

VIRTUAL REALITY IN THE DARK

Willem de Ridder

A big empty space is needed that has to be completely dark. It has to be so dark that even after ten minutes the eyes cannot focus on anything. The slightest light will enable the eyes to "see" again. In that space simple hallways, corridors, barriers, staircases and rooms are being built to "guide" the visitors.

Visitors get a walkman and headphones. They sit down in a comfortable chair next to the entrance. There they switch on the cassette player and listen to a special sound that will affect their brains and physical state. Then a voice tells them about the quite risky experience that they are going to have. Other visitors (eventually waiting in line) can watch this process.

The voice gives simple instructions and if these are followed correctly, there will be a minimal risk. The visitor is then asked (by the same voice) to get up and open the door next to the chair. Entering a small hallway, the voice advises them to close the door and wait. The light is quite low and the sound intensifies.

The voice warns again of the considerable risks that the upcoming adventure will bring and how important it is to follow the instructions as correctly as possible. A second door has to be opened and the same type of hallway is entered. In this room the light is even lower and again the voice prepares the visitor for the upcoming dangers.

There is a third hallway where the light is so low that the eyes need some time to get used to it. One can barely see the next door that has to be opened. After that there is absolutely no light any more. One has to rely completely on the voice. The instructions are very precise. When the voice tells that the floor will turn soft it actually does. When it warns of a wall ahead, there is a wall.

The voice tells an incredible story about the reality in this dark space and it becomes very real. There will be a rope that one can hold on to, but at a certain moment the rope will stop and one is lost in a very adventurous and dangerous space where every imposed idea will become real and visible. Most of the brain is geared towards visual stimuli. Any idea or belief tends to materialize, and we do not need light for that.

The visitors enter a room with a bed in the middle and the voice asks them to lie down on it and to look around. The ancient art of storytelling knew all along that time and space are mere ideas. If we believe in them they will materialize. Any good storyteller easily lets them disappear again. The induced reality in the dark space is very convincing. Willem de Ridder is a master story teller.

This project was introduced for the first time in The Netherlands in 1981. Willem de Ridder did a live transmission on Dutch National Radio from a Zeppelin above the city of Rotterdam. Listeners could visit three museums in the country where they were only admitted if they brought a portable radio. They entered totally dark spaces where De Ridder guided them from the Zeppelin through a virtual reality. Even the listeners who could not go to one of the museums "saw" it at home while listening to the radio.

The sound will be produced by THE HAFLER TRIO in cooperation with the Robot Laboratories. The space will be designed by Willem de Ridder and the text will be recorded according to the final realization of that design. Simple partitions (used at fairs) with some doors, a bed, some extra loudspeakers, some custom carpentry and some soft carpets are necessary. In most cases the space is built with existing and available material.

