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# Alleviating digital fatigue through embodied artistic practice and green space

Julie Watkins 

University of Greenwich

## ABSTRACT

Digital fatigue, physical and mental tiredness caused by the continuous use of digital devices is a global concern. This paper surveys current research that problematizes the narrowed, but heightened attention often demanded by digital devices. It reframes the problem of fatigue in terms of affect. Numerous field and lab studies of immersion in green spaces, and simulations and images of green spaces have demonstrated the effectiveness of immersion in restoring of psychological and physical well-being. This paper suggests that an image of a green space, even when reduced through abstraction can still be effective. The use of visual reduction in eliciting a feeling of the self dissolving into the green space is examined from philosophical and psychological viewpoints. Phenomenological experiences of work from artists who use visual reduction, with non-directed attention, not focusing on details and not-naming elements, are delineated to clarify how this approach can be used to counter digital fatigue. The methodology is autoethnographic. A multi-stranded approach to alleviating digital fatigue through practice as research is articulated: laying down a strong sensory memory in a green space to counter digital fatigue, phenomenological viewing of artworks and creating visually reduced digital photographs, paintings and light installations.

## ARTICLE HISTORY



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## Introduction

Digital fatigue is physical, and mental exhaustion caused by the continuous use of digital devices (Carvalho et al. 2021; Lixar 2021; Mheidly, Fares, and Fares (2020); Sharma et al. 2020; Empire Retina Consultants 2016). These symptoms of digital fatigue include: eye strain, neck strain, and backache, and mental symptoms, including mental fatigue, lack of concentration, negativity, and depression. This is a global concern that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. This paper will problematize how digital devices, such as mobile phones, narrow our attention and subliminally affect us. After establishing that digital fatigue lessens our ability to focus our attention, relevant theories and studies in environmental psychology are reviewed and applied to interventions aimed at restoring psychological and physical well-being by being in contact with green space.

**CONTACT** Julie Watkins  j.watkins@gre.ac.uk  University of Greenwich

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There is no standard definition for green space (Oswald et al. 2021). Definitions from environmental psychology include having access to outdoor spaces that relieve the stress of urban life and not being confined to a built-up environment (van den Berg et al., 2015), 'open land and its vegetative cover' (Jorgensen and Gobster 2010, 339) accessing green-spaces: national park, forest, garden or bluespace: seascape, beach, river or lake (Oswald et al. 2021), a garden (Hansen, Jones, and Tocchini 2017) or having a view of green vegetation or a view of sky (Kaplan 2001). A view of green space can also be defined as 'unimpeded opportunity to see [green space]' (Appleton 1975, 73). These can be 'real or simulated settings' (van den Berg et al., 2015, 15,861). Heerwagen and Orians's (1986) study includes pictures, interior decoration, and plants to create an experience of being in a green space. This paper defines being in green space as being in a tranquil space, away from the stresses of urban life, that is predominated by green in the form of vegetation and/or blue in the form of sea or sky, whether this is in real life, simulated or as an image.

The paper recognizes the wider negative effects of digital devices on physiological well-being and subjective emotions, feelings, and pre-reflective, non-verbal affect. It proposes embodied experiences (Merleau-Ponty 2014) to alleviate digital fatigue by creating rich sensory memories and artistic practices. Mental fatigue not only reduces the performance of the task in hand but also the willingness to make an effort at that task (Hopstaken 2015). Stephen Kaplan and Marc Berman attribute this double reduction to the way executive function and self-regulation share the same resources; they posit that our ability to direct our attention is finite (Kaplan and Berman 2010). Digital media devices such as mobile phones demand not only our attention but also that our attention is narrowed and heightened. Our capacity for rich sensory experience is funnelled into more limited sensory activities that may impair not only our cognitive capacity but also our regulation of our emotions.

Immersion in green space has been shown in numerous field and lab studies to restore psychological and physical well-being by resting directed attention (Brown, Barton, and Gladwell 2013; Kaplan 2001; van den Berg et al., 2015). Evolutionary psychologists posit forming our perceptual model of the world distances us from external reality. This suggests that green space can also be reduced to more abstract imagery and still positively affect us, physiologically and psychologically. Merleau-Ponty's embodied experience and Deleuzian affect are explored through my autoethnographical practice. Case studies are presented including reflection on restorative immersion from my own practice in a specific contact with a green space, a seascape, in real life and as images. Affordances are examined: experiencing the eternal present, recognizing tacit knowledge, creating rich sensory memories, sensual phenomenological viewing experiences, immersion through filling peripheral vision and tactile light. Diverse artistic practices are explored autoethnographically: the experience of being on a cliff-top, and responses to this experience in digital media, screen-based moving images, and immersive light installation. Suggestions are made for developing approaches to alleviate digital fatigue and increase life satisfaction. The paper does not aim to be conclusive but, rather, to draw together research and artistic practice underpinned by this philosophical approach into a compelling case for further study.

