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On reaching and creating your audience: VR artist Nemo Vos on the role of film festivals

Marijke de Valck

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Abstract

Dutch artist Nemo Vos discusses his approach to VR and his vision of the role played by film festivals in making VR available. Reflecting on the premiere of his work *8 Billion Selves* at International Film Festival Rotterdam in 2024, Vos addresses both the challenges and advantages of exhibiting VR at festivals. Looking to the future, Vos outlines his vision for a series of co-created VR works, each featuring a different artist and aiming for distribution in theatres to achieve economic sustainability for the medium. The artist emphasises the responsibility VR artists themselves have in creating awareness and cultivating audiences, and details how he uses co-creation and collaboration with other art forms to elevate VR from a niche technology to a mainstream artistic form.

Keywords

VR, virtual reality, distribution, exhibition, film festivals, audience, co-creation, IFFR

In conversation with Marijke de Valck, Dutch VR artist Nemo Vos discusses his approach to VR and his vision of the role played by film festivals in making VR available. Reflecting on the premiere of his work *8 Billion Selves* at the International Film Festival Rotterdam in 2024, Vos addresses both the challenges and advantages of exhibiting VR at festivals. Looking to the future, Vos outlines his vision for a series of co-created VR works, each featuring a different artist and aiming for distribution in theatres to achieve economic sustainability for the medium. The artist emphasises the responsibility VR artists themselves have in creating awareness and cultivating audiences, and details how he uses co-creation and collaboration with other art forms to elevate VR from a niche technology to a mainstream artistic form.



Fig. 1: *8 Billion Selves* live performance at IFFR. Image courtesy of Nemo Vos.

Marijke de Valck: Can you introduce yourself as a VR artist?

Nemo Vos: I'm a VR artist who makes cinematic 360 experiences about the human condition. My work is about finding a new visual language for VR. I choose a subject, something quite broad that everyone can understand, and try to find a poetic way to talk about it. I made a couple of very short VR works. My favorite one is *Investment Banker Suicide Rate* (2021). It follows a banker in his journey down from the top floor of the building. I also made a VR experience called *Lijn 74* (2023) with the artist Amber Arcades based on the novel *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. *Lijn 74* tries to find horror in modern societies. Most recently, I made *8 Billion Selves* (*8 Miljard Ikken*, 2024) with sound design or live musical accompaniment by the renowned Dutch artist Spinvis. It is about the eight billion persons living on Earth, a poetic observation about what it means to be human.

de Valck: How does your VR work become available to people?

Vos: That depends. When I started, I just had a website and an Instagram account. I just had the work in Unreal Engine, as an Unreal Engine project file. When people wanted to see it, they could send me an email. Not very handy. Later, when people were enjoying my work and I could get some funding, I started exhibiting it at film festivals or in theatres in general. Now with the newer works, *Lijn 74* and *8 Billion Selves*, we have a collaboration with De

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Helling in Utrecht, a small music venue. We always do the first show there, a kind of beta show or test screening. After that, we show it wherever people want to book it, and also at film festivals.

de Valck: How do you see the role of film festivals in making VR available to audiences?

Vos: I think the importance of VR at film festivals is that it addresses the difficult question of how to reach an audience. How do you attract people to a show that only lasts 20 minutes? This is solved at a film festival because people are already there and they're going to see a lot of different things. Maybe they see two or three movies that day. So, it's easy to also book the VR experience in between. Also, you don't have to explain certain things. The festival context is not a VR arcade; it is about the art of the VR, the storytelling and narrative you want to tell. So, it's easier to reach *that* audience. That's the great thing. Also, it gives your work the same value or hallmark as a short film or a movie. It gets it out of the technology space and more into the art space.



Fig. 2: Still from *8 Billion Selves*. Image courtesy of Nemo Vos.

de Valck: Is that important for the type of work that you make?

Vos: Yes. Of course it helps. It's easier when people go there and know they're going to watch art, in a way. They are expecting it, and you give it to them. But it's also fun when it's just ordinary people, not thinking about anything and you just put the headset on them, and they're gone for 20 minutes. That is also the power of VR, because the medium is such a powerful tool to tell your narrative, to show people things. It's very convincing, even if it's not shown in an art space or at a film festival. As I was trying to get funding from the city of

Rotterdam for instance, a lot of people were walking around. There were a lot of investors, including a large law firm looking to invest. There were three guys in particular who looked like archetypal fraternity boys. I had quite a strange VR with a lot of explicit material in it. It wasn't something with a flat plot or with humor, but rather something quite heavy. I didn't know if these guys were going to like it. I put one guy in it. He had it on and there was a presentation from someone, and everyone was quiet, while he was having a great time. He was laughing. He was screaming, so his friends had to calm him down. I don't think that would have happened if you had a conventional 2D movie or something like that.

de Valck: Are there also disadvantages to exhibiting your work at a film festival?

