

Talking Video Art, Architecture, and Immersion with Sabrina Ratté



Danae HI in DIGITAL ART WEEKLY by Danae HI

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Sabrina Ratté, *Undream*, 2018, still from video, courtesy of the artist.

Café Le Brebant, Paris, a Monday morning. We meet with video artist Sabrina Ratté to talk about her creative approach, use of new media, and recent work, as she brings her solo show Cité-Jardin to Galerie Charlot in Paris.



You use both digital and analogue technologies (e.g. video feedbacks, analogue video synthesizers) for your works. Could you comparatively explain how notions of chances and accidents appear when creating on computer devices?

The two processes are decidedly different. 3D animation, which I've been working with for the past 3–4 years, provides a much more controlled environment than



trait of Sabrina Ratté, courtesy of the artist.

the analogue technologies I used before. Video synthesizers consist of several modules that you can plug together with wires in various arrangements. You can

also turn knobs. All these configurations allow for a wide variety of outputs, and so there's a lot of space for experimenting with glitch and errors. Likewise, video feedback — when you turn the camera to the screen — always gives unexpected results. It's the nature of these tools to create glitches, and that's what interested me about them, but eventually I felt like it was a bit limited in terms of creating more complex geometries and perspectives, because you're always working with a flat surface, and so I started to integrate animation and other digital tools in my practice. For instance, I work a lot with the 3D animation software Cinema 4D, which brings a lot of possibilities but in a more controlled way. It changed my process a lot. Instead of experimenting with the machines and interacting with the results, now I write down ideas and try to figure out in advance what I'm going to do. And, of course, while I'm doing it, the concept changes and I interact with my tools, but it's more like a process than an accident. Renderings are also time-consuming, so it's overall not as intuitive, but it's a sacrifice I'm ready to make so that I enlarge my scope of possibilities. I still have accidents sometimes where I do something wrong, and the result is compelling, but I would say, it's less present.

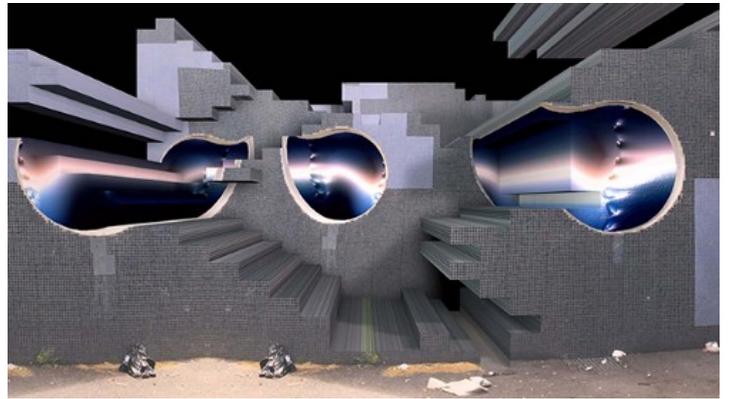
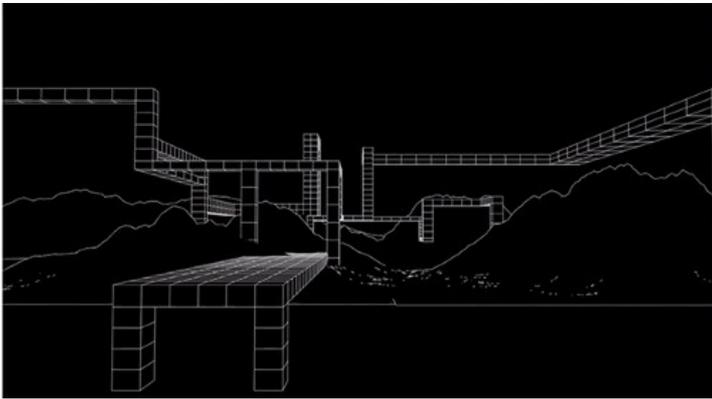


Sabrina Ratté, *Machine for Living: Montigny-le-Bretonneux*, 2018, still from video, courtesy of the artist.

From your series *Machine for Living* to your current exhibition *Cité-Jardin* at Galerie Charlot, your work shares strong references to French Modernist Le Corbusier and his utopian/dystopian visions of architecture. Even *Undream*, with its continual structures, reminds of his rooftop walkways in the Radiant City. Could you explain your interest in the painter and architect?