## Digital fatigue and affect

In order to delve into digital fatigue this paper will differentiate between emotions, feelings, and affect. Emotions are 'complex, constructed experiences' (Eerola et al. 2017, 3)

that we project outwards to others. Each individual interprets and names their feelings based on their own unique memories and sensations. In contrast, affect is non-verbal & pre-reflective. The body responds to affect in 'the facial muscles, the viscera, the respiratory system, the skeleton, autonomic blood flow changes, and vocalisations' (Tomkins and Demos 1995, 19). These changes are instantaneous and as Massumi suggests: '[imply] an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act' (Massumi cited in Deleuze and Guattari 2004, xvii). Our experience is not divided into first receiving information and then processing it; we experience what we perceive directly. Effect emphasises our embodied perception of the world (Merleau-Ponty 2014). To acknowledge our own individual embodiment in the world is to start to alleviate digital fatigue by recognising that our minds are not separate from our bodies. This complex relationship affects us in our face-to-face communication and our communication via digital devices.

Cognition underpins knowledge work and affect underpins emotional work. The lessening of cognitive capacity and regulation of emotions has been exacerbated as work has expanded to become a lifestyle (Hu 2017). Because the effect is pre-reflective, it can be passed on by an automatic mimicry of facial expressions, body language, and vocalisations of another. This mimicry causes similar feelings and emotions in the person who is automatically, pre-reflectively reacting (Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson 1994, 5). It happens unconsciously at great speed and spreads rapidly. This gives affect power, which lies beyond feelings and emotions. As Shouse suggests:

The power of affect lies in the fact that it is unformed and unstructured (abstract). It is the affect's 'abstractivity' that makes it transmittable in ways that feelings and emotions are not, and it is because effect is transmittable that it is potentially such a powerful social force. (Shouse 2005, 3)

This paper proposes the alleviation of digital fatigue using multiple approaches that build on each other. These approaches are: to experience a green space in the real world and in simulations of such spaces created through art practices. To acknowledge the importance of embodied experiences, experiences when one is in an eternal present moment. To develop these embodied experiences through creating sensory memories and to nurture the human individual by recognising the importance of tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge, also known as learning through doing, is knowledge that emerges from handling materials, from having human senses engaged in practice. It is knowledge without words. Tacit knowledge is 'made explicit through reflection' (Nelson 2013, 37). Recognizing that knowledge exists on a spectrum ranging from tacit to explicit is a strong counter against the binary tendencies of the digital. There is no binary of knowledge or not-knowledge, instead knowledge is fluid.

[K]nowledge exists on a spectrum. At one extreme, it is almost completely tacit, that is semi-conscious and unconscious knowledge held in people's heads and bodies. At the other end of the spectrum, knowledge is almost completely explicit or codified, structured and accessible to people other than individuals originating it. Most knowledge of course exists between the extremes. (Leonard and Sensiper 1998, 113)

As knowledge evolves from the tacit to reflexive to the distant abstract it becomes not only clarified but also multi-layered and enriched. Codified structured knowledge that is easy to share and easy to quantify is all too often given a privileged place on digital devices. This paper posits that digital fatigue arises from being bombarded with knowledge from the

completely structured and codified end of the knowledge spectrum. This overload causes cognitive stress and emotional stress as its affective toll is not fully acknowledged. Recognising the fundamental importance of our individual, embodied, tacit knowledge helps to alleviate digital fatigue, because this concept of knowledge recognises human strengths, whereas digital devices all too often point to human weaknesses.

