PROJECT SPACE

Xpace Cultural Centre

The Slow and Unreal Research Lab (SURL)
Nehir Ay

October 31 – December 12 2026

Pull open the door to Xpace Cultural Centre and walk into the gallery. Proceed past the Main Space exhibition, through the library, all the way to the threshold of the Project Space. Then, pass through the doorway. Where are you now? You've entered the second physical incarnation of the *Slow and Unreal Research Lab* (SURL), the decidedly unreal space founded and managed by designer Nehir Ay.

Once inside, do you first notice the chroma-key green walls surrounding you? Impossibly bright and insistent, reminiscent of the same shade used in film post-production to insert CGI backgrounds. Or does the room divider catch your eye? The one right in front of you, positioned perpendicular to the doorway and mounted on wheels like a piece of stage scenery. Or the signage on either side of the divider, directing you towards one of two destinations: the *Cartography Office* or the *Living Space Office*?

For some, the scene may call to mind, however tangentially, the 1951 Disney film *Alice in Wonderland*, when Alice wanders into the Tulgey Wood. There, she finds wooden signs nailed to the trees, pointing "this way," "that way," "yonder," and "back," among

other absurd directions. A similar gesture appears in SURL's *Unreal Space Manifesto*, found on one of the desks. A neatly cut sheet of yellow paper, its text arranged in constellations across a grid. Ay's graphic design choices hold order and chaos in suspension. The official-looking spiral logo at the top of the page sits in pleasing contrast with dotted directional lines, each capped with a pointing finger, that jolt between the floating text. They suggest movement with purpose, but without efficiency: a system that moves with confidence even while getting lost on the way to its destination.

Ay expertly deploys these aesthetic markers of bureaucratic order across print media, which visitors are encouraged to peruse throughout the installation. Her focus on graphic design points towards her central conceptual concern and the impetus for creating SURL: to facilitate "in-depth explorations of the term real world, and [act as] a reminder that the real world is also a design".[1] Ay's interest in the term *real world* emerged during her Spatial and Environmental design classes, when instructors would repeatedly urge students to design for the *real world* without explaining what, exactly, that meant. Ay was frustrated by the way this phrase narrowed students' design imaginations and, more broadly, their capacity to imagine alternative social realities. What are the political implications of designing for a *real world* where our most powerful systems perpetuate hypercapitalism, genocide, and resource extraction, to name just a few issues? And so, she began focussing on *the unreal* as a space of conceptual possibility.

What exactly is *the unreal*? For Ay, it is not a fixed category but a practice of imagining possibilities and inscribing them onto the real. This process takes place both metaphorically and materially: for example, the walls painted as green screens surrounding the installation allow visitors to literally insert any image they desire onto the gallery walls. Furthermore, SURL's embodies this practice, allowing Ay both to

[1] Slow and Unreal Research Lab, "anti space." *Youtube,* uploaded by the Slow and Unreal Research Lab, 17 Aug, 2026. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slJeAXO8HD8>

parody the “real” through an absurdist performance of institutional authority, enacted through print media, and to investigate the unreal more critically through the ongoing research and reading sessions the lab has hosted. Videos of previous readings, info sessions, and more are available on SURL’s Youtube channel. SURL operates as a method of inquiry: an institution through which Ay can question the systems that define, organise, and legitimise our understanding of reality.

Ay’s installation offers a self-reflexive perspective on the theme of exchange uniting the three projects currently on view at Xpace. Her interest lies less in what we exchange with one another than in what we exchange with the world around us as we move through life. We are compelled to enter into relationships with the spaces and ideologies of the “real world” before we are old enough to choose them for ourselves. Most of us enter the institutional space of school around the age of five, and continue moving through a succession systems as we grow older: universities, workplaces, bank accounts, marriages, and so on. We give ourselves over to these structures, but, as Andrea Fraser reminds us, “The institution is inside of us [too] and we can’t get outside ourselves.”[2]

Entering an office, like the SURL office, may not feel like an act of exchange, but it is. We participate in workplace systems, and in turn, those systems shape our understanding of ourselves as workers. Exchange, in this sense, is not always a conscious or reciprocal act, but an ongoing process through which we are shaped by the systems we inhabit, even as we sustain them through our participation.

French philosopher Louis Althusser uses the term *interpellation* to describe how we are constituted as subjects through societal institutions, even as we rely on those institutions to navigate our lives. The term derives from the French *interpeller*, meaning “to call out” or to draw someone’s attention. The classic example used to explain the

[2] Fraser, Andrea. “From a Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique”. Artforum. September 2005 (Vol. 44, No. 1, page 278–283)

concept is a police officer calling out, “Hey, you there!” in the street. Without knowing for certain whom the officer is addressing, we might turn around, recognising ourselves as the person being called. In doing so, we become the subject to whom the call is directed. Althusser argues that cultural institutions operate in much the same way: they call us into subjecthood, shaping our identities before we consciously choose to incorporate their values and assumptions into our sense of self. In this sense, as Fraser observes, we have allowed the institution inside us, participating in an exchange that often takes place without our knowledge.[3]

Ay calls to us through the institutional framework of SURL, but this is not a call to order. Instead, SURL acts as a destabilising force, prompting us to consider how much of ourselves we exchange for membership in the “real” spaces we inhabit, often without even realising we are doing so. What’s more, we may never stop to question whether these spaces are worth belonging to in the first place. Let us hope that by allowing the unreal in, as Ay invites us to do, we might move forward with greater awareness and a more expansive imagination.

– Ciar O’Mahony

[3] Althussur, Louis. *On Ideology*. Verso, 2008.