When I came in Paris to do my residency for *Machine for Living*, I stayed for a long time and visited several of his buildings such as Cité Radieuse in Marseille and la Villa Savoye in Poissy, and also read some of his books. He's an interesting character, he's very radical — and a little bit too much —

but at the same time, he's very ambiguous, which I find fascinating. He said "Architecture is the learned game, correct and magnificent, of forms assembled in the light," which is something I easily relate to when working my videos because I always feel like my medium is light and I'm creating shapes with it. I find that there is a lot of parallels to be made between architecture and art, and, for my sake, video art. Also, I'd say I'm quite an aesthete, so I love formal things, and Le Corbusier's work is very seductive in that sense; he thinks of all the very details, even for the interior design of his buildings, which left me impressed at Cité Radieuse. Mostly, I think what drags me to Le Corbusier's work is that he envisioned a utopia which then became a dystopia. The large housing towers in *Machine for Living* are a homage to him and his famous book *Vers Une Architecture* where he explained that a house is a machine to live in. It's an icy and systematic approach, although it ambioned to change the living habitat of the many at the time. This tension between the vision of an architect and the actual application of his work is something I like to convey in my work. I'm showing something beautiful at first sight, but there's something worrisome behind. There's always an ambiguity between dream and reality.



Left: Sabrina Ratté, *Undream*, 2018, still from video, courtesy of the artist. Right: Sabrina Ratté, *Machine for Living: Tours Aillaud*, 2018, still from video, courtesy of the artist.

Nonetheless, your approach to architecture departs from his functionalist approach, bringing more of an imaginary, non-feasible scope. How do you work with incorporating architectural elements into your virtual worlds?

Yes, I approach architecture from an aesthetic perspective, it's very intuitive and sensual, and I'd say amateur-ish in a way. I like to convey what spaces feel like and what you see when inside. What I like about architecture is its forms, shapes, and composition. I present it a visual element in which we want to project, so the built environments I produce have no functionality or practicality. Stepping aside from something which could exist in reality also allows for more freedom in conception. Architecture is a place for human to live in, but seeing it as an art can also push the constraints of functionality. I find it interesting to create an architecture that serves no purpose, just for the ambience. I think that's why I love the Arc de Triomphe so much, for instance, it's an unusual and massive architectural element which serves no practical purpose, but is very symbolic, and in that sense, has a lot to offer.

