A Dance Epidemic, Once Again

A study of artistic practices that explore speculative presence and new performativities on contemporary digital platforms

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English translation, Neil CHARLTON.

Abstract

One of the fundamental values of live art — theatre, dance, performance, and so on — lies in the encounter, the co-presence of a group of people in the same here and now. In contrast, digital spaces and social media are often seen as paradigms of disembodiment. But is this really so? This article proposes a review of performative gestures and interventions by artists in online user cultures as "speculative presences".

A co-presence effect can arise when an effect of shared space and time is created. However, speculative presence seems to be a specific effect of digital platforms that emerges in the complex panorama of technological mediatization created by social media and other digital infrastructures.

By analysing various artistic strategies developed in the last decade, we suggest that — like a new "dance epidemic" spreading across platforms — speculative presence emerges and encourages new performative gestures of all kinds, original or repeated, simple and memetic, or complex and metadiscursive. Finally, we argue that, within such a diverse and irregular range of practices, some of these manifestations expand the very idea of the performative act by adapting to the rules and tempos of digital infrastructures and protocols.

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Introduction: ongoing research

This article presents reflections that emerge from a series of curating, producing and research activities on themes that Nil Martín observes from the field of performing arts and cultural communication, and Bani Brusadin from his practical and theoretical experience in the field of visual arts and critical technology studies. This study is a testimony to transformations that are still ongoing and, possibly, due to the very nature of the subject, under permanent construction. We propose the fusion of different perspectives and proximity to the practices studied as a strategy to respond to the need not only to document but also support these creative practices and artistic methods (Fuller, 2008) that are the object of this study. With this in mind, our reflection also has two specific objectives: to observe historical and conceptual vectors between projects from apparently different disciplines and to lend legitimacy to an emerging panorama of experimental practices, with the hope of contributing to their recognition and growth.

A tentative idea: speculative presence

When we talk about live art in digital media, it is inevitable to face the dilemma of the ontological definition of *live art* in relation to technological mediatization. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1996), and also more recent researchers such as Peggy Phelan (1993), define theatre as an art of direct confrontation with the spectator; that is, without a medium. This thesis is challenged by advocates of technological mediatization such as Philip Auslander (2008: 3), who opposes "reductive binary opposition of the live and the mediatized," as well as the fact that mediatized live artistic works are considered "artificial reproductions of the real". Going one step further, mediatization not only does not have to be an obstacle to performative representation, but can *itself* be performative. The medium of transmission itself *produces* and *creates* and *is part* of the message.

Today we will use the tentative idea of *speculative presence* as an instrument to talk about certain creative phenomena (individual and collective; intentional and involuntary) that play with the limits between bodies and shared time and space through the mediatization of social media and other digital platforms. We will approach this concept from four aspects, which touch on and intersect with each other: space, the collective body, the unnatural, and performing the platform.

Co-presence

The notion of co-presence has been a classic motif of remote art since the first telepresence experiments in the 1980s and 1990s. This concept has been profoundly transformed by the growth of algorithmic factories (data systems, social media, surveillance capitalism, etc.), especially since the early 21st century. This phenomenon was accelerated during the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-2023), with a restructuring of intimacy, and economic and emotional precariousness, among other aspects.

A classic example – and still valid, despite the profound evolution of technological mediatization in the last fifteen years – is Natalie Bookchin's series of projects, which includes *Long Story Short, My Meds* and *Mass Ornament*, and which explored, between 2009 and 2016, the possibilities of co-ordination between individuals through networks and the visualisation of the transformation of the notion of intimacy and social bonds.

