

A Human-Size Spider Web Is Getting a Boost From TikTok

 [nytimes.com/2022/03/18/arts/design/tomas-saraceno-tiktok-shed.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/18/arts/design/tomas-saraceno-tiktok-shed.html)

March 18, 2022



“You need to check out this installation in NYC,” reads the title card of [the TikTok](#) post.

“Must love spiders,” adds a qualifier in the caption.

The video opens onto the mouth of a white globe, 95 feet in diameter, inside the McCourt space of the Shed, a cultural center in the Hudson Yards neighborhood, where an interactive exhibition by the Argentine artist [Tomás Saraceno](#) opened in February. Overhead, 40 feet above the ground,

scattered people clamber across wire mesh netting. Twenty-eight feet below, visitors sprawl out on their backs, limbs outstretched.

The user scored the video to Hans Zimmer's otherworldly instrumental track "Cornfield Chase" from the 2014 science fiction film "Interstellar," adding to the ambience.

More than 720,000 people have watched this video. A similar TikTok about the exhibition has racked up 2.8 million views and more than 595,000 likes — this one set to the ethereal "Forever" by the "Euphoria" composer Labrinth.

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Social media posts like these — particularly on TikTok and Instagram — seem to be driving attendance to the exhibition, "Tomás Saraceno: Particular Matter(s)," and one piece of it in particular: the multisensory performance "Free the Air: How to hear the universe in a spider/web."

Image



Detail of a web in a section of the show called "Webs of At-tent(s)ion," (2020).Credit...George Etheredge for The New York Times

Over the past few years, and perhaps especially during the pandemic, interactive and experience-based art has risen in prominence and popularity. In 2019, a visit to Yayoi Kusama's "Infinity Room" in New York came with a wait of up to two hours, which didn't deter eager attendees. The "experiential art center" Superblue drew crowds to its opening in Miami last spring. When Meow Wolf, which creates large-scale immersive art installations, opened its third location in Denver in September, buyers snatched up 35,000 tickets in the first 24 hours of sales.

"With the rise of technology, the rise of being able to have more self-determinacy through technology, through having a phone, access to information, all of that," said Alex Poots, chief executive and artistic director of the Shed, would lead toward a number of artworks becoming "more interactive and more immersive."

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"Free the Air" is a concert in four movements, with recordings of the activity of various spider species — the tropical tent-web spider, the golden silk orb weaver, a Mexican jumping spider, the African social spider and the red-legged golden orb weaver — transformed into vibrations. There is also a spider divination interpreted by Bollo Pierre Tadios.

Attendance is limited by the capacity of the installation itself (45 people max) and the number of concerts scheduled each day. On weekdays, there are a total of 19 sessions that begin every 20 minutes. On Fridays and Saturdays, 26 sessions happen every 20 minutes. The exhibition is averaging about a thousand people per day and regularly selling out slots, except for Wednesdays and Thursdays at midday, according to Tiffanie Yakum, a communications manager at the Shed. The Shed has now added Tuesdays to the exhibition calendar.

“When you create a situation where the audience are involved, are actively participating, they have a more engaging experience,” Poots said. “I mean, it sounds obvious. But we still keep building places that can only do rows of seats.”

As a 20-something newcomer to New York, I often turn to TikTok to learn about the city and map out weekend plans. I follow the creator of that first TikTok, scored to Hans Zimmer, and liked the video when I scrolled by. So I jumped at the chance to check out the installation.

Image



A passageway into “Free the Air.”Credit...Justin Lane/EPA, via Shutterstock

I arrived at 11:20, the first time slot on Saturday morning, unsure of what to expect. About a dozen of us entered a waiting room of lockers and benches, stowed our coats and received instructions. The concert would last eight minutes, we were told.

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We climbed up many flights of stairs to the upper level and emerged into the white globe. As we clambered onto wire mesh netting that recalls a giant spider web, we forgot how to walk. The ground had a slight give to it, like a trampoline. Slowly, we spread out across the web and settled onto it, positioning ourselves near the white cylindrical shakers that would emit frequencies of spiders “playing their webs.”

The giant white ball of light at the top of the dome slowly faded to black. A light mist emerged through the netting and the performance began. For eight minutes, I shut off my sight and focused on my sense of touch. The mesh beneath me vibrated and shook with sound waves. I felt, in essence, like a spider in its web.

Afterward, I talked to Alexandra Mount-Campbell, a teacher, and Andrea Morales, an actor, who live in New Jersey and came into the city on a Saturday morning to see what “Free the Air” was all about. Mount-Campbell had sent her friend a TikTok about the exhibition. “It was just this eerie white glow,” Morales said approvingly.

Mount-Campbell looked up the difference between the levels and selected the upper one. She knew phones weren't permitted on the upper level but had read that visitors had gotten more of a sensory environment on the top.

"I didn't really care about putting it on social media myself," Mount-Campbell said, adding that she wanted to focus on the experience.

"Yeah, I'm cool with putting my phone away," Morales replied.

Last summer, they saw the Arcadia Earth pop-up exhibition in NoHo. They've also been to the Van Gogh immersive experience near Battery Park.

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"I feel like that type of all-immersive experience is kind of 'in' right now," Mount-Campbell said.

"Probably a lot due to what you can capture and put on social media. I think it kind of gets people out — which is great, though."

Clara Ongil and Benoit Lemoine weren't so sure. Both are graphic designers — she's from Spain and he's from France — so exhibitions like the one by Saraceno pique their interest.

"We were a little bit skeptical at the beginning because it also seems like a very Instagram-y type of show," Ongil said.

Image



Credit...George Etheredge for The New York Times

Lemoine agreed. "I'm a bit worried about that when I come to the Shed, because sometimes it's at the border of Instagram and art," he said. "Is it really art?"

The designers bought tickets for the lower level, from which visitors look up at people on the upper level, suspended on the netting like so many spiders. There, phones *are* allowed.

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"It would be cool if they don't allow phones at all," Ongil said. "It would feel more like a true experience, rather than having everyone taking videos."

Matthew Barrows, a visitor experience associate at the Shed, has worked there since October. Guests often tell him that they've come to the exhibition after seeing it on TikTok. "I think it's a good way for artists to get more recognition for their art," Barrows said.

He has experienced the exhibition about a dozen times now, he estimates. He prefers the upper level and likes that, when the lights go down and the mist comes up, he's left to reflect on his thoughts.

"I think it's a way for people to face their fears — overcome looking down — and I think they realize that it's not too bad," Barrows said. "And really getting a grasp on what spiders have to go through."