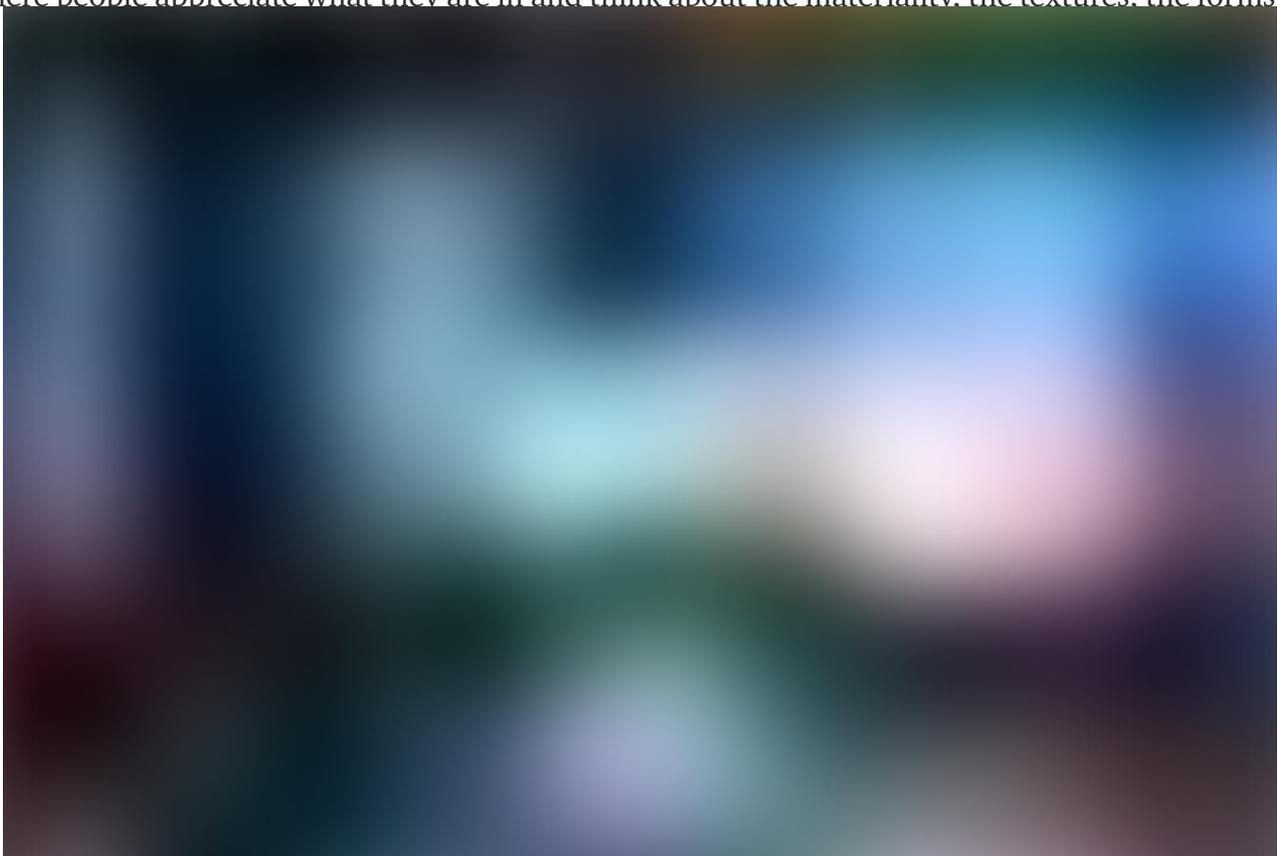


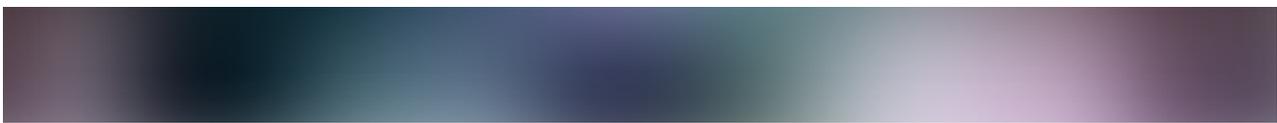


Sabrina Ratté, *Radiances VI*, 2017–2018, still from video, courtesy of the artist.

I believe you haven't used VR in your work as of now, but it seems to feature already this notion of stepping out of the real world and getting in another, great environment. What are your thoughts on virtual realities and the idea of immersion?

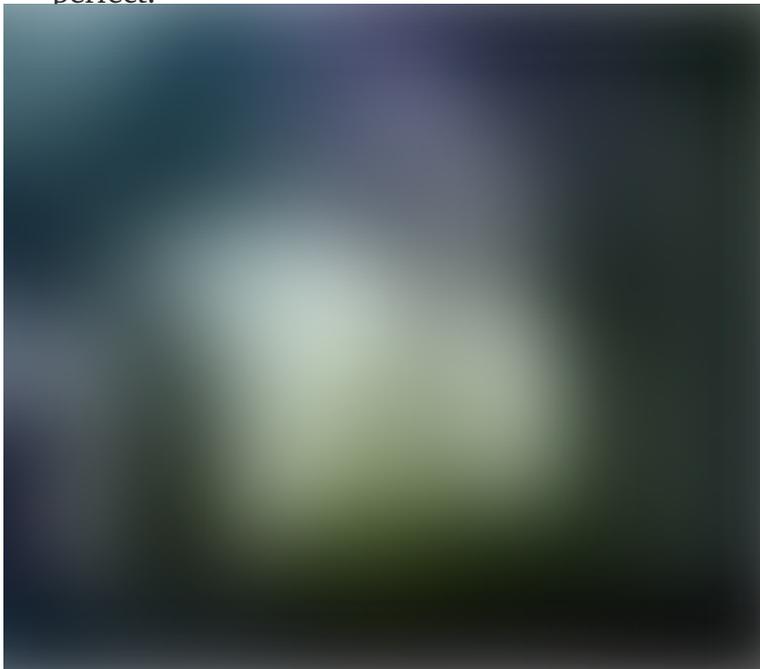
It's funny you say this, because I just received a grant to work on a VR project and am going to collaborate with Sara Ludy, an artist I've been wanting to collaborate with for years now, so it's finally happening and it will be my first VR project. All my work is about this idea of crossing the stream and being immersed in an environment. I'm obsessed with this idea of projecting oneself into a situation, but also with distancing the viewer and the environment — both at the same time. For instance, I often bring elements into the view which contrast with the initially peaceful scene. It cuts violently to disrupt this feeling of immersion, so you wake up from the dream and realise “oh yes, I'm watching a video and what just happened is a video synthesiser movie disruption.” Somehow, you understand that you're watching a film and come back to your viewing position. I think that's my approach to immersing; I want that immersion, but I also wish for a certain distance where people appreciate what they are in and think about the materiality, the textures, the forms.