## Green space and simulating green space: experiencing the eternal present

Scientific research suggests that contact with green space helps to restore psychological and physical well-being or life satisfaction (Kaplan 2001). There have been numerous studies that demonstrate the health benefits of this contact, not only going into these spaces but also looking at images of them (Brown, Barton, and Gladwell 2013; Kaplan 2001). Attention fatigue, depression, feelings of stress, and low self-esteem are all decreased, physiological stress is not only lowered but stress resilience may be increased through the experience of green spaces in the real world or simulated green spaces (van den Berg et al., 2015). In van den Berg et al.'s 2015 study there were sets of photos. One set was of green urban spaces, such as parks, and another of built spaces, such as streets with few or no trees. The sets of photos 'depicted a mixture of different seasons and different sunlight intensities' (ibid, 15,863). Importantly, the subjects were asked to connect emotionally to these images, rather than analyse them. 'At the start of the experiment, participants were asked to imagine themselves in the environments shown on the photos' (ibid, 15,866). To immerse the participants in the spaces they were shown one of the two sets of photos, 'projected on a computer screen (28.8 cm x 51 cm)' (ibid 15,862). Van den Berg et al concluded 'five minutes of viewing urban green space can support recovery from stress as shown in enhanced parasympathetic activity. These findings strengthen and deepen the growing evidence-base for health benefits of green space' (ibid 15,871).

Resting directed attention in a green space, whether the space is real or an image gives it a chance to recover. These experiences require little directed-attention effort they elicit gentle, unfocused, undirected attraction, giving space for reflection. Reflection, taking a self-distanced perspective on unsolved problems, or musing, is made easier when soothed by an undirected attraction rather than by solely focusing on the problem or being totally distracted by an escapist experience that precludes all else (Kaplan and Berman 2010). Solving problems increases the sense of agency and reduces rumination and internal noise that is likely to lessen cognitive function and lower life satisfaction and well-being.

In my lived experience a strong sense of presence enables me to be absolutely in the moment, I suspend all interpretation and find a new imaginative space, linked to the effect afforded by wide-open spaces, imagined and encountered in dreams. As Daniel Birnbaum suggests:

[A]ll of us have at some point had intense sensations of the same kind: when confronted with open spaces, skylscapes and seascaapes; in dreams and in imaginary landscapes. These are moments when light and void itself strike us as different and strange – producing a strong sense of presence.

(Birnbaum in Noever and Turrell 2002, 230)

Participating in this intense form of seeing is analogous to entering a preverbal ecstatic state. Or encountering the Sublime and losing oneself, dissolving into space, becoming like the storm, the mist, the sun.

In *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia* Roger Caillois, building on Freud (1999) that seeing nature as an extension of self is infantile, posits that the feeling of personality is part of feeling distinct from one's surroundings. He suggests that irrational phobias, obsessions, or compulsions can lead to feeling one has been devoured by space:

To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at *himself from* any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, *dark space where things cannot be put*. (Caillois and Shepley 1984, 30)

In contrast, philosophers allow a dissolved state without conjuring irrational phobias, obsessions, or compulsions. Giles Deleuze breaks the boundary of the skin when he writes of a dissolving of subject/object. The subject that is having the experience and the thing that is being experienced intermingle and become reversible parts of one thing.

The being of sensation, the bloc of percept and affect, will appear as the unity or reversibility of feeling and felt, their intimate intermingling like hands clasped together. (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 178)

The experience of loss of self in a limitless space affects our sense of temporality. Losing oneself in space involves surrendering to an eternal present, to feeling a sense of timelessness. How can we understand our sense of time? Phenomenological concepts of temporality give shape to our sense of time. Maurice Merleau-Ponty explains Edmund Husserl's phenomenology of temporality: we experience a flow of time, rather than a series of 'nows' (Merleau-Ponty 2014, 439). We perceive the immediate present, the extension of the present into a few milliseconds ago 'retention' and anticipate the next moment 'protention'. In this flow of time, protention becomes the immediate present and then retention. The flow of time layers up the retentions; they become retentions of retentions: 'it now becomes the retention of a retention, and the layer of time between it and myself becomes thicker' (Merleau-Ponty 2014, 439). In this flow of time photographs flow backwards from the moment they are seen into the past. As Roland Barthes states there is 'astonishment' (2000, 90) that a moment has been caught in a photograph and the flow of time broken. Barthes contrasts the lack of future that photographs hold with cinema: '[the Photograph] is without future (this is its pathos, its melancholy); in it, no protensity, whereas the cinema is protensive' (2000, 90). The sense of timelessness in a limitless space counters digital fatigue as we are no longer giving shape to our sense of time and therefore, we are no longer pursued by a sense of urgency but live, however briefly, in the eternal present.

### Reduced visuals: sensual phenomenological gaze

Reduced, abstracted images create space for the viewer to complete the image, to actively engage with the image. The art historian and theorist Ernest Gombrich calls such images 'incomplete' (Gombrich 1960, 200). Works from artists such as Sugimoto and Rothko that are 'incomplete', i.e. reduced visuals, are more likely to rest directed attention because of this engagement.

