

## **The process of co-creation and the role of the audience as active spectators in today's performance**

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The postmodern concept of performance as an artwork and the emerging need to reshape the public sphere<sup>1</sup> was defined by Bourriaud (1998) with the term “relational aesthetic”<sup>2</sup>. The theory of “relational art” explains the arts consumers’ evolution and highlights the role and relationship between the audience as active spectators, the artists and the “art product”.

The performance space is conceived as a shared space for social interactions<sup>3</sup> and, thus, art fruition implies even more “viewer participation” and “activated spectatorship”<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, the increasing technological implementations, as occurred for example in the recent pandemic, contributed to create an extra layer to enhance art communication.

Arts become “a product of social interaction”<sup>5</sup> where to experience and encounter the “other” of the self in the perspective of achieving self-expression, self-realization, enhanced socialization and improved creative thinking<sup>6</sup>. In this

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by Thomas Burger (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Les presses du réel*, 1998 (French edition), *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods. 2002 (English edition).

<sup>3</sup> Erving Goffman, “The frame”, in *Performance analysis: An introductory coursebook*, eds. C. Counsell & L. Wolf, (New York: Routledge, 1974), 24-30.

<sup>4</sup> Claire Bishop, *Participation* (London: Whitechapel, 2006), 78.

<sup>5</sup> Bishop, *Participation...*, 75.

<sup>6</sup> Adam Arvidsson, “The ethical economy of customer coproduction”, *Journal of Macromarketing*, 28(4), (2008): 326-338. doi: 0.1177/0276146708326077. Alan Brown,

context, contemporary artists are searching for methods, strategies and artistic actions to engage the audience in “active and expressive ways” in order to establish an aesthetic and culture of “making-and-doing”<sup>7</sup> and to transform spectators from passive recipients into active participants engaged in a process of co-creation.

We talk about the process of co-creation, audience participation and public engagement in today’s performance (online and offline conditions) and about the role of technology in this interview with two professors and artist-researchers from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp:

**dr. Ine Vanoveren**, contemporary flutist and performer of the digital arts collective studio.POC, professor in contemporary music at the Royal Conservatory of Liège and senior artistic researcher in XR-performance at MAXlab (Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp), EMERGE (Sint-Lucas, Antwerp) and PXL-MAD (PXL University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Hasselt).



**Kristof Timmerman**, chairman and coordinator of MAXlab, the research group on the interaction between art and digital technology of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp, doctoral researcher and organizer of the summer school 'Storytelling in Virtual Reality. An Immersive Encounter'. He is the founder of the digital arts collective studio.POC.

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Rebecca Ratzkin et al., *Making sense of audience engagement: A critical assessment of efforts by nonprofit arts organizations to engage audiences and visitors in deeper and more impactful arts experiences* (San Francisco: The San Francisco Foundation, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Brown, Rebecca Ratzkin et al., *Making sense of audience engagement...*, 4.



Both conduct practice-based research on performance in digital environments, interaction between online and on-site audiences, and the mechanisms of immersion. Their developments extend the performance space using emerging technologies.

### **1. How do you experience and define today's performance space?**

Since the COVID-19 crisis is (almost) over, people return to physical events, like concerts, theater and dance shows, exhibitions... On the other hand, virtual and remote events became part of our daily art experience and the awareness around virtual performances that has been built over the last few years, will not disappear anymore. On the contrary. Both performance spaces - the physical and the digital - can perfectly exist next to each other, or they can merge – the so-called *phygital* events.

As XR artists, we are highly interested in these virtual and/or hybrid performance spaces and we strongly believe in an online arts scene, whether it be in VR, AR, on desktop, mobile or home cinema set-up, or immersive spaces with larger audiences. The past months artists worked, created, played and received audiences in these spaces.

Since the pioneers of the late 1980s and 1990s such as Jeffrey Shaw, Chris Marker, Monika Fleischmann and Char Davies, technology has made such a leap forward that an enormous potential of digital worlds has become accessible. A network of unexplored, virtual environments is emerging - the 'metaverse'.

The term "metaverse" first appeared in 1992. In the cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash*, American writer Neal Stephenson used the contraction of the words 'meta' and 'universe' to describe the successor to the Internet (now known as web3.0); a virtual environment as a massively multiplayer online game (MMO) populated by avatars and system deamons. Just over a decade later, this speculative concept first took concrete form with the online multimedia platform *Second Life*, in which residents build a parallel life in a virtual world. Since its launch in 2003, the number of visitors has grown steadily until in 2013, when it had one million unique users.

Artists also found their way to Second Life. In 2009 Chris Marker built a radical futuristic museum within the platform in which he exhibited his own photographic work, video installations, film clips and other media work. The number of MMO-like platforms and artistic interventions within such environments has exploded in recent years. Combined with the evolution towards reachable technology, a very accessible performance space for artists and their audiences is gradually opening up.

## **2. How do you experience and establish a connection with the audience?**

This is one of the bigger challenges digital performers are facing. You don't have a direct connection with your audience, the 'live stage vibe' is lacking. Not only is it important to establish a connection as an artist with your audience, but also to facilitate a connection for your audience with the virtual world itself. People have a more active role when they visit digital performances or exhibition spaces: they have the possibility to move around in a virtual setting, they can encounter other people as avatars and they are immersed in a world they haven't experienced before.

Some of the parameters that define the audiences experience are the so-called '*social and spatial telepresence*'. Spatial presence is 'the subjective experience of being in one place or environment, even when one is physically situated in another.' Social telepresence has been described as 'the feeling of being socially present with another person at a remote location'<sup>8</sup>.

The interaction with an audience also partly happens through a user interface: it should be clear for an audience how they need to enter and move around in a virtual space. What arrows or keys to use on a keyboard, how to handle the controllers of a VR-set, how to interact with other avatars, the performer and/or the virtual world.

For our live virtual performance with virtual interaction, Empty Mind, the user interaction interface is still relatively simple: by creating an extra interactive layer on top of a Twitch livestream, people at home could interact with the virtual world by moving their mouse over the screen. They could also - live - throw 3D emoji into the virtual world and towards the avatar - the alter ego of the live performer.

**Empty Mind** is an audiovisual live performance that takes place in a virtual environment and is meant to be viewed online. It is inspired by the works and ideas of the American artist Agnes Martin. The work consists of 6 large movements (5 + 1), which can be performed in any order. The spectator decides

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<sup>8</sup> <http://matthewlombard.com/presence-definitions/index.html>

this order and can interfere with the performance through an interactive UI-layer on top of a livestream.

Originally, Empty Mind is a composition by Wim Henderickx for flutes (piccolo, flute, alto flute and bass flute) and live electronics. In each movement there is a strictly composed passage that represents a continuity between the parts and several free passages where the piece has the space and freedom to develop on its own – chosen by the soloist at that moment – creating a discontinuity.

Flutist Ine Vanoeveren performs in a motion capture suit with which she controls the virtual environment.

The next step in the development of this performance will be the conversion into a live performance in Virtual Reality, where performer(s) and audience meet and connect with each other in the virtual environments. This should improve the spatial and social presence, so performers and spectators experience and share the same space and can influence each other.

### **3. Do you stimulate spectators' active participation? What are the strategies you are experimenting with within different contexts?**

There is an enormous potential within digital performances to give responsibility – agency – to an audience. People will have more control over the trajectory and narrative of a digital performance, than they have with traditional performances, where their role is that of a mere spectator, a witness.

Digital artistic performances can learn a lot from multiplayer games - the so-called *massively multiplayer online game* (MMO).

Games are actually audiovisual works in which different disciplines, such as storytelling, visual arts and music, come together. The total immersion of the player in the story and the possibility of interaction and co-creation between creators and audience are key concepts digital performances should include. In a game, the player is not a passive viewer, but is rather involved in the creation process of the story, for example by making choices and taking actions (agency). In this way, games give control and responsibility to their audience and close the gap between consumers and creators of art.

As explained before, **Empty Mind** already explored the principles of agency, by giving the audience the responsibility of adding content to the virtual environment - the 3D emoji. A next step for us, is to develop Empty Mind as an MMO performance in VR, where multiple avatars walk around, interact and choose to alter the environment while engaging with the performer-avatar.

We are curious in researching and developing live virtual experiences, where the boundaries between the physical and virtual fade away and where live and virtual interaction will merge together.

#### **4. Is technology used in your work? If yes, in which ways, both in relation towards the performance space as well as to the audience (even in remote conditions)?**

For us, technology is inherent to the artistic experience. Current - and future – technological tools open up a wide range of artistic possibilities, experiences and concepts.

The technology itself often lacks the imagination of breaking out of existing frameworks, which often results in these digital twins. We aim to challenge - almost abuse even - the technology by creating unknown worlds, spaces and experiences that transcend the physical imagination. ‘Technology’ is a wonderful toolset to expand our known boundaries and to create what has not been imagined yet. Why should a virtual performance space of an exhibition hall look like the physical counterpart, condemned to physical laws? Why should an audience behave in a similar way as in a physical concert hall? Why should avatars sit down, shut up and applaud when a virtual performance is over? Why should an audience be reduced to an anonymous spectator behind a screen in a dark room, while they can easily be drawn into the live experience itself?