Bookchin's projects are particularly relevant in this context because they explore research and formalisation strategies that combine ethnographic study with memory and the "out-of-time" activation of indigenous forms of collective performative intervention. This approach offers an innovative perspective on how contemporary social dynamics can be analysed and represented. We will return to this issue later and highlight specific examples that enrich this perspective.
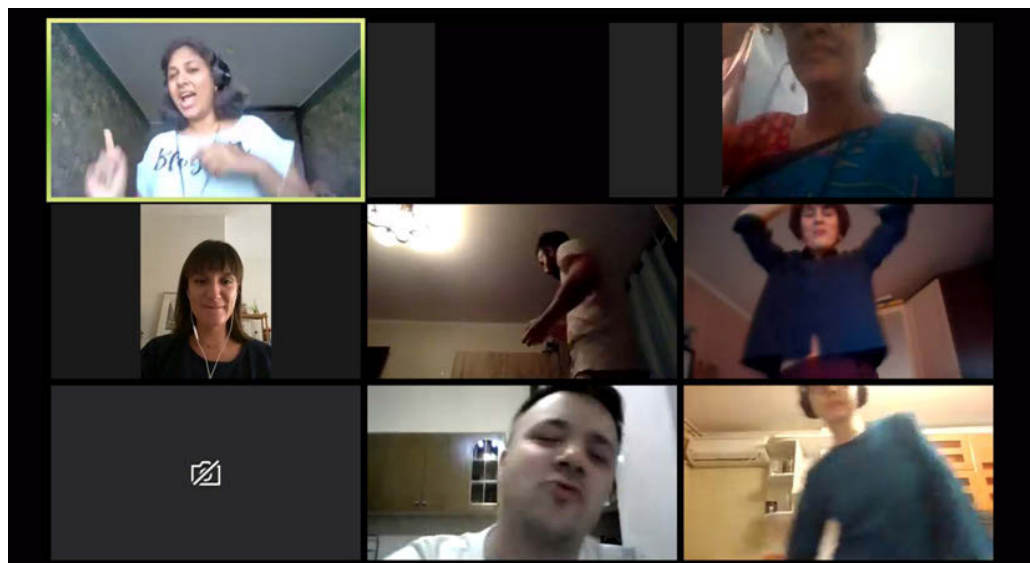
Rimini Protokoll. *Call Cutta at Home* (2020).

Another paradigmatic case of the artistic use of co-presence through technological and digital media is that of the *Call Cutta* trilogy (2005-2020), by Rimini Protokoll: from the idea of co-presence through a telephone call (*Call Cutta*, 2005), we move on to the integration of interactive elements (*Call Cutta in a Box*, 2008) or, in the last part, to the use of the webcam and videoconferencing platforms, so widespread during the pandemic (*Call Cutta at Home*, 2020). European participants communicate, by telephone or video call, with workers at a call centre in Calcutta, India. Through a series of technological and performative premises and devices, they are invited to discover the spaces of the other through their gaze. Many of the participants in the different pieces of the trilogy claimed to feel "very close" to the other, despite the 10,000 km that separated them (Widmann, 2009). In a way, both spaces converged, creating an effect of co-presence. In *Call Cutta*, distancing and technological mediatization do not prevent the theatrical work, but, in this case, *are* the work; without these conditions, the dramatic and vivid effect that the piece achieves would not be possible. In the words of Kara McKechnie (2010: 75), Rimini Protokoll's pieces become representation because they are mediatized and situated in a theatrical context.

The collective body

The dance epidemic, a phenomenon of collective and hard to explain choreomania that occurred in 16th-century Europe (Martínez, 2019), finds its contemporary reflection in the phenomenon of viralization and propagation of movement on TikTok.[1] Cover dances, first on YouTube, and now the dance trends on the TikTok platform (formerly Musical.ly) make the performative gesture, multiplied and transmissible, jump from one body to another just as a meme does, a minimum unit of information that spreads "leaping from brain to brain", according to the founding definition of Richard Dawkins (1976). This propagation of movements, reproduced and reincarnated again and again, which has been taken up by artists and curators such as Nina Davies (2022) or Estela Ortiz (2020), leads us to the idea of a collective body, created from the sum of bodies and movements in synchrony and communication on the net.

The study of platforms such as TikTok presents several methodological and conceptual challenges that need to be considered. One of the main methodological challenges is the documentation of ephemeral materials, often filtered by algorithms, that characterise the dynamics of the platform.[2] These materials are poor in terms of durability and depth, and are marked by a constant process of accumulation and repetition. This creates problems when constructing a collective memory, since the ephemeral nature of the

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1. Jenkins, Ford and Green explore the differences between the propagation and viralization of content in *Cultura Transmedia* (2015), a classic essay in the field of communication and media.

