the audience in the theater jumped out of their seats and ran for their lives because they thought that the train was going to hit them. During those 100 years since movies have been invented, we have seen so many movies and we have a common vocabulary shared with the directors so we know how to watch a movie, but right now VR is like a new-born baby. Nobody knows how to watch

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VR. So I think for a lot of creators in VR, if their background is in film, the thing that troubles them the most is that they cannot force the audience to see what they want them to see like in a movie. In VR, the audience can see what they want. I think we have so much to learn. For example, using the body is something we found that only VR can do. As VR becomes adopted by more and more creators, we'll find more amazing things that only VR can do compared to movies or other media.



Go on a donkey ride on the moon with diamonds falling from the sky PHOTO COURTESY OF HTC VIVE ARTS

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I've been a luxury lifestyle writer and editor for 17 years, meaning I've met with today's movers and shakers and gone behind the scenes to observe master craftsmen at work creating everything from Cartier timepieces and Moynat handbags to Rolls-Royce cars and Riva yachts. I've rubbed shoulders with the biggest names in luxury, partied with celebrities and hung out with the most exciting artists and designers of our generation, while watching out for the rising stars of art, design, architecture, horology and jewellery. For the sake of lifestyle journalism, I've interviewed the likes of Monica Bellucci, Lenny Kravitz, Ralph Lauren, Giorgio Armani, David Adjaye, Frank Gehry, Shigeru Ban, Karim Rashid, Marc Newson, David LaChapelle and Yue Minjun, sharing my insights with readers of Robb Report, T Magazine, Artsy, Artinfo.com, Vogue, International Watch, The Peak, Asia Tatler, Prestige, Surface, Watch Journal, Manifesto, Art Republik and The Straits Times, among others. I have the best job in the world. Follow me on Instagram: @yjeanm.

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