Hiroshi Sugimoto is a photographer who creates seminal images of tranquil seascapes that are reduced in terms of content, the forms are minimal and reduced to black and white. He searches for tranquility and seeks out 'sites on the coast that are as far removed as possible from civilization, far from traffic, boats, yachts, and even air traffic. It's the moment of absolute tranquillity that I search for' (Sugimoto quoted in Bui 2016, 62). Sugimoto is entranced by the sea and by catching an image of sea and sky without subjects, objects, the sun or moon or clouds. He creates reduced photographs with the aim of evoking a key sensory memory. He relates this to an epiphany he had as a child.

My memory of the sea, the first memory that I can recall with any certainty is of the sea. A blue sky absent a single cloud, a sharp horizon, waves breaking from afar in the limitless distance. The moment that I witnessed the scene I felt in my child's mind as though I had awoken from a long dream. I examined my hands and legs. I felt then that I was looking down upon myself. It was at that moment that my life began. (Sugimoto quoted in Petitto 2016, 108)

Sugimoto remembers his encounter with the sea as elemental, primordial, an awakening of the sleeping self; a kind of birth: 'It was at that moment that my life began'. At the same time: 'looking down upon myself', it is an out of body experience, the loss of self. Seeing the unbounded, 'limitless distance' of the sea simultaneously evoked birth and death. The black and white of Sugimoto's images alludes to life and death: 'I also identify black and white as the colors of life and death, going back and forth' (Sugimoto quoted in Bui 2016, 63).

Sugimoto's reduced photographs give no sense of perspective. Seeing images without perspective can allow access to a child-like sense of the world. Perception feels direct, beyond words; there are no figures or objects to name. Looking and reading the landscape without naming any elements recalls Walter Benjamin's metaphor the 'optical unconsciousness' or '*Optisch-Unbewusste*' (Benjamin 1972b, 371) which breaks with representation to read the 'nameless appearance' or '*namenlosen Erscheinung*' (Benjamin 1972b, 379) of things through photography. Not naming indicates a disturbance of a facile reading of images and breaks entirely depending on captions for meaning. Not naming signals a willingness to inhabit a more dreamy state, to allow oneself to be affected by the image.

Sugimoto references painters, including Rothko, as key influences:

I share Rothko's affinity for the early, primal evolutionary sense of humanness. I sometimes see the same dark horizon in his paintings that are in my photographs. (Sugimoto quoted in Bui 2016, 63)

Rothko has a deep affinity for a primal sense of humanness; his aim is to express basic human emotions and communicate these to the viewer:

'I am not interested in relationships of color or form or anything else', he elaborated, 'I am interested only in expressing basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on'. (Rothko quoted in Rodman 1961, 93)

Rothko suggests that artists, like philosophers, reduce the external world, reduce the objective and subjective, how we perceive and our perceptions, in order to appreciate truth. Philosophers create generalisations to inform ethics by reducing 'all of the external



things perceptible to man, the apparatus of perception itself, as well as the actual product of concrete sensation' (Rothko 2004, 21). Rothko reduces his painterly expression of basic human emotions to the sense of touch. In contrast to philosophers, artists aim: 'to give human beings direct contact with eternal verities through reduction of those verities to the realm of sensuality, which is the basic language for the human experience of all things' (Rothko 2004, 25). Rothko states that 'sensuality', i.e. our sense of touch, synthesises not only all of our sensations, including sight but also our perception of reality.

[A] painting is the representation of the artist's notion of reality in the terms of the plastic elements. The creation of a plastic unit reduces all the phenomena of the time to a unity of sensuality and thereby relates the subjective and objective in its relevance to man. (Rothko 2004, 25)

The viewer responds to this reduction of all sensations and objective and subjective reality to a sensual truth. '[The artist] establishes the unity of the ultimate by reducing all phenomena to the terms of the sensual. For sensuality is the one basic human quality necessary for the appreciation of all truth' (Rothko 2004, 27). The visual reduction in these works emphasizes the sensual and tactile.

