

**Excerpt of “The Existential Void of the Pop-Up ‘Experience’”**By Amanda Hess, *New York Times* (Critic’s Notebook), September 26, 2018

One evening this summer, I left work around 6, ducked into a storefront in Midtown Manhattan and stood at the back of a line, waiting to become myself. I was at the threshold of the Rosé Mansion, a pop-up “experience” that is themed around pink wine but promises much more. I had been beckoned there by an Instagram ad featuring a woman with heart-shaped glasses on her face and a plastic cup in her hand. “Be fiercely and uniquely yourself at Rosé Mansion,” it said.

What I am at the Rosé Mansion is, mostly, standing around. Though a friend and I had \$45 tickets to enter the manse at 6:30 p.m., we were moored in its sweaty lobby for another half an hour, left to stare at the “ROOFTOPS AND ROSÉ” pink tanks on display in the gift shop until a Rosé Mansion “ambassador” unhooked the velvet rope to unleash us and dozens of other patrons into the space.

This was a familiar feeling. I’ve spent the past few months going to as many temporary “experiences” as I could find in New York, to explore every broadly themed “mansion” and “factory” and “museum” possible before they all shutter and reconvert into the empty storefronts of high-rent blight. They included Color Factory, stocked with “participatory installations of colors”; Candytopia, an “outrageously interactive candy wonderland”; 29Rooms, a “groundbreaking art experience” dedicated to “expanding your reality”; and the Museum of Ice Cream’s spinoff space, featuring a “Pint Shop” and “tasting room” created in collaboration with Target that “re-visions the grocery store, enabling a hyper-sensory experience.”

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And yet, the “experience” has emerged as among the defining fads of my generation. There have been New York experiences centered on tea, dreams, eggs, illusions and cereal. Soon the Museum of Pizza, “the world’s first and only immersive art experience celebrating pizza,” will open. There’s one for dogs now, too: Human’s Best Friend, which offers 20 “photo moments” for your pet to endure.

By classifying these places as experiences, their creators seem to imply that something happens there. But what? Most human experiences don’t have to announce themselves as such. They just do what they do. A film tells a story. A museum facilitates meaning between the viewer and a work of art. Even a basic carnival ride produces pleasing physical sensations.

The central experience delivered at all these places is one of waiting. At the Color Factory, I first waited for half an hour past my ticket time, outside in the 90-degree heat. Then I waited inside the lobby, just outside a roped-off area. After being allowed inside the roped-off area, I was offered mochi ice cream while I waited. Then I was shown an orientation video and ushered into a rainbow-painted hallway, which turned out to be another line in disguise.

What are we waiting for? Places that are themselves reminiscent of lines. At 29Rooms, a pop-up from the women’s site Refinery29, I waited outside big white tents to get into makeshift rooms like “Star Matter,” a space curated in collaboration with Nicole Richie, which features big fake rocks, little fake stars and a hanging red orb. The aesthetic recalls the line for Disneyland’s Splash Mountain, except in here, Fleetwood Mac was playing. One of the features of the Rosé Mansion is a fake gold throne that you can sit on while wearing a fake gold crown, an event akin to hanging out in the lobby of the New Jersey Medieval Times. Each of these experiences culminates in a ball pit — filled with “marshmallows” at Candytopia, “champagne bubbles” at the Rosé Mansion, and blue-colored balls at Color Factory — a feature pioneered by the McDonald’s Play-Place.

Yet these line-adjacent experiences are pitched as somehow transformative. In a plaque outside the “Star Matter” room, the experience was teased as “a cosmic pilgrimage of love, music, and connectedness into the California night sky and back in time to the 1970s, a decade defined by progressive group thinking.” The Color Factory says it’s designed to “invite curiosity, discovery and play.” The Museum of Ice Cream’s Pint Shop is said to “inspire and empower audiences to be their most creative selves.” Mostly, we’re expected to have the time of our lives. A Candytopia employee announced: “The first rule is to be happy and always smile! Frowns make other people sad!”

The most that these spaces can offer is the facsimile of traditional pleasures. They take nature and art and knowledge seeking, flatten them into sight gags and stick them to every stray surface. At a preview party for the Museum of Pizza — held inside a real museum, the New Museum — items like a slice-shaped guitar donated by the musician Andrew W.K. were displayed in glass boxes, as if to conjure an air of significance. The Museum of Ice Cream’s Pint Shop offshoot (now closed) was only “creative” insofar as taking photographs inside a store creates a kind of content. And the “discovery” offered by the Color Factory mainly involves following directions: Trace a flow chart on the floor to find your “secret color,” which corresponds with a random dance move — “air guitar like you’ve never air guitarred before” — you’re instructed to complete on the light-up floor in the next room.

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Even the loose themes of these places often aren’t enough to sustain full “experiences.” Candytopia’s main attraction is its candy statues — a fox made from candy corn and gummy bears, a dragon of Swedish fish and licorice strings — but it also contains inexplicable items like a punching bag labeled “Candytopia” and a wax figure of Katy Perry. The Rosé Mansion is designed through very, very free association: There are two Cialis-esque bathtubs filled with rose petals, because “rose” sounds like “rosé,” and a room plastered with pink flamingos because rosé is also pink. Occasionally, this approach revealed irreverent charms: At the Color Factory, a rainbow conveyor belt served macarons; at Candytopia, a candy pig spewed confetti. More often it’s just confusing, as when the Rosé Mansion styles more than one “experience” around fake landline telephones.

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There aren’t characters in these spaces. Instead there are young temp workers dressed in uniforms who are tasked with wiping down surfaces, chasing down balls that have escaped the pit and fostering cults of personality around the museum creators themselves. At the Museum of Ice Cream’s Pint Shop, an employee in a sprinkle crown, pink feathered leg warmers and a lab coat calling himself “Slush” told an assembled crowd about how Ms. Bunn “experimented with 7,000 different combinations of vanilla” to perfect one of the museum’s flavors.

There is one way these experiences are better than real life. Standing on the lip of the Grand Canyon, taking in the Mona Lisa at the Louvre or witnessing a seal pup shimmy onto a rock, we might pull out our phone to take a picture, only to find that what we experienced as grand feels dinky through the lens. But these experiences often look cheap and grimy in person. They’re made to pop on camera.

These places are often described as “Instagram Museums,” and the real experience plays out only after we post photographic evidence on social media. The internet is an increasingly visual space, and these museums, with their enormous pools of candy and gargantuan emoji props, are designed to fit the shrunken-down Instagram grid. What’s the point of anything else?

Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” suggested that the technology to endlessly replicate images had compromised the aura of art, the unique presence of an original piece. These spaces offer a canny, if cynical, response: The guests supply the aura.

That logic has so permeated the culture that these “experiences” need to offer little to activate that impulse. The now-closed Museum of Ice Cream’s Pint Shop was, essentially, a store, stocked with racks of \$25 “Vanillionaire” hats and \$10 churro clothes patches. And yet on an afternoon in July, it was filled with people taking their photos in front of the shelves.

The central disappointment of these spaces is not that they are so narcissistic, but rather that they seem to have such a low view of the people who visit them. Observing a work of art or climbing a mountain actually invites us to create meaning in our lives. But in these spaces, the idea of “interacting” with the world is made so slickly transactional that our role is hugely diminished. Stalking through the colorful hallways of New York’s “experiences,” I felt like a shell of a person. It was as if I was witnessing the total erosion of meaning itself. And when I posted a selfie from the Rosé Mansion saying as much, all of my friends liked it.