2. The methodological issues of studying user cultures in the era of major platforms have been addressed by numerous academic, para-academic and artistic researches focused initially on digital folklore or digital methods and then on more specific aspects that it is impossible for us to summarise here. On TikTok, specifically, we have found the approaches of the group The Hmm (2020) and De Seta (2024) particularly interesting.

contents makes it difficult to maintain a timeline or a coherent view of the entire activity on the platform.

In addition to these methodological challenges, a conceptual challenge emerges that involves the tension between two models of content creation. On the one hand, individual content creators, who create materials in order to monetise them, and, on the other, the mimetic or memetic gesture, characterised by collective production and diffuse authorship, where content is repeated and transformed into propagable patterns. This dynamic is altered by the conditions imposed by algorithms, which regulate monetisation differently depending on each platform.

We cannot speak of a collective body without taking into account the powerful reality of the platforms where this epidemic of performativity develops. On the commercial platforms that we know and that have dominated the last fifteen years of the internet, there is a standard process of value creation based on a separation between creators and audience; that is, to make a controlled number of content creators emerge as individual originators, capable of developing engagement, in other words, interaction with the contents and communicative involvement. Although this supposed involvement requires the active intervention of users based on phenomena such as memetic imitation, it is fundamentally a process of capturing attention that produces a centripetal tendency (centralised by the platforms) that goes against the centrifugal dynamics of the collective body as we conceive it.

The unnatural presence

To mask the extractive process of intelligence in contemporary social media, its interfaces produce a sense of inexhaustible accumulation. The distancing of the content that "our" feed presents us with is just one of the capture strategies we discussed. Our attention is demanded, but the majority of users enjoy it the least: we look, we scroll, perhaps we get involved by forwarding what catches our attention the most, and we move on, without creating a profound memory of this experience. With this qualitative analysis, inspired by the method of the artists themselves, we propose to stop and reverse this semi-automatic process and put the focus on some ephemeral trends. This is the case of the passing fashion of NPCs (non-playable characters), in video games, figures necessary to develop the scenario and narrative of the game. Although video games are being developed in which some of these passive characters are controlled and dynamically created by artificial intelligence (AI) systems, usually, in the most common games of recent years, NPCs play a merely functional and decorative role, with simple, standardised and economical movements in terms of processor use. For a period of time, recreations of NPC corporealities became particularly popular on platforms such as TikTok (Park, 2023). The goal of developing this unnatural corporeality can be monetisation through distancing and exposure of the body (often female), as is the case of the Canadian streamer Fedha Sinon, better known as Pinkydoll. However, this same process of self-exhibition and exploitation also illustrates the unprecedented potential of gestures and movements to
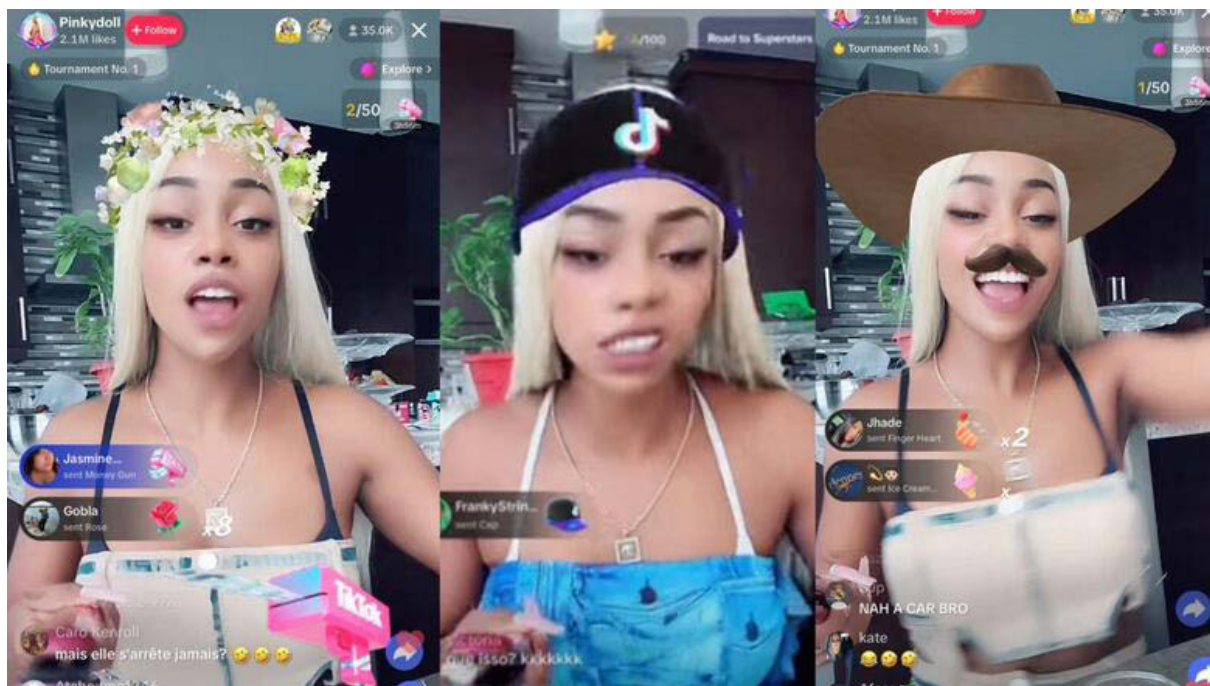
Video captures from Pinkydoll (Fedha Sinon) on TikTok.