### Immersion: filling peripheral vision

Rothko explained how he made his paintings immersive: he painted large pictures and had them hung in small rooms so that the viewer was up close to the work and their peripheral vision was filled. He stated:

I want to be intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience as a stereopticon view or with a reducing glass. However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn't something you command. (Rothko and López-Remiro 2006, 74)

Generally, I look longer at paintings than photographs and feel more immersed. Perhaps this is because paintings lack the astonishment of capturing a moment and instead present a layering of time that is integral to the process of painting. I find that paintings more easily allow me to enter a phenomenological viewing experience than photographs. My gaze feels drawn in by the surface of the painting: visible brushstrokes revealing rhythm, gesture, intention, and layering of time. I approach a painting and an area of 'nameless appearance' (Benjamin 1972a, 379) draws me in closer. My tactile, affective response is woven in and out of a questioning of what I am responding to. This involves very close, near, and more distant looking at the painting. I weave between responding on an affective, phenomenological level to colour, texture and gesture, and more of a questioning mode of looking. In this mode, I name elements and sensations, look at formal elements such as: composition, division and layering of space, tonality, colour saturation, and sometimes draw conclusions about why the work holds my gaze and what emotions it evokes.

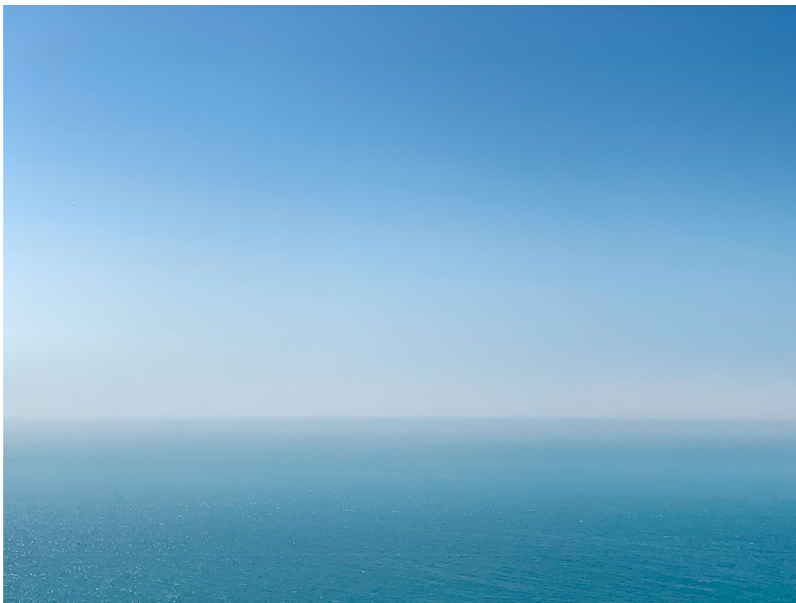
Up close to the *Seagram Murals* peripheral vision is filled with the image, the luminosity envelops the viewer; the nuanced layering draws the attention to compelling contemplation of veils of colour. The viewer needs to be in proximity to the artwork in order to fully interact with its plasticity and sensuality. Rothko stated:

A painting lives by companionship, expanding and quickening In the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token. It is therefore a risky and unfeeling act to send it out into the world. (Rothko 2004, xix)



My first impression of the *Seagram Murals* is that they are simple rectangular forms in dark colours. The blurry edges of the forms draw my gaze and I step closer in. My peripheral vision is filled. Coloured veils gradually reveal more layers of colour. The colour seems to float, to be disembodied. The painting has no perspective but it has endless depth, like evanescent light. The colour seems to vibrate. As my gaze shifts across the picture the colours seem to shift. I feel immersed in shifting colours, the red hues are elusive. This sensuous experience is in sympathy with not naming. The most defined area is of textured brushstrokes that create a line that draws the eye as it offers orientation, in the way a horizon line is fundamentally orientating as it distinguishes between up and down. Understanding of scale, distance, and spatiality is bound to the medium of expression. Grain-less photographs with small sharp details, such as Sugimoto's *Caribbean Sea, Jamaica* (1980) and Watkins' *Seascape from Gara Rock* (Figure 1) create a vast distance. In contrast, Rothko created a seemingly infinite space by applying fragile, loose pigment in films; this achieved a suspension of light in the veils of colour on his canvas. There is no beginning or ending to the colour.

To create my own impression of immersing the viewer in an atmosphere that is dream-like with a lack of clear perspective and ambiguity of surface, scale, depth, and light I begin with brushstrokes of paint on paper that I scan and layer up digitally to create layers of rich, dense colour (Figure 2). This results in colour that is overly textured. Reflecting on my experiences of reduced photographs I choose an optical defocus, photographing the screen, to create something more like a fog of colour. This loses the sense of brushstrokes and pigment particles that create a universe in the microcosm of a painting and gains an infinite scale through the reduction of texture.



