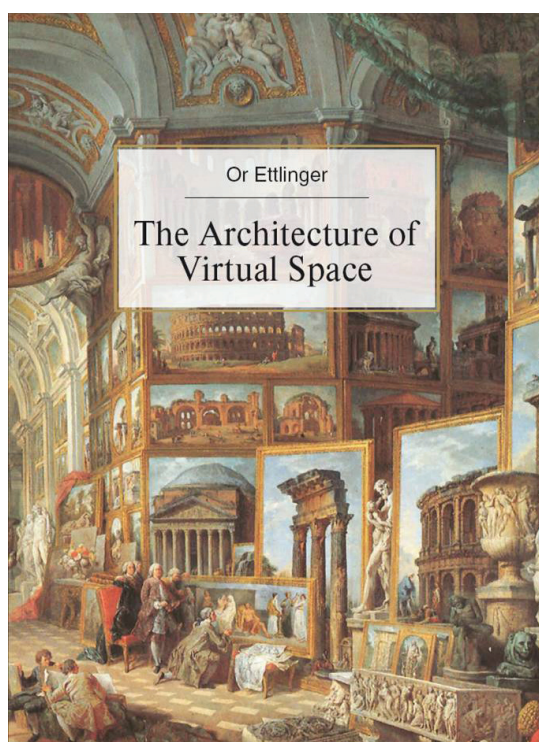


Interview with Dr. Or Ettliger, author of “The Architecture of Virtual Space”

The Faculty of Architecture of the University of Ljubljana is about to publish the book “The Architecture of Virtual Space”, authored by Dr. Or Ettliger, who is a lecturer and researcher of media theory and virtual architecture at the Faculty. His book combines two topics of research: it presents a comprehensive analysis of the elusive idea of virtual space, and explains it through a detailed study of works of art that are rich in architectural content.



Let's get right down to it; what is your definition of virtual space?

My approach to reaching a definition of virtual space was to first of all define what a virtual place is. According to the theory I am proposing, a virtual *place* is any place that we can see with our eyes and yet which has no physical existence right then and there. In other words, it is any place that we can see through a picture. Normally, we tend to identify what we see in a picture with the picture object itself, or we identify it with what we know about how that picture was made, or with the mental images it conjures in us, or with what it might mean to us. But if we put all these considerations aside for a moment, we would realize that whenever we look at such a picture, we actually see a place where in fact there is no place at all. Physically, all that is there is just ink on paper, or dots of light on a screen. Such a place is also not inside of our imagination, because it exists in front of our eyes, outside of us.

So where is this place that we see in a picture?

My proposed answer is that it is located in a space we could call 'virtual space'. I define this special kind of space as the overall space that is perceivable to us through pictorial images of any kind – paintings, photographs, films, video games, and so on. Each virtual place is a particular segment of this space, which can be seen through a particular picture. To describe anything as 'virtual', therefore, is simply to say that it is a visible object that is located in virtual space and is perceived through a picture. This approach to virtuality is obviously quite different than most of the common uses of this term and may raise many questions. My answers to these questions as well as further insights into the nature of virtual space were codified into what I call *The Virtual Space Theory*, and which is the theoretical core of my book.

This sounds like a theory of art more than a theory of technology, doesn't it?

The popular uses of the term 'virtual' often make us expect that any discussion of virtual space should necessarily be a discussion that is based on computers. Yet the further I explored the topic of virtual space, as well as the actual technology behind computers, the less I was convinced that computers are the key to understanding the essence of virtuality. Eventually, I focused on the visual aspect as the starting point for understanding virtual space, and started to regard the other non-visual uses of this term as metaphors whose reference is actually to the visual phenomenon of pictorial images.

So this theory is in fact independent of modern technology such as computers, the Internet, 'virtual reality' goggles...?

Exactly. One of the key goals of *The Virtual Space Theory* was to define virtuality and virtual space at the level of their principle, regardless of the particular tools with which this principle is realized. Currently, virtual space is popularly considered to be a computer-based phenomenon, and since most of us do not really understand the complexities of computer technology, virtual space became an elusive and mysterious idea. My point was to reinterpret the idea of virtual space in a way that would be equally applicable to a digital image made with the latest computer programs and to a painting made with brush and paint on canvas.

But isn't new media fundamentally different than old media?

There is no question that the technological developments of the last half century or so have changed much in how we produce, distribute, and experience images. Whether we consider it to be a sharp break in tradition or simply the next evolutionary step in a continuous process is then only a matter of interpretation. What *The Virtual Space Theory* offers is an alternative point of view which reconciles old and new media by revisiting old media theory and adapting it to present day technology and terminology. The surprising result is that old media theory can still be valid and applicable to new media phenomena as well.

There is a huge mess with terminology, isn't there? How to solve it?

As I see it, our ability to understand the world is limited to our ability to describe it in language. The mystery and confusion around the topic of virtuality is therefore primarily a matter of the inconsistent language we have for it. Terms such as 'virtual' and 'virtual space' are common to many different fields, yet often mean completely different things. My approach

was first to explore many of these fields from the inside for several years each, and come to internalize their respective views and uses of these terms. Then, I gradually constructed one single definition of virtual space by drawing an arbitrary line through this fog of multiple meanings. The result proposes a systematic model of virtual space and its related terminology, which differs somewhat from each of the common uses of these terms, and yet takes most of them into account.

Why did you focus so much on the architectural content of pictorial media?

To begin with, architecture was the initial stimulant for the development of *The Virtual Space Theory*. But as it turned out, taking an architectural point of view towards virtual space – rather than the more common technological, psychological, or philosophical approaches to the topic – allowed for a whole other set of answers to come forth. In the physical world, architecture is considered to be ‘the art of space’, and it deals with how we produce and experience the physical space in which we live. When it came to virtual space, then, architecture proved to be a useful visual theme through which to try to understand how it is that we can produce and experience space where physically there is none.

In a way this idea fills a large gap between the huge amount of theory on painting and the equally huge amount of theory of architecture. Am I right?

Yes. The history of painting, and more recently, film, is rich with a wide variety of places, some of which could even be considered architectural masterpieces, were it not for the fact that they are not – and were never intended to be – part of the physical world. And yet, this vast architectural heritage somehow received very little attention in that sense. On one hand we find the history and theory of art, which is much more interested in the central themes found in paintings, or in a painting’s technique of production, or in the cultural context of its making. Its architectural content, however, if mentioned at all is usually of secondary importance. And on the other hand we have the history and theory of architecture, whose main interest is either in physically-built architecture, or in the kind of architecture that was made with at least the hope of becoming built someday. In between all of these, the whole creative field of architectural content made purely for pictorial media has somehow remained widely overlooked.

How did you come up with it? What are the origins of this idea?

In a way, *The Virtual Space Theory* is a formal articulation of a personal way of perceiving virtual space, images, and their relation to each other. In the beginning it was only intuitive, and I did not consider it to be special in any way. But when, as an architecture student, I one day decided that I wanted to become an architect who builds virtual places, I discovered that no one really understood what I was talking about. Even worse, I found that even I could not clearly explain what my vision was – it was still beyond words. To me it was just obvious that there are two kinds of space an architect can build in – physical and virtual – and that my interest was in the second. So I started to explore all the fields that seemed related to the topic, and gradually formed an understanding of this special kind of space I wanted to be able to build in. It was not until much later, when I was already involved

with the Faculty of Architecture in Ljubljana and was asked to formalize my approach as a written theory that I realized that what I had actually ended up with was an alternative theory of the pictorial image.

How long did it take you to fully develop this theory?

The whole process took some fifteen years, though for most of the duration it was a very personal quest. I was only trying to educate myself in my profession of choice and reach as wide an understanding of it as I could. It was only much later that I realized that the insights I had gathered along the way may be of value not only for my own artistic work as the creator of virtual places, but also as a theory which could be shared with others. The core of the theory was then written down in the course of a few intensive months, and it took an additional three years of numerous revisions, editing, and design to produce the final book.

How has the theory been accepted in the academic circles of the FA and outside of it?

Most of the reactions have been extremely positive, and I feel privileged to have the support of some very distinguished professors. It is thanks to their encouragement that I was able to make it through the long process of producing the book, and it is their conviction in the value of the work that gave me the strength to see it through to completion. I am honored that the Faculty of Architecture chose to publish this book and make it available to wider academic and professional circles in Slovenia as well as abroad.

In which directions could this theory be further developed?

The Virtual Space Theory can be seen as a theoretical platform which can be extended further as well as applied to additional topics. I intend to still expand the theory itself in future publications as well as share more thoughts and ideas on my blog. As for the study of virtual places made for various mediums, the book's focus on the mediums of painting and film can be extended to additional mediums as well – from print ads to video games, music videos, and so on – a task which I hope to see taken up by experts in these respective mediums. On a more practical level, I am personally applying this theory in the development of my own art projects and I have previously used it in projects of data visualizations. However, during the process of writing the book I found that its topic piqued the curiosity of people in many fields I might not have considered related to it before, yet who felt that it addresses problems of their own. I therefore still expect to discover quite a few unpredictable applications of it, which is one of the reasons this book is now being made available to the broader public.

Dr. Ettliger, thank you for your time.

For more information, please visit: www.virtualspacetheory.com