accelerate and amplify collective dynamics that endless scrolling hides and naturalises. Of course, NPC corporealities can be explored on and off screen for more artistic or even ironic purposes, as do the Polish dancing couple Nicki and Loczek, better known on TikTok as Loczniki. But Pinkydoll herself, with all the aesthetic and political contradictions that her activities entail, is an example of an unnatural performative act that does not require any irony or critical distance.

In the case of NPCs, the body ceases to be "natural" and becomes uncanny or monstrous, taking us to that strange line that has often been referred to as the uncanny valley (Mori [*et al.*], 2012). The unnatural body opens us to a way of being "not so human," which challenges established notions of the normality of bodies, and allows us to discover other ways of becoming community through the use of the body.

Choreographer Núria Guiu, for example, has brought TikTok's unnatural and virtual bodies not only to theatres, but also to public spaces, with the project *Cyberexorcisme* (2021-), a dance show with a stage version and a site-specific version designed for unconventional spaces. A similar approach is that of Nina Davies in the piece *Bionic Step* (2022). Both Guiu and Davies champion a hybrid body, without any nostalgia for the organic and mimetic movements of nature. In fact, we have always been beings mixed with technology, and the incoherent, absurd and unnatural gestures of the thousands of performers on the networks — spontaneous or monetised — open up new possibilities for understanding the evolutionary process of our bodily imagination and, perhaps, even cause changes in rhythm — accelerations, slowdowns, distortions — that can question the relationships of material and cultural power in current corporate networks.

Núria Guiu Sagarra. *Cyberexorcisme - site specific* (2022).

Performing the platform

The abstract body of TikTokers, the distorted time of their short videos, or the gestures that come not only from a screen but also from the context, take us towards another perspective in which the presumed unnaturalness actually consists of the possible collaboration between the bodies of users, the material or conceptual gestures of artists and the logic itself of the techno-political operation of the platforms. This dynamic takes us into anomalous practices of artists (and sometimes, also, of ordinary users) who "make the platform perform"; that is, who interact in an unusual or spurious way with the operating principles of its interface, with the social habits of its users and communities or, even, with the design of the platform's infrastructure itself, influencing the distribution of the circulation of content and the control of relationships between users.

When we talk about *performing the platform*, we do not mean a theatrical performance of these issues, but rather to the effort of inhabiting the planetary-scale computing systems and their interfaces (Flender, 2019; Brusadin, 2021). Through bodies, their footprints, their doubles and their ghosts, light is shed on technological frameworks, the coordinates of which are usually opaque.

