Alliance of Women in Media Arts and Technology Conference 2019

**Project name:** Rockhaven Creepers Trilogy

**Category:** Installation

**Artist(s):** Elizabeth Leister

Dancers:
Tiara Jackson
Kelsey Long
Samantha Mohr

Music:
Found, Dealer & Denser by Nctrnm
Petal by Respawn

**Abstract**

Inspired by "The Yellow Wallpaper" written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1932, “Rockhaven Creepers Trilogy” utilizes cinematic virtual reality to bring the viewer into the space of the abandoned Rockhaven Sanitarium in Glendale, California. The trilogy presents three rooms, each inhabited by a dancer, a character, who through movement, embodies the various "nervous disorders" associated with female health in the 1930's and even through present day. The project uses the technology of virtual reality (VR) to physically and emotionally connect the audience to an embodied space and female stories.

**Motivation**

I wanted to create a VR work that highlighted a unique space. The Rockhaven Sanitarium provided such an opportunity that also aligned with my interests in dance and feminism.

After visiting Rockhaven I was inspired to shoot a cinematic VR project in these extraordinary rooms that held histories in the colors, textures and patterned wallpapers. Building a world is a key component to working immersively. The space becomes a character in the story and this was my starting point.

Movement is a key component in my work and I have collaborated with dancers in various projects. Dance naturally lends itself to activating the 360-degree space. Considering the history of experimental dance films, the work of Maya Deren must be studied. Her ability to convey emotional and psychological states through movement is influential. Watching her dance films, “Ritual in Transfigured Time” from 1946, for instance, while contemplating VR, I imagine that Deren herself would have been interested in working with movement inside of an immersive space.

Developing and editing this technology for presentation requires different concerns since it is unlike the passive, reactionary experience of watching a traditional film or video. VR allows the participant to have agency since they can determine where within the 360-degree space he or she will direct their attention. Additionally, this is a particular challenge. Through the editing process the ability to mask and layer
specific sections of the 360 clips enabled me to create multiple specters, cloned ghosts as well as numerous representations of each woman’s mental state being played out. While this was a conceptual decision, it also provides multiple possible focal points within each section of the trilogy, with movement employed as the main strategy for directing the participants eye.

While my project is experimental, it was not improvised. The three dancers and I had in-depth conversations prior to our shoot. We defined the three characters and their states of mind so that specific choreographies could be generated, specific to each room. This was an important step since it’s not possible for the director to be physically present in the space when shooting with a 360 camera. Like other aspects of VR, the maker senses a loss of control.

VR, perhaps XR in general, seems to be a technology that women are gravitating towards to express themselves. This new space for storytelling is just outside of cinema, historically and consistently dominated by the male voice. As a recently appointed Assistant Professor of Multimedia in the Cinema and Television Arts Department at California State University, Northridge hired to build new curriculum in Immersive Media, I am proud and excited to be a woman developing this new path of study.

**Detailed Description**

Inspired by "The Yellow Wallpaper" written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1932, Rockhaven Creepers utilizes 360-video to bring the viewer into the space of the abandoned Rockhaven Sanitarium. Each room is inhabited by a dancer, a character, who through movement, embodies the various "nervous disorders" associated with female health in the 1930's and even through present day. The project was shot with a 360 camera and edited in Adobe After Effects. The project uses new technologies to shoot and edit the work as well as VR technology (Oculus Go) to experience the work.

**Audience experience**

The VR project will be experienced through the Oculus Go headset. Additionally, it will be edited as a flat three-channel video installation specifically for the AWMAT conference.
Bio

Elizabeth Leister engages a practice that includes video, performance, drawing and virtual reality. Time and memory are key themes that are woven together often through the gesture of drawing as a performative act. Temporality and connection to place are at the core of her work where travel, loss and memory are illuminated.

Her work has been presented at the Torrance Art Museum, Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Morris Gallery at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts Museum, and the Delaware Museum of Art; The Drawing Center, Art in General, Apex Art and P.S. 122 in New York, Counterpath in Denver and Highways Performance Space and Gallery in Santa Monica in addition to various artist
run spaces.
Leister has performed at LACE, Perform Chinatown, Beyond Baroque and Electric Lodge in Los Angeles. Her networked performances have been presented at the Cardiff School of Creative & Cultural Industries in Wales, the Sheppard Fine Arts Gallery at the University of Reno, Outpost Artists Resources in New York and in Low Lives 2 & 4 among other venues.

Leister has received an ARC grant from the Center for Cultural Innovation in Los Angeles, and grants through The Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and The Leeway Foundation of Philadelphia. She was awarded a 2014-15 COLA Fellowship grant from the Department of Cultural Affairs in Los Angeles.

She earned an MFA from The Milton Avery Graduate School of the Fine Arts at Bard College and a BFA from Tyler School of Art at Temple University. Leister is Assistant Professor in the Multimedia Option in the Cinema and Television Arts Department at CSUN.