Sabrina Ratté, *Alpenglow*, 2018, inkjet print and projection, courtesy of the artist.

You use a lot of textures which vary from construction materials to surfaces with electronic feels and painterly thicknesses. How do you work your aesthetic around these components? In Cinema 4D, there's this option called "material" that allows you to apply a texture onto an object and with that, you can do about anything. For example, the surface in *Machine for Living* is a photo that I applied onto the 3D structure, and a lot of the project is about the texture of this photo that I stretch and move on the building's framework. I find it amusing that if you take an element and change its outer appearance, it will appear to be a completely different object and change the ambience of a room or space. I experiment a lot with that and recently started to compile material details such as concrete, marble, etc. This bank of textures mostly consists of pictures I take (photos on the internet need to be of good quality) and allows me to try out different materialities onto my architecture elements. I like the idea of working with textures of reality and bring them into the virtual. I also use mirror and water textures to bring deepness into a room. This part is genuinely intuitive, much like painting. You ask yourself "what kind of ambience am I trying to convey to viewers?" so I try a lot of different textures, and then I get to this moment where I'm like "Oh, this is perfect."



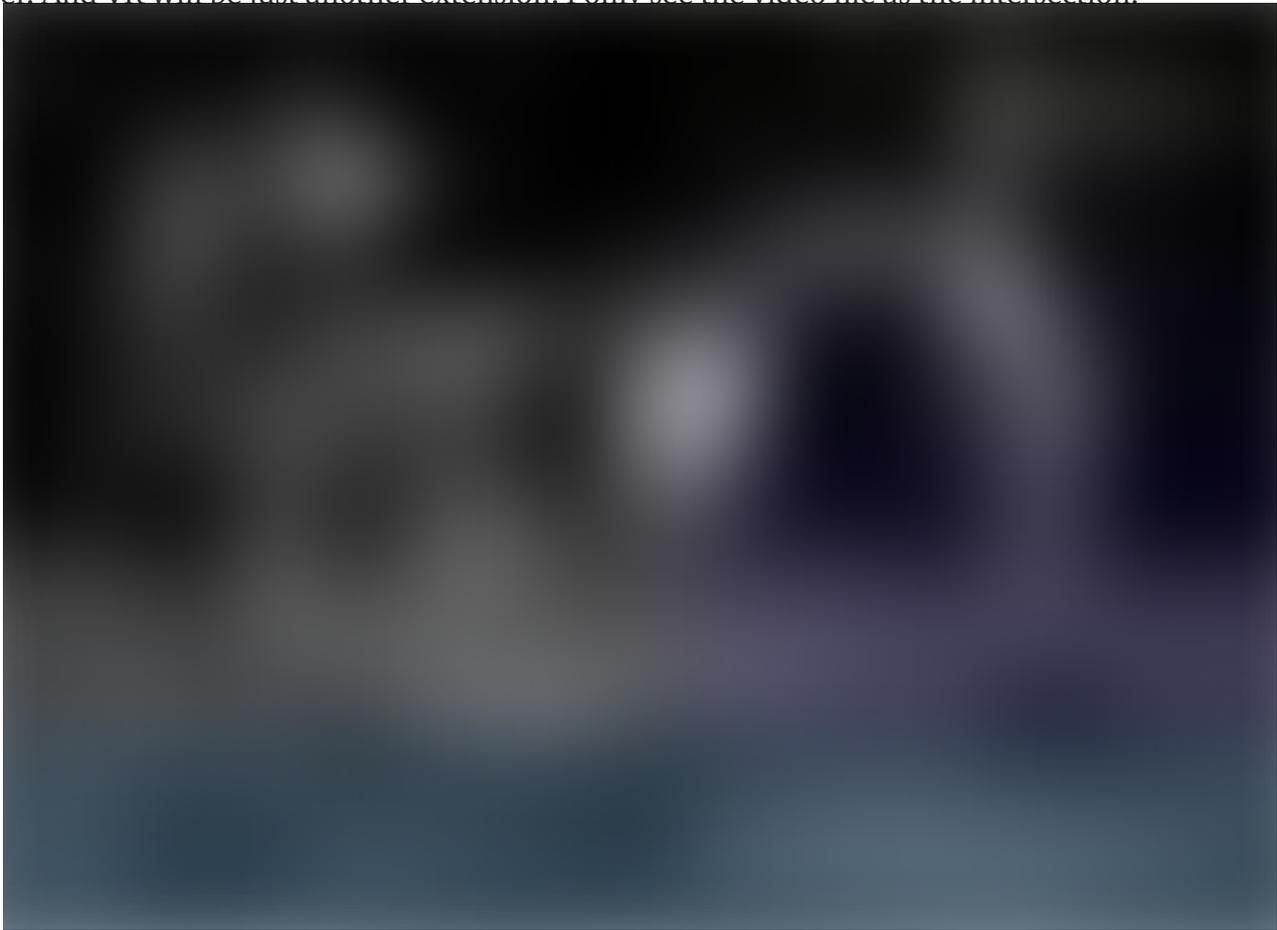
Machine for Living: Créteil, 2018, plexiglas sculpture and video projection, displayed in her solo exhibition Cité-Jardin at gallery Ellephant in 2018, courtesy of the artist.