There are gestures that function as mirrors of digital platforms and break the effect of transparency and technical efficiency that these platforms project. This performativity often begins with simple, everyday actions such as selling an object online. What do people do to upload a photo of a mirror

Unknown (collected by Eric Oglander).
Craiglists Mirrors (2014-2016).

(real, not metaphorical) without their body appearing in it? What does this involuntary microperformance reveal about the platform itself? In this simple example — immortalised in projects like Eric Oglander's *Craiglists Mirrors* (2014-2016) — context is transformed into content, and the very process of interacting with platforms that are both technical and social opens a crack in everything that the commercial network wants to hide, because it is not functional for the primary objective of capitalising on engagement and individual promotion. It is not attractive, standard, normative, exploitable.

Other mirrors show us how "making the platform perform" can acquire unprecedented conceptual depth. With the series *The Phantom of the Mirror* (2013-) the artist Mario Santamaría collects images of visits by Google's robot cameras to historical spaces, such as the Palais Garnier in Paris or the Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna. These visits would be completely hidden behind the smooth interface of Google Earth if it were not for the fact that, from time to time, in museums or historical noble residences the camera finds itself in front of a mirror that captures the same strange and futuristic device that the company uses to automate the process. These cases of robotic self-performance break the other performance, that of the regular and apparently objective representation of the world, while the artist's intentionality makes visible the existence of automatic observation processes that no longer require the human gaze and that create new visualities.

Another way of performing the platform involves subverting its uses or adding political implications to it. This is the case of *Palestinder*, an aesthetic-political intervention that emerged in Palestine in 2014, which consists of using dating apps like Tinder to explore how the lives and rights of Palestinians are perceived in a context of conflict. A group of users from the Palestinian territories flirted with other users on the other side of the border, and the conversations developed between users were clear signs of prejudice and racism that revealed the deep injustices in the region and the everyday dimensions of violence. This experiment was documented in real

A conversation on Tinder,
part of the *Palestinder* project (2014).

time through a blog on Tumblr. We mention the *Palestinder* case for its historical and political relevance, but similar cases have occurred on many occasions, including the intentional use of social platforms by activist groups in Ukraine, who have used Tinder as an open-source intelligence tool (OSI) to create familiarity with Russian soldiers deployed on Ukrainian territory and obtain information from them that could be used in the defence of the country (Bielskyte, 2022).

In some cases, the platform is not just a collaborator, but an accomplice or protagonist of the performance. With the project *Google Maps Hacks* (2020), Simon Weckert spent some time walking through the quiet streets of his city while transporting 99 second-hand mobile phones in a handcart. With all the phones with the app open and GPS activated, he managed to make a street marked on Google Maps as green (decongested) turn red (congested), which modified the behaviour of users who, trusting the app's recommendations, redirected their cars to other routes to avoid traffic jams. As if it were a jujitsu move or a guerrilla tactic, Weckert used the same force of the platform against himself.

These kinds of interventions are political, and play with the materiality of digital infrastructures, but at the same time, open up the possibility of poetic gestures with the involuntary creative collaboration of platforms as hybrid, technological and social artifacts. David Horvitz, with *Public Access* (2011), uploaded landscape photos to Wikipedia entries for the relevant locations — unpopular California beaches where the artist often walks — adding new images or replacing existing ones. The new images represented the places objectively and coherently with the platform's guidelines, but with one particularity: he appeared in all the images, even if it was in a very

distant shot, as an absolutely secondary detail, often as the silhouette of a person with his back to the ocean. This action provoked debate among the Wikipedia community, as the moderators, unwitting actors in the performance, did not understand who the person in the photos was or why he was doing what he was doing. They debated, visibly according to the rules of the platform itself, whether it could be considered an act of self-promotion, and, ultimately, almost all of the original photos were deleted as acts of "vandalism", and Horvitz's access to Wikipedia was restricted. Horvitz did not seek to denounce or criticise Wikipedia, but rather to expand his creative exploration — very influential and widely recognised in the world of visual arts — of moments of poetic rