



On a journey...



Central Berlin, Germany

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By Susan Griffith-Jones, Exclusive

I'm whisked down into the bowels of the Brandenburg Gate Museum and into a large hall which has screens on 3 sides. I'm told that the museum is shut today as there are some private visitors coming that afternoon and they're slotting me in first. For this reason, I get the hall to myself to watch the 20 minute immersive display of the history of the Brandenburg Gate. It's a little disorientating watching 3 screens at once, as you never really know where to place your focus, even though it is impressive to say the least. Sometimes they run in tandem and sometimes with separate images, but somehow I am never really able to find where to focus my gaze and of course I want to know everything that's going on!

Afterwards I think that's perhaps exactly what we're always struggling with in life, as we are constantly experiencing the 360 degree world appearing around us and must focus in on one track not to become overwhelmed. We cannot and never do actually take in everything around us at every moment, not to mention deal with all the responding impressions that would occur with that amount of stimuli, as it's just too overpowering to 'notice everything'. But perhaps this is just 'the frightened rabbit' reaction; alert, wide eyes staring, darting from one side to the other, as it is both stunned and frantically trying to assess the danger... whereas the eagle soaring serenely high above the valley, really does see it all.

The fellow who's organizing the show returns to the hall at the end of it with a technician, who's got a set of Virtual Reality glasses with him that he hooks up to a computer. I don the goggle like apparatus and the room vanishes. I'm standing next to a cliff on a sandy ground with cicadas chirping away and a camp fire lit in front of me. Behind



Susan taking a walk along the river in Berlin, Germany

me is a cave that I can enter. Early on, I don't realize that I can actually walk through walls in this virtual world and due to habit, stay clear of solid objects, walking instead through entrances and staying on designated pathways. I can't move very far in this particular place as actually, in the room where I'm physically standing, there's a demarcated space controlled by a tracking device stuck onto the ceiling that will allow me to only move within those markers. Inside my virtual world, this is defined by a white perimeter that shows me which area I can walk inside, even though the visuals go much further than that and I really seem to be inside a holistic scene.

I have to say that I am impressed and understand why the woman at the exhibition company is promoting VR for my simulation, although before I can decide I need to know exactly how I'm going to create the Bardo experience. I'm yet to try Augmented Reality and others are telling me that this will be the interface I need to use. AR is apparently the next massive technological invasion of mass stream usage and what is apparently going to replace our Smart phones within the next 5-7 years. I immerse myself into online articles explaining the difference between AR and VR that is, in the end, quite simple to summarize. Whereas in a VR world you are immersed into a completely different world and may use an Avatar

to have a full on simulated experience in there, with AR you are in 'real-time' as they call it, yet can superimpose 3D characters, objects, lights, sounds and information into the ordinary environment. So, as a practical application, you could ask for directions to somewhere and arrows will appear as to where you should go, seemingly in the street in front of you, but only visible to you with the glasses on. Not to mention the advertising potential as they pop billboards alongside the roads, overlaying buildings that are 'really' there. I imagine us all walking around wearing these glasses soon, some designer and others, cheaper, those that are more sophisticated, others more simple etc...!

From the tacky literature that I've been reading online, I start to notice several companies producing this equipment jumping out at me repeatedly from various articles. I check their locations and most of them are in the USA. Is this going to herald a trip to the US, I wonder as I also assess my own stamina to keep up with the project at this stage, not to mention, stomach the cost of it all! Less than a month ago when I started focusing in on it, I had no idea of its scope. I mean, I did, but then it was a blur, and now pathways are starting to define themselves and I must choose to walk them or not. I muse over really having a choice in the matter and instinctively know that while I'm in motion, I should just

keep going.

As soon as I get back to London, I book my ticket for the following week to Boston. I'm staying at a friend's house and finally have some peace and quiet and the space to get my head around the issue. I have to admit that operating out of the Happy Hostel in Berlin, albeit cheap and somewhere I could cook my own food, has been an ongoing challenge. Much of the time I am escaping on walks in Berlin's Tiergarten or up to the Hauptbahnhof to be alone to think and try to formulate ideas. It's not just the busy atmosphere of the hostel, but the nature of the project at this stage, difficult to identify directions until doorways naturally start opening and following leads until they come to a dead end.

Boston has its own attractions for me too, not the least because it was where my family had first settled in the US back in the mid-seventeenth Century. Plus, in Berlin, I download an audio version of the Tibetan Book of the Dead. It's an explanation of the book by a professor from Columbia University in NYC, who has translated it, the version of which I also have. I am inspired and look him up, checking his schedule online. It will be necessary for me to also meet people who work closely with this literature and since he'll be at a book discussion in Up State New York the weekend I'm in Boston, I can hire a car, go to that venue and then go on the next day to visit His Holiness, Sakya Trizin, one of the great Tibetan Masters, who I've known for many years, whose seat in the USA is just half an hour on from there.

In the meantime, I continue working on the proposal for the Art/Technology grant from a US organization based in LA. I've been fill-

ing in this form since my Clapham Common days and it's quite honestly helping me focus in on the dynamics of the project. They're asking questions like "What is the artistic merit of the project? How may your project inspire dialogue and How may this further help other industries?" At the end of it is a section where the budget and table of key milestones must go. Just these two boxes alone would stop me from even starting the application, but Nelida, my Panamanian friend who is one of the guiding lights of this project is not letting me shy away from answering the questions and tells me that she'll do the budget, as she intuits that it's a major block for me.

I identify 5 companies I want to meet in the States. This range should get my head straight about the technical side and get me understanding more about what I'm dealing with and its feasibility. I book a ticket to San Francisco for the week after Boston, which will be contained in 6 days, including the weekend in Up State New York. When I stop to realize what I am doing, my head spins and intermittently, I talk with friends on the phone in various countries. Everyone is enthusiastic and there's much encouragement, but I am constantly perplexed at my own daredevilry and sometimes find myself collapsing into bouts of intense fear at the scale of it, the money I'm spending and the time I'm using up. In the end, it always comes back to the intention I've spent so much time planting within the project and now I realize why, because it's the only reason to do it and the only thing I can actually hold onto.

To be continued...

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Reichstag Building, Berlin, Germany



Brandenburg Gate, Berlin, Germany