**Figure 1.** Seascape from *Gara Rock* (Watkins, J., 2022).



**Figure 2.** Watkins, J. Impression of close-up view of Seagram Murals (2022).

### My autoethnographic practice

My autoethnographic case studies of reduced images of green spaces demonstrate that they can be restorative. In my practice, I seek out immersive, tacit experiences in green space and explore how best to take a photograph of the scene in order to capture an embodied experience of the scene. I have arrived at the stages of going into green space, taking a photograph with physical awareness and awareness of the limitations of a digital rendering of the scene (a photograph), and looking afresh at the photograph after reflecting on my practice and finding that this approach helps me counter the effects of digital fatigue. A key experience in green space that I find particularly immersive is my feeling of unbounded vision when gazing across the sea. I stand on a cliff in the South of Devon looking out over the sea. The panoramic view fills my vision. The blue sky arches above. The distant horizon line draws my gaze over the sea. The sky and sea merge at the horizon. The space feels endless and infinite.

The effect is of being somewhere so wide open is that I feel wide open, my eyes open wider, the top of my head feels as if it has lifted off. I breathe in the air and feel that I expand out to the limitless horizon. (Watkins, 2019, 303)

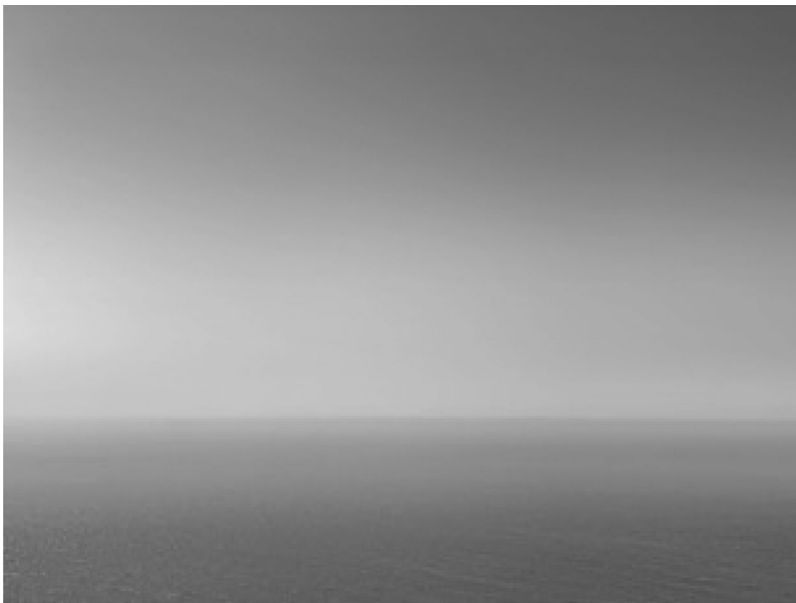
It feels as if there is no boundary between myself and the seascape. The lack of boundary evokes tranquillity and restfulness. This is reminiscent of Benjamin's writing on allowing one's gaze to wander over nature, almost impersonally, which allows the uniqueness or 'aura' (Benjamin 1972a, 20) of nature to be breathed in.

Now I have experienced the view I take a photograph (Figure 1) with an awareness of the weight of the camera in my hands, my sense of balance on my feet, an awareness of the differences between my vision and the camera's framing and capturing of contrast and colour. I also note all my senses that will not be caught in the photograph: the sunlight on my skin, the sounds and smells.

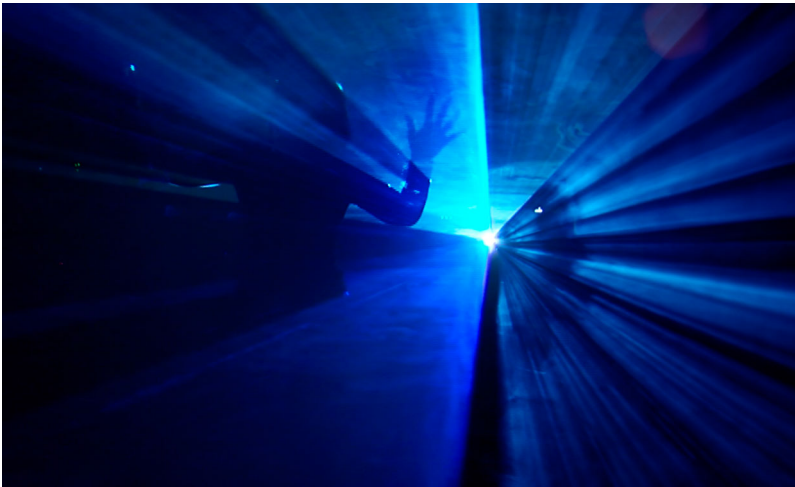
I iteratively reflect on my immersive experience in the seascape by exploring the material effects of different technologies: photographic and digital paint, animation of volumetric light, and diverse outputs: paper, screen, and installation. For example from being in a seascape to taking a photograph of it (Figure 1) and then digitally reducing it to a black and white image (Figure 3), to creating an installation (Figure 4).

