Virtual Mindsets

Ton Haarmans · Wide Open Windows



The installation of a world

I recently visited a virtual reality exhibition about the sinking of the Titanic. It was set up in an apartment building in Alicante. An ordinary place. White walls. A doorbell. A staircase. And then, a headset.

I put it on.

And I am immediately elsewhere.

Thousands of meters below the surface of the sea. On the deck of a cruise ship. In the engine room. In a restaurant. Walking, turning, moving through a convincingly structured space.

I can pick up objects. Open drawers. Follow the virtual captain. Walk down a staircase.

That last one is unsettling. I am physically just walking forward, but visually I am descending. There is no real handrail. No real depth. My body hesitates. I cheat, briefly sliding the headset up to see the actual floor. Reassurance breaks the spell.

The resolution is not even very good. I know it is an illusion. And yet it feels strangely real. Not because the image is perfect, but because the environment is total. Surrounding. Immersive. There is no outside. Only here.

Within seconds, orientation establishes itself. The body adapts. Attention reorganizes. Emotion follows. Caution arises where there is risk. Curiosity where there is depth. I respond before I think. I inhabit before I judge.

Something has been installed.

What strikes me is not the quality of the simulation, but the speed and completeness of the transition. A world does not need to be believed. It needs to take over the field of experience.

This is what VR makes impossible to ignore: a world is not primarily something that exists. A world is something that functions.

What normally remains invisible

In ordinary life, this process is hidden by duration. The world into which I was born has had decades to stabilize itself. Its structures have sedimented into habits, language, perception, expectation. It feels given. Natural. Self-evident.

VR interrupts that concealment.

Here, the world does not arrive as nature, but as event. As a sudden reconfiguration of experience.

Space is not discovered, but generated. Meaning is not found, but activated. Presence is not anchored, but induced.

What normally takes years, culture, education, and biography, happens here in moments. And precisely because it happens so quickly, it becomes visible. Not the content of the world, but the mechanics of worldhood itself.

Mindsets made explicit

I use the word mindset not to mean an opinion or a belief, but a configuration of experience that determines in advance what can appear, what counts, what matters, what is real, and what is unthinkable.

A mindset is not inside a world. A mindset is what lets a world show up as a world.

VR offers a rare clarity: a mindset that is intentionally built, technically supported, and phenomenologically complete.

A virtual mindset.

It provides a spatial logic, a bodily orientation, a horizon of relevance, a regime of plausibility, a style of presence. And once these are active, experience follows. Coherence is enough. Reality is not required.

This is not because VR is deceptive, but because ordinary reality works in the same way. VR does not invent world-making. It exposes it.

The shock to the idea of reality

What quietly collapses in a convincing VR environment is the naive hierarchy between “real” and “artificial”. The nervous system does not consult metaphysics.

Orientation does not check ontological status. Emotion does not ask whether a world is fundamental. It responds to structure.

What counts as real is what successfully organizes experience.

This does not mean that everything is arbitrary. It means that reality is not a substance, but an achievement. A stabilized configuration of appearance.

VR makes that achievement negotiable again.

Beyond the headset

It would be easy, and misleading, to treat VR as a special case.

Social media already functions as a low-intensity virtuality. Ideologies are long-duration immersive worlds. Identities are biographical VR systems. Spiritual traditions are carefully engineered experiential architectures.

They all install perspectives. They all regulate salience. They all generate self-world structures. The difference is not kind, but explicitness.

VR does openly what culture usually does slowly. It compresses world-formation into a visible operation.

From entertainment to experience laboratory

If VR matters philosophically, it is not because it will replace reality, but because it clarifies it.

It shows that worlds can be designed, presence can be guided, meaning can be architected, and selfhood can be re-situated.

This makes VR more than a medium. It becomes a laboratory. A site where the conditions of experience can be varied, tested, destabilized, and explored.

Not primarily for distraction. But for insight.

Closing

A virtual environment succeeds not when it convinces me that it is real, but when it quietly installs a way of being.

That installation is familiar. It is what every world has always done.

VR simply makes the gesture visible.

And once seen, it cannot be unseen: that a world is not where experience happens, but how experience happens.