

The Creators Project

I Fought Aliens (and Died) at a Multimedia Festival

Taylor Lindsay — Nov 23 2016



(left) Still from Jeremy Couillard's *Alien Afterlife*, presented at Roulette's multimedia festival *Optics 0:0*. Image courtesy of the artist. (right) Visual and musical presentation by Georgia at Roulette's multimedia festival *Optics 0:0*. Photo by Taylor Lindsay.

We watched ourselves die and fought through an afterlife filled with aliens at *Optics 0:0*, a Brooklyn-based multimedia festival put on by the venue Roulette. On the first night of the three-day series, Jeremy Couillard presented a video game live performance, inviting audience participation via a virtual reality app. "Hopefully, everyone in the room will experience a death together," Couillard said at the event. Couillard's post-death VR experience was the centerpiece of the festival's first evening, spearheaded by sound scientist and documentary maker Victoria Keddie. Night no. 1, "Parallax View," promised to explore "new ways of seeing new worlds through video-based tech," and the probing of real and imaginary spaces.

When I walk in, I see rows of chairs facing the stage, where three large screens are waiting. As people take their seats and the night begins, I witness what looks like those 3D morphing screensavers of my 90s childhood to a backdrop of trance-like music. My mind starts reaching for a focal point. My body is used to sitting and focusing like this in a movie theater or at a play—for something linear and narrative-based, but at this moment I feel like I'm watching a slow chemical reaction. 20 minutes later, I think I've zoned out. When visual trip "The Mess" by Peter Burr comes on, I realize I've been primed for paying closer attention to a sobering sequence of events. I can't pull my eyes away for the next 10 minutes and 18 seconds. The video itself is an apocalyptic story about claustrophobia and bugs.



Stills from Jeremy Couillard's *Alien Afterlife*, presented at Roulette's multimedia festival *Optics 0:0*. Image courtesy of the artist.

I begin to sense a theme in the evening: a “new way” of exploring new worlds via visuals that isn’t supplied by the visuals themselves. I have to let my mind wander, but not my eyes. It makes for a new kind of mental journey.

After the intermission, everyone tries to access the VR app to join in for Couillard’s game. Half the room misses the boat on roomy bandwidth and doesn’t participate. But eventually, as the creator plays out the game on the screen before us for half an hour, even those who successfully join in put down their phones to watch. It’s not really sleek sci-fi: we witness gooey aliens move through neon landscapes from the perspective of a dazed dead person, a motif involving shampoo bottles filled with music, and visualizations of the idea that you could eat light. The end was strangely satisfactory, even in its “empty” message. Recalling that the artist told me his curiosity about the afterlife was sparked by the book *Proof of Heaven*, his conclusion feels intentionally south of heaven, with an ending both odd and alarming.

When the game concludes, electronic duo Georgia takes the stage. Their visual trip is a presentation of stitched-together “scraps:” pieces of video projects the pair had leftover from day-job videography work. As they take us through an hour of improvised sounds, I notice that they’re flipping the typical concert experience: instead of listening first and watching a live performance second, we visually ingested disjointed imagery to a congruent tune, watching first and listening for assistance.



Stills from Jeremy Couillard's *Alien Afterlife*, presented at Roulette's multimedia festival *Optics 0:0*. Image courtesy of the artist.

“We’re not used to doing this for a crowd who sits and watches,” Brian Close from Georgia tells me afterwards. “It’s usually more of a DJ scenario, like we’re providing the backdrop for another event.” I ask them how it felt different, but they turn the question on me: What did I think had happened? “I think I wasn’t being taken anywhere specific by the video and visuals,” I reply. “So I had to kind of mentally participate, to figure out where to go.”

“Yep,” Close tells me, “that’s part of the point. You carve out a direction.” I’m not sure where else I can do this. But *Optics 0:0* is onto something.