Looking at my reduced photograph, *Seascape from Gara Rock*, is a new experience. My immediate impression is a deep rich blue, a blue that fades into almost white at the centre. This quality of blue evokes summer. I stand further back from the image and become more aware of the differences in blue and texture between the top and the bottom of the image. A name bubbles up and the textural ripples become waves, waves in a sea. Letting my gaze drift up from the waves I am aware of the vast distance of the horizon and how the whiteness of the horizon gives weight to the dense blue sky above. I stand close to the photograph and my peripheral vision is filled. Perspective is not apparent. There is no photographic grain to highlight the materiality of the image; there is no apparent scale or perspective. My embodied gaze feels limitless, my vision dominated by light and colour, the experience rests my directed attention and I feel refreshed.

My phenomenological experience of an image starts with an original moment of looking, which can be a visceral surprise as I am 'pricked' by the image, I am led by my gaze without naming. As Roland Barthes states: 'What I can name cannot really prick me! The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance' (Barthes 2000, 53). I respond to the image by shifting my gaze, by 'zooming' in or out, and by looking from another angle. I wander from being affected by unnamed things to naming elements or aspects. Seeing the image above I weave between seeing waves, frozen in time or seeing texture, seeing cloudless sky or light or directly feeling the colour. I do not try to subsume the whole to a name or caption. This is akin to Susan Kozel's description of her practice.



**Figure 3.** Seascape from *Gara Rock* reduced to black and white (Watkins, J., 2022).



**Figure 4.** Animated circles creating infinite tunnels of light (Watkins, J., 2022).

[T]he first moment of phenomenology originates in doing, but accompanying this doing is a weaving in and out of a line of thought, a line of questioning. The thought as it emerges is non-homogenizing, and sometimes goes quiet. In this sense it is different from normal analytical thought. (Kozel 2007, 50–51)

I change my mode of viewing by looking at the same image in black and white (Figure 3). The absence of colour emphasises the formal aspects: composition, tonality, and texture. The black and white image is tranquil. Its reductive approach has similarities to Sugimoto's tranquil photographs. I am surprised that gazing on my black and white image my experience is closer to being on the cliff-top. The sense of dissolving into the limitless muted seascape is stronger in black and white and more strongly evokes my optical unconscious. I feel the waves frozen in time as I look at the ripple texture. I have a sense of my vision extending out and touching the sky and this somehow replaces the wind on the cliff-top. I feel the presence of the whole seascape and this sensation somehow replaces the direct sensation of sunlight on the skin. I am immersed in the natural environment and feel a lowering of physiological stress that improves my mood, as Selhub and Logan (2012) suggest.

The memory of the tactile and auditory sensations of being on the cliff, in the elements, wind blowing, sunlight on skin, is evoked by gazing on the image of a seascape that is barely described, almost abstract. With this comes a deep appreciation of our shared humanness, the importance of our embodiment. I find that combining the reduction of the image to a nearly abstract image with sensory memories of the experience is a potent way of alleviating digital fatigue. The reduced photograph evokes the expanded sensory, tacit, restorative attention of the original experience, rather than fleeting, narrowed directed attention.

Sensual phenomenological gazing at images of seascapes seems not only to be restorative but also to affect how I experience seascapes. I find that long, close looking at reduced visuals of green space, informs my gaze when I am in a green space.

To further explore increasing the sensual and sense of touch through scale, I take my work into real three-dimensional space by creating an installation of animated light in a



**Figure 5.** Animated horizon line (Watkins, J., 2022).

haze: *Tactile Vision* (Watkins, J., 2022). By projecting animated circles through a haze two-dimensional animations become three-dimensional tunnels of light (Figure 4).

*Tactile Vision and Voice* only exists as an installation, a participatory event. It does not exist as a film and films and photographs cannot fully convey the experience of participating in this interactive event. Participants are invited into the installation, to be inside the animating horizon and tunnels of light within the hazy atmosphere. This animation is mixed with an animated horizon line, developed from *Impression of close-up view of Seagram Murals* that further abstracts *Seascape from Gara Rock* by alluding to veils of colour as it animates (Figure 5).