Vos: For me the great thing about IFFR was that we had the possibility to create our own space. They got us a venue and it was just empty, a black box, and we could do anything we wanted there and do it ourselves. That was great because we could use all our own techniques and things like that. But there was also another space in a smaller venue (called Worm), and there they had all the VR works combined. We had a show with live music [in the venue we controlled], and a cinema version [in Worm]. In Worm we didn't have any control. Later we found out that some glasses didn't work, or that the audio didn't work. These were things we heard about the other VR experiences there as well. I think the difficult part is that if you hand over your VR to a festival, the technical facilities are not always already there to keep it running smoothly all the time. I think that this is difficult for VR artists: it could harm the work, because you never know who's in the glasses. Maybe the person looking at your work is an important critic and maybe they already don't like you that much. And then they see your work and they can't give it an honest chance, and then they write a scathing review. Or someone who might be interested in booking it or distributing it and they see only half of your film or not the way it should be seen. It is a stressful feeling when you don't have control over your work.

de Valck: From an artist perspective, should there be a minimum amount of knowledge from the organising festival about the specific needs of VR artists?

Vos: Of course, but I don't think that's possible. I don't think it's realistic to ask that from an organisation, because there are only a few people who really know how to solve problems with the headsets, and film festivals are also dependent on a lot of volunteers, who are just people who enjoy films and enjoy volunteering. You can't ask them to know everything about VR and if something glitches or something doesn't work, to fix it. It's not realistic and I don't think it should be on them. I think a film festival should try to provide VR artists with their own space, just like at IFFR. We have the capability to fill it ourselves and work it ourselves,

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and that's what festivals should do in my opinion: facilitate the artist to take their own responsibility and keep their own shop running, their own VR experience.



Fig. 3: *8 Billion Selves* live performance at IFFR. Image courtesy of Nemo Vos.

de Valck: *8 Billion Selves* premiered at International Film Festival Rotterdam. What did that bring you as an artist?

Vos: A lot. We had great reviews. Very, very positive. That was very nice. And now we're being approached by film producers to work with them and producers for commercial films also want to work with us for VR. When you are at a festival like IFFR you can put the stamp on your posters and on your website – it is a stamp of approval. It lingers a lot further than the people who are at the festival themselves. That's great, so we can really keep working, and also make larger projects. Also, they [IFFR] organised a lot of professional activities and networking sessions, in particular for Dutch creators. There are obviously a lot of Dutch filmmakers at IFFR, but also a few Dutch VR artists. I really enjoyed meeting them. It was very valuable to me to talk to other VR creators and see what they are doing, what they are working on. Because it's not a very big world and it's also quite solitary, because you don't have to work with a lot of people to make VR experiences. You can start out just on your own on a \$1,000 computer. In my previous projects, I was lucky to collaborate with a few people: 3D artist Doris Konings helped me with the technique and hardware; Jim de Paauw, who works at the University of Utrecht, helped me with the live technical production and hardware. But you don't have to work with other people; you're always at home behind your computer, working. So, it's very fun to be out and see all of the other pale-looking VR artists at the festival.

de Valck: In terms of that stamp of approval and networking opportunities, where would you like to go after IFFR?

Vos: Venice. I heard it is the best festival to do your VR experience. They take it very seriously. It's just the place to be. When you make an arthouse film with a large budget, you must go to Cannes. When you make a VR experience, and if you want everyone to think it's the best, you have to go to Venice.

de Valck: For Dutch VR artists what is the best stepping stone to Venice or any of the other international festivals that are leading in VR?

Vos: I think IFFR. I really think so. I also talked with the Dutch Film Festival, but it's in a way too Dutch-focused. IFFR is an international film festival. There are a lot of people from outside of the Netherlands as well, and real film producers and serious people are walking around and talking to each other. That's good, and they're also very approachable.

de Valck: How did you get selected for the VR program at IFFR?

Vos: It was like that. We called them and we went by. We already had done the test screening, so we had most of the content. We called IFFR to see if we could do it at the festival. They asked us to come by at the office in Rotterdam. It was the programmer who was sitting there and two other people who were also involved. And then we just talked, we showed the experience, they liked it. Because *8 Billion Selves* is also a theater production [with live musical accompaniment], it needed some additional funding for the musicians. We started talking about that and IFFR funded this. It wasn't difficult. They were very helpful, very friendly. It was a good experience.

de Valck: Your approach to VR is not exclusively VR. *8 Billion Selves* is a co-creation with a Dutch musician. Could you say a bit more about your collaboration with other artists?