You also recently developed 3D printed sculpture with video projection as an extension of *Machine for Living* as well as Plexiglas sculptures for *Radiances*. How do you embed these different media in your practice? Do you feel that digital tools allow artists more flexibility?

For me, this is all an extension to video. I see video as a very ambiguous term that's easy to use and can represent a mix of things. Video synthesiser and video feedback are forms of video, but then 3D animation is digital, and we still call it video, although it has a different nature. When I create an architecture in Cinema 4D and put it in the 3D printer, it becomes a sculpture, but still comes from that video file, that digital file. It's a complete

extension of the same work. Installation works are another to experience the video spatially, prints and projections bring another angle, but for me, it's all video. For instance, when I did a series of sculpture for *Machine for Living*, I printed three-dimensionally the architecture you see on the initial picture and projected the moving image of the facade onto the sculpture. So it's like this materiality that without the projection is plain, but you feel the object coming alive as light projects

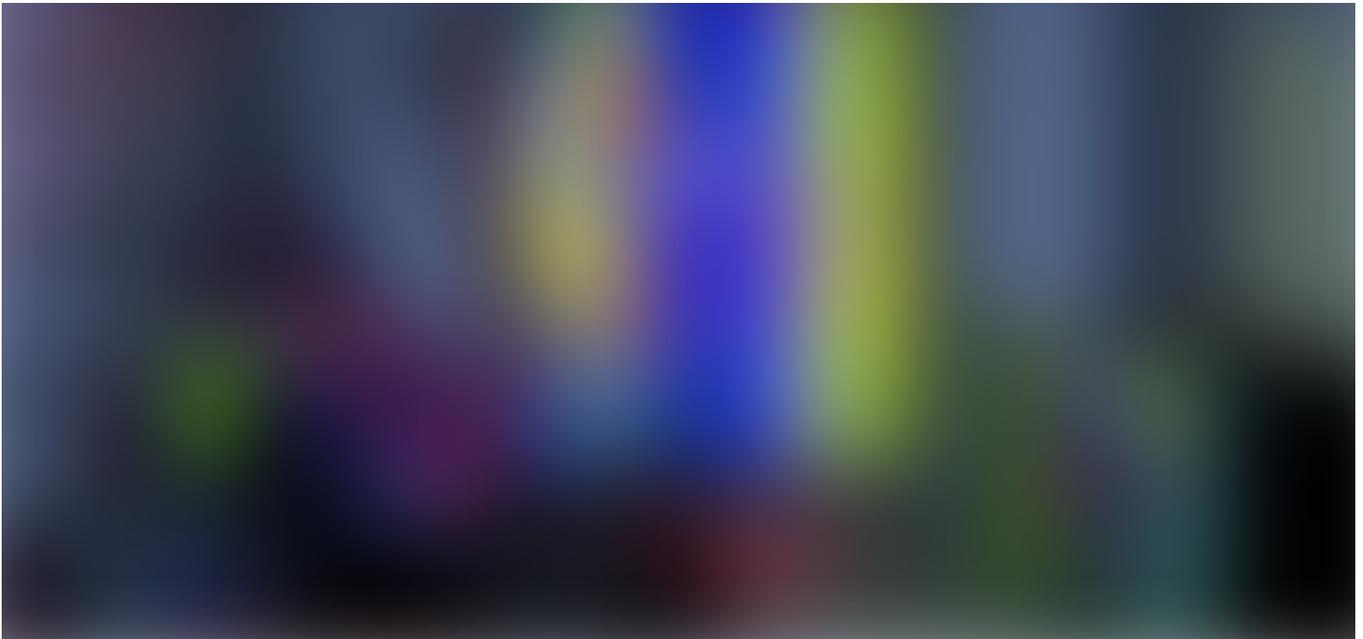
on its surface. Since I've started working with video, I wanted to explore all the possibilities it had to offer. And VR will be just another extension. I only see the video file as the intersection.



Sabrina Ratté, *Geometry of the Dream-Place*, 2019, inkjet print, courtesy of the artist.

In recent pieces such as *Inscape* and *Geometry of the Dream-Place*, it seems like you are digging more into mental spaces and constructions of the psyche? Could you explain your thoughts behind this stream of works?

I think I have always been fascinated by psychological projection, thinking that reality is a construction of our minds. We see things based on our experience, and I'm obsessed with the idea that everything is a projection, so it's part of most of my works. Usually, I want to explore a technique, and then I have other inspiration that comes and feeds the method, so it's a dialogue between the technical aspects and emotion I want to convey or an ambience and it always ends up being about perceptions of reality. I made *Inscape* and *Geometry of the Dream-place* at the same period when running a formal experiment of using the video synthesiser and making it into a 3D. If you look at *Geometry of the Dream-place*, the amorphous thing on top of the metal structure is an image of the video synthesiser that I adjusted to a 3D environment through different deformations — my way of bringing the synth' too. Other flat, rectangular surfaces show the classic video synth' that I've used for the texture of the 3D shapes. Content-wise, *Geometry of the Dream-place* was inspired by the famous horror writer HP Lovecraft whose books I was reading when creating the piece. The author describes dark atmospheres, and I love how he always brings in creatures from hell that you would not have imagined, so the original idea was to picture what kind of future could exist based on HP Lovecraft's vision. In the end, this piece explores the fear of the mind: all our own hidden thoughts and anguish.



Sabrina Ratté, *Inscape*, 2019, still from video, courtesy of the artist.

Meanwhile, *Inscape* was inspired by the paintings of surrealist artist Kay Sage who also asks about our thoughts. When I look at a surrealist canvas, I often think to myself “Oh wow, this could just be a 3D thing.” It’s something I was keen to explore. Sometimes I like to experiment formerly and see where it leads, and then maybe an ambience comes out. That’s what happened with *Inscape*; I did this as a complete exercise trying to do a Kay Sage’s painting in 3D and then eventually I thought I wanted to push this one further, so I built upon it and made a video.

Any exciting projects you’re working on right now and that we might get a glimpse of in 2019?

Well, I already told you about it, but the VR project that I’m doing with Sara, that’s pretty exciting, and I’m leaving for Chicago in July to do that. The summer will be about this project and I’ve already started working on it. It will be inspired by the Follies, buildings were constructed for decorative purposes in the 18th-century French and English gardens. I don’t want to tell you much more about it, but it will work around architecture in that sense. Exhibition-wise, I have a solo show at Galerie Charlot in Paris until the 25th of July, another with Rick Silva at Transfer Gallery in Los Angeles until the 10th of August, and will also participate in the group exhibition “Inner Ear Vision” at the Bemis Center in Omaha from the 11th of July to the 14th of September.

Architecture Immersive Digital Art VR Interview



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