**Figure 6.** Touching the light (Watkins, J., 2022).





**Figure 7.** Interacting with *Tactile Vision and Voice* (Watkins, J., 2022).

They are free to walk around and through the installation, to examine, play with, and film it. *Tactile Vision and Voice* is created on a theatrical stage big enough to aid immersion (Griffiths 2008). I added texture to the perfect digital circles by projecting my animation onto imperfect surfaces: the ever-evolving haze, translucent tracing paper, and the folds of black curtains. This post-digital approach increased the textural touchability of the animation. The immersive, affective nature of the installation was also increased through a series of visceral surprises: light in the dark theatre, being inside the work, seeing the light form 3D shapes in the 'air', being able to touch and play with film (Figure 6).

The Film is associated with fixed-screen experiences reaching out and touching the projections is an affecting experience. The animations reacted to touch as the participants cast shadows into the light tunnels and the haze moved as they dragged their fingers through the stream of light. Projections draped over their figures as they interacted with them. Because of this interaction, each performance was unique and each participant had a completely individual and unrepeatably experience (Figure 7). Watching the participants' reactions, it was clear that visceral surprises combined with touch to enable being embodied, strongly present in the moment, in a flow-state, alternating with 'soft fascination' (Kaplan and Berman 2010, 44). As an intervention aimed at the restoration of attention through embodied practice, the installation was successful.

## Conclusion

This paper has delineated approaches for alleviating digital fatigue using green space, several of which, have been validated by a wealth of research. In my practice, I have developed combinations of these approaches. At a general level to counter at least some of the mentally and emotionally fatiguing effects, of the use of digital devices one must be aware that engaging with them increases one's emotional workload and can trigger

visceral responses. Valuing human knowledge inclusively by recognising that it has a wide spectrum from the explicit codified and structured to the tacit, embodied, and pre-conscious is necessary to build resilience. Positive strategies to enhance our tacit knowledge and increase our resilience include experiences in green spaces, where attention can be rested and negative aspects of digital fatigue, including rumination, quieted. As this paper demonstrates, it is well-documented that the positive physiological and mental effects of these spaces are shared not only by simulations but also by photographs.

This paper suggests, based on my autoethnographic methodology, my reflection on creating, and the testing of my own work, that reduced visuals mirror these effects. The effectiveness of reduced visuals is increased by practicing a phenomenological gaze. This gaze enhances one's appreciation of the just-visible as a gateway into an expanded, sensual form of seeing. It acknowledges the power of letting one's gaze be drawn, of breaking with representation to read 'nameless appearance', of being in a non-perspectival, uncharted, suggestive, meditative, interior world. This vision weaves in and out of a passive state, which is dream-like, but, the space is not Freud's unreal space of the unconscious but a phenomenological expansion of spaces that are all becoming Deleuze's intermingling of the subject and object. The phenomenological gaze can be immersed in green spaces, an unconscious optical space of photographs, a sensual space of paintings, or the space created by visceral surprise in light installations. The research above demonstrates that visceral surprises created by tactile light installations trigger affected, embodied experiences. The surprises of: touching the light, seeing a two-dimensional animation become a three-dimensional tunnel of light in the haze and stepping into this tunnel, directly encourage affective immersion.

As this paper demonstrates, I have engaged in autoethnographic qualitative research into developing my own processes to further enhance my immersion into green spaces, sensual seeing, and a phenomenological gaze and shared my practice with others. I find that enhancing and prolonging an immersive experience by consciously building sense memories around the making of a sketch, taking of a photograph, or digital recording also helps to build resilience. I have many years' experience of this as a practicing artist and I have informally discussed this with other artists and in mindful-drawing groups. Practitioners report that strong sense memories without a particular 'punctum' (Barthes 2000) imbue the resulting image with a stronger evocative power for the maker. Building strong sense memories also encourages allowing oneself to be immersed in others' images, whether painted, photographed, moving image, or installation.

It is hoped that the multi-stranded approaches outlined above will encourage other artists to explore and share ways of alleviating digital fatigue through sensual seeing and create further ways of fostering a deep appreciation of our shared humanness.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

*Dr. Julie Watkins*, senior lecturer in Animation at the University of Greenwich, formerly worked as lead creative in prestigious post-production facilities in London and New York. She created and



ran a degree in partnership with the BBC. Her research expands understandings of how animations are perceived, created and displayed, through re-framing modernist traditions in light of postmodern understandings of subjectivity and affect. She has added knowledge to creative communities via international journals of contemporary artistic practice and research, presented her work to international communities concerned with film, animation, art, music, dance, theatre, immersive environments, health and the sciences.

## ORCID

Julie Watkins  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8872-7041>

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