Vos: Well, I think the most important part is that VR has to reach an audience. People are still not used to going to a venue for 20 minutes, paying money, and then leaving. That's not something people are used to doing. But they are used to going to a music show, to a music venue. So, we really wanted to use the known infrastructure for music and the things that come with it, to show people VR and to get them in that kind of viewing experience.

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Also, I think the interesting thing about combining music with VR is that listening to music with VR is a more natural way to listen to music than watching a video clip. When you are sitting on the bus and you are listening to music, you are into the song; everything starts to correlate with the music, everything around you starts moving with the music. That is something VR has built into it. It makes it more transformative. I think that combining the live music experience with VR is quite interesting, because VR is traditionally a solitary experience. You're always locked away from other people. Even when you are playing a multiplayer game, you are not aware of your surroundings. Like in *8 Billion Selves*, the soundscapes were done live and there were 40 people in the room. You are aware that they are there. It's just like in the cinema – you are aware that other people are there, and that helps elevate the experience in a way. We had people in the *8 Billion Selves* show who were both in the headsets and holding hands the whole time. It was quite theatrical of them, but it was nice to see that people had a connection with each other. When you're watching something and something scary or beautiful happens, the knowledge that other people are experiencing it at the same time is nice. Live music can really connect the crowd. We did twelve shows and not one was the same. The visuals stayed the same, but the music was always different, so the crowd was always different. The music and crowds play into each other in a way, so the experience transformed every time.

8 Billion Selves can also be exhibited without live music. This has its own value. The technique we use plays everything simultaneously, but there's still like one-third of a second difference between all the headsets combined. So, you can't really time everything on the queue [with the live musical accompaniment], so it has to be quite broad. But in the recorded version everything can have its own sound.



Fig. 4: Still from *8 Billion Selves*. Image courtesy of Nemo Vos.

de Valck: *8 Billion Selves* was the first in a series of these co-created VR works that will have a live musical component. You are going to collaborate with a different artist each time. What is your aim with the series?

Vos: To have them all distributed around theaters at least. I'd love to do a small theatre tour, with the idea that it can pay for the work. That's the thing I would like the most, for all VR artists. Because right now you always have to get money from somewhere to make VR. You always need a subsidy. That's also good. It's great that subsidies are there and it's also necessary now, but it would be nice if you can make a VR experience and it just paid for itself, just as any other film. I think that it would really help the medium move forward as well. Right now, VR productions always have to be quite small because, it's taken seriously in a way, but not financially seriously. For a medium like this to grow it also must be seen as an economically viable product.

de Valck: What would it take for VR to reach this economic self-supportive level?

Vos: People just have to be more aware of it. As an artist I am responsible for facilitating as much as possible; making sure I have my own headsets, because I can't expect that every theatre will have everything I need in the amounts that I need. You just have to get your own headsets, work with that to show it live and find a way around it.

We work with music artists to make it easier to get people in. Now we're also working with two Dutch rappers who are very popular with 15-16 year-old boys. That's going to be quite a wild ride. I see the collaboration as a way to make these boys become more aware of the medium, that it's not just for gaming and watching pornography, but also a way to enjoy art. I think it's your responsibility, as a VR artist, to create an audience for this type of VR work. If all VR artists try to create their audience and really work on that, then I think it will be feasible and everyone will like going to a VR show. When there are more VR shows around the film festival will be key and VR films will be considered as any other films. I'd love for us to just be able to create our own VR experiences and show them at a festival attended by distributors who would be able to take the films in their programs or book it for a later release.

Authors

Nemo Vos, pseudonym of Tibor de Jong, is a Dutch VR artist working with 3D software, scans, and films. Through collaboration with other artists (such as musicians, actors, and

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performers), he creates live shows where the boundaries between the tactile, analog world and the virtual VR world are blurred and explored. Nemo Vos has collaborated with Dutch Digital Collectibles, Obey Clothing, and Spinvis. With the latter he has created various animated music films and VR projects, generating dreamflights for adults through abstract virtual worlds. Their installation *8 Miljard Ikken* (2024) was selected for the IFFR 2024 Art Directions immersive media programme. <https://nemovos.com/>

Marijke de Valck is Associate Professor of Film and Media Studies at Utrecht University and co-editor of the film festival review section in NECSUS.