Technology can be the key to attract new audiences, to create new, hybrid art forms, to rethink and challenge our cultural traditions towards art and performance. But we should always treat technology as an augmentation of the humane and of humanity. Technology can make art more inclusive, more part of society and present-day life. Too often, big tech companies develop technological tools with only efficiency and monetary plans in mind. Artists on the other hand (should!) challenge that same technology to raise awareness and to create social experiences that expand our physically bound life.

#### **5. What does the process of co-creation mean in your idea of performance?**

All of our projects arise from a multidisciplinary co-creation process. **Equivalent multidisciplinary co-creation** within the digital arts includes both artistic and technical profiles, as well as technological tools, protocols, and methodologies. This allows us to work towards a unique (e)co-system within the digital arts scene. We include technical profiles in the brainstorm, development and creation process, since they bring their own view to the table. We don’t like the idea of ‘giving tasks’ to programmers - their knowledge and experience is as vital for the artistic development as our own creative perspective. For instance, the design of Empty Mind by the visual artist Max Schweder, influenced the entire construction of the performance.

With regards to digital live performances - in whatever format it will be - we aim to include our audience in a live co-creation situation. The research project ‘Framed’ within the research group Maxlab focuses on live digital drawing, with multiple people working on the same drawing at the same time. There is live

interaction with musicians, with the audience passing by and with other artists. The co-creation here happens on the spot.

In our performance *Empty Mind*, the main part of the co-creation process with programmers and designers happened during the development process, although the audience still has this 'agency aspect' during the live performance. They have authority in choosing the order of the different movements, by placing their mouse on their preferred 3D-object during the menu scene. With the help of a heat map, we can see on the spot which 3D-object is the most popular and which corresponding movement will be played next. The audience is thus part, responsible even, of the musical and visual narrative of the performance.

With another project, *DISSOLUTION*, a project we started with [studio.POC](#) in January and that will run for 3 years in collaboration and co-creation with Corda Campus and Studio Plankton, the live co-creation aspect by the audience will be the complete destruction of the artwork. We research the definition and consequences of digital waste: Our life in the cloud seems less bound by restrictions than the finite life in which we are dependent on our own bodies, living conditions, decisions of others, etc.

But what are the consequences of these virtual excesses? What digital traces do we leave behind? Countless amounts of storage space are taken up by zombie profiles and inactive virtual rooms. The mass of virtual space clutter is almost as incomprehensible as the (un)boundlessness of the universe itself.

We decided to not contribute another deserted virtual room to the virtual cloud once the live performances are over. Instead, we will destroy the room bit by bit, and the audience will have a big responsibility in that process.

**6. Co-creation, as an umbrella term, can include experiences in a variable modality, duration and with different audiences (professionals and non-professionals). Which is your approach and why?**

Our co-creation process really depends on the project. For *Empty Mind* we worked within quite a large team of artists, programmers, and a professional motion design company. Every person or profile is an important link in the whole creation process, where we strive to enhance the audience's experience as well as the performer's experience as much as possible, from our different perspectives and knowhow.

We like collaborating with people from different sectors - also business and corporate - because we believe in this reciprocal relation between the arts, technology companies and the creative sector. Digital artists have as much an influence on the development of technology as technology is an inspiration source for creative people.

There is a challenge however in making performances digitally accessible. Not only in regard to hardware (mobile phones, desktop, etc...), but also in user

friendliness and user interaction. If we want our audience to become part of the live creation, it should be easy and intuitive for them to interact and engage. Technology companies or professionals do not always have this state of mind: they develop for a certain target audience, which is often very exclusionary. Therefore, a co-creation process between (digital) artists, programmers and corporate professionals will eventually also be beneficial for a commercial digital user as well. The refinement of user interaction is not only important for artistic experience and audience agency, but also as is as important for digital inclusion in our society.

### **7. Which are future perspectives or goals in the development of your co-creative process?**

We will continue refining our current goals: audience agency, multiplayer VR interaction, audience interaction with the virtual surroundings, other avatars and performers, the merging of physical and virtual boundaries and the development of different digital layers within artistic performances.

At the same time, we will keep building bridges between live audiences and virtual audiences, between live performers and - in the future - holographic performers and between the digital arts and businesses.

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