

Stunning Rain Room installation at Shanghai's Yuz Museum brings audience and environment closer together

Is immersive art just a gimmick? Florian Ortkrass and Hannes Koch, the co-founders and creative directors of the art collective Random International, don't think so. In the collective's water-based *Rain Room* at Shanghai's Yuz Museum, visitors are invited to take a leap of faith and walk through what looks like a downpour – without getting soaked.

"It is not just a playful experience," explains Koch as he watches a handful of young Chinese giggling nervously as they make a tentative move towards the "rain". "There are serious questions behind it referencing environmental pressures, climate change and technology."

Ortkrass adds his take: "Immersion in an environment has been an interest of the studio for some time. With *Rain Room* we wanted to engage with the environment, to become part of the piece. The science and technology are just tools to explore how immersion affects the senses."

The indoor installation features a 150 square metre field dropping 1,800 litres of water (recycled from the museum's mains) per minute in what looks just like a downpour. The *Rain Room* has an intricate bank of 3D cameras and motion sensors that constantly track the audience's movements and stop the water directly overhead when they sense a body in the space. Rain continues in front of and behind the person, creating an experience that is at once playful, unnerving and surreal.

The first *Rain Room* debuted at London's Barbican Centre in 2012 before it was recreated in a temporary tent erected next door to New York's Museum of Modern Art two years later.

In Shanghai, the cavernous space of the Yuz Museum offered an unmissable chance for the artists to install an even bigger version – 50 per cent larger than previous ones – within a matte black tent that blocks out all light except that coming from an enormous spotlight at one end of the room. The effect as it shines through the light transforms visitors in the rain into mesmerisingly ghostly silhouettes.

The installation's new context within China is of particular interest to the artists. "How will people react to it here? Will they be different to those in London or New York?" asks Koch. "We just don't know but that is very exciting for us because the context definitely makes it different. The field of rain is so much larger and that intensifies the sensory experience."

Yuz Museum offers a booking system and extended viewing hours to avoid the long queues that the show attracted in London and New York.

"With our installations we find the relationship a person has with a space or other people is an interesting area of investigation," Koch adds. "You see people genuinely touched by it. You can actually reach people because it is a very physical experience. We also like the purity of it; that it is not used for advertising. It is about the purity of the experience."

The creative duo first met while studying at Brunel University in London before going on to attend the Royal College of Art. Realising they and fellow artist Stuart Wood worked extremely well together, and wanting to retain freedom to explore new technologies in their art, upon graduation they decided to found a collective in London in 2005. Random International is now based in both London and Berlin.

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Hannes Koch

"We decided to sacrifice our own egos and put our work together," says Koch. "The word 'collective' is just an easy way to describe this thing we do as a team of about 20 but the two of us share the artistic direction of projects."

The artists have made a name for themselves by transforming technologies such as LED and OLED into simple but striking interactive experiences that they believe encourage a more active relationship between visitors and their surroundings.

"Many of our works have been made possible by developments in technology, but technology is simply a material that we use to express our art," Ortkrass explains.

Their most notable works to date include *Fly* – a kinetic and responsive fly sculpture contained within a large glass cube – that premiered at the 4th Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art in 2011. The simulated insect's movement resembles a real fly responding to humans.

In the same year they installed an intriguing light artwork titled *Reflex* on the façade of a London building using lights to physically interact with passers-by. The highly complex installation comprising brass rods and LED lights on custom chips employed an algorithm specifically developed to emulate the collective decision making of large groups of birds or ants, thereby transforming people passing by into migratory digital patterns.

Another monumental light installation, *Swarm Study/III*, is on permanent display suspended above the Victoria & Albert Museum's ceramic staircase. The piece translates the movements of groups of visitors moving up and down the stairs into moving light, engaging with the visitors and the space.

The collective has also won several notable awards, including Prix Ars Electronica – Award of Distinction 2013 and Design Miami/Basel's Designer of the Future 2010. Current projects include taking part in a long-term artist residency at Harvard John A Paulson School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, to develop work that looks at life in a machine-led world.

Rain Room has been the collective's most successful project on the international stage. Ortkrass says he believes the effect of slowing down and being immersed in the art in an increasingly virtual age is a key attraction. "It is like being part of the art making. People are no longer passive spectators but become the art."

Watching visitors on the opening day, it was undeniable that the installation – which took about eight months to construct – allows the museum to engage more directly with the audience, provoking a response rather than presenting one as with more traditional works.

Although the experience is very simple, it is nevertheless also contemplative and deeply personal, and clearly deepens the connection to a work of art, reducing the traditional boundary between artist and audience.

Why I got wet in the Rain Room

Random International's *Rain Room* promises visitors can walk straight through the artificial rain without getting soaked. That is, if you walk slowly and are not wearing shiny black clothing or stiletto heels, as this writer found out.

So was it a technical glitch that led to me getting wet? Apparently not: I had moved too quickly, a few drops of water landed on my arm and as I instinctively leapt to what looked like a dry spot that had just seconds before been vacated by a fellow visitor, I unleashed a downpour. And that is the point of the piece.

"You can't rush gravity," says the collective's co-founder Hannes Koch with a laugh. "But it is the emotional side that we find so interesting. That many people are afraid to enter and then when they build up enough trust to enter the space, we love to watch the amazement when they are in."

Rain Room continues at the Yuz Museum until December 31 before embarking on a tour of Asia. Its ultimate permanent home will be at Yuz Museum founder Budi Tek's sculpture park that is under construction in Bali.

