



Eric Block

Andrea Khôra on RAPTURE

RAPTURE, Blessed Foundation, London, 16 May – 27 June 2024

The Blessed Foundation is a charity that works at the intersection of art, design and emerging technologies. Bringing innovators from these respective fields together, the artwork can be seen at its Vauxhall premises from 16 May until 27 June.

A film conceived and created by the artist Andrea Khôra embodies this ambition; entitled *RAPTURE*, 2024, is an AI-infused fiction capturing the darker side of the current psychedelics start-up culture. The narrative anchor of this visually seductive piece is an interview between Ethan Grant, the CEO of a fictional psychedelic start-up TranscendX and Kate Thompson, the host of the *Mystical Misadventure* podcast. AI and a psychedelic experience are two key components of the visual language of the work.

Although Khôra's inputs and AI's outputs merge seamlessly, there is an impressive amount of artist's labour and research poured into this piece. Khôra introduces the touchstones of the current psychedelic healing landscape and asks crucial ethical questions about the power relations within it. Through the character of Kate, she interrogates the use of Indigenous knowledge for profit and the well-being of patients in inherently hierarchical church-like congregations conceptualised by Ethan.

Could I begin by asking you to explain why you wanted to make *RAPTURE*?

RAPTURE is part of my practice-based PhD project in the Art Department at Goldsmiths where I am researching emergent cultures which come from the collision of psychedelics and institutions, namely: medicine, capitalism, and the military. While each of these sectors has a rich and turbulent history with psychedelics, I'm focused on the present-day manifestations. Psychedelics have been undergoing a 'renaissance' in culture, and while there has been a plethora of research done in the sciences, as an artist, I'm hoping to use the medium of film, sound, and installation to research these sectors in a more nuanced and embodied way.

RAPTURE is the culmination of my research into the convergence of capitalism and psychedelics — the majority of which has been happening in the United States and has strong ties to the culture of Silicon Valley. I did my best to demonstrate some of the themes that have emerged, such as the use of new-age rhetoric, belief in absolute healing from these substances, and even the prevalence of the podcast format without collapsing the complexity of these cultural touch points.

In the film, a podcaster, Kate, is interviewing the CEO of a psychedelic start-up, Ethan. I designed the fictional company TranscendX to embody some of the forms I've seen in the corporate psychedelic space, a members-only psychedelic church, retreat centres for the ultra-rich, and lab use of cutting-edge technology to discover new chemical compounds. An underlying theme throughout the film is the use of AI to form a trippy and slippery reality in which nothing is quite as it seems. The use of AI is a deliberate choice not only for these aesthetic properties but also because of the overlapping cultures of AI and psychedelics. The discourse, language and excitement surrounding hallucinogens mirrors that surrounding advanced technologies and AI. Silicon Valley startup culture enthusiastically promotes and celebrates the use of hallucinogens and AI as methods to cure personal and societal problems, even though what we're seeing manifest is a compounding of those very problems they were hoping to solve.

I gather you attended the *Psychedelic Science* event last year, can you give us your impressions of that event and what you took away from it?

Psychedelic Science 2023 was extremely inspirational for *RAPTURE* and my research overall. The psychedelic space is so new and brings together unlikely communities such as clinical researchers, countercultural practitioners, altered-states enthusiasts, psychiatrists, legislators, and more. The conference was the largest psychedelic gathering in history with over twelve thousand attendees. It was located in Denver, Colorado, which recently decriminalized the personal use and gifting of some psychedelic substances. The Multidisciplinary Association of Psychedelic Studies had also recently submitted their application to the FDA for the use of MDMA as a therapy for PTSD. This combination made the conference celebratory. Everyone was full of optimism and excited about the future of psychedelics — and in Denver, there were new forms of churches, therapy centres, and recreational gifting programs all taking form.

One of my main takeaways from this conference was the feeling connected to this moment in psychedelic history, which for me is best experienced immersed within the community.

Did you script the film yourself, and if so can you tell me what research you undertook beforehand as it seems eerily familiar (and true to life) of the types of interviews with CEOs of tech companies, minus, of course, the effects employed in the film.

Yes, I wrote the script myself. I'm glad it came off as believable! The research for the script was really dispersed over time. I spent the last couple of years listening to podcasts, watching interviews and reading articles until I felt confident enough to know how these characters would interact in a podcast interview setting. While neither of the characters are based on actual people, I viewed them as an amalgamation of archetypes I kept seeing and hearing in both tech companies and the psychedelic space. It also really helped that King who played Kate is super knowledgeable about psychedelic culture and was also at *Psychedelic Science*. She really made the character believable.

Do you see it as the role of the artist to comment on and expose the big ideas that are being brought into being by new technology?

I see the role of the artist to be nuanced. While exploring big ideas is one role an artist can take, I find myself hoping to create art that lets the complexity of situations exist within the work — perhaps making new perspectives known or visible, but not necessarily dictating a point of view or giving prescriptive solutions. Art can act as a mirror for society, which is especially needed for emergent technologies and cultures.

Can you tell us a little more about your artistic practice, and the works you have created in the past?

A core tenet of my artistic practice is to explore the malleability of reality on various scales. As a research-based artist, my practice takes a lot of different forms. From writing to filmmaking, to installation, and so on, the project dictates the form it needs to take. I was originally trained in traditional oil painting. While painting is much different to the work I do now, the way I use art to explore complex concepts, situations, and relationships is informed by my past and ongoing education. Right before *RAPTURE*, I made a trippy film called *BOLUS*. It uses seamless and scoping AI animation to recreate experiences I have had during IV Ketamine Therapy for Treatment Resistant Depression. It was screened in many places, but the most exciting one was as part of CIRCA x Dazed's *Class of 2022's* screening at Piccadilly Circus on the largest screen in Europe. Seeing the film that size was really psychedelic!

What upcoming projects do you have in the pipeline?

I'm really excited about my upcoming film project that is looking at the use of psychedelics for military veterans with PTSD. It's a delicate area and I'm still navigating how to best go about the process, but I'm teaming up with a group of researchers who are working with veterans and shamans in Peru using Ayahuasca and indigenous healing practices.

Image: Andrea Khôra, *RAPTURE*, 2024, video stills, courtesy of the artist

Andrea Khôra is an artist and researcher based in London. Her work centers around the malleability of reality on both personal and societal levels. Andrea's practice-led Ph.D. project, *Under the Influence: Expanded Technologies of the Mind*, investigates the intersection of expanded consciousness and hegemonic institutions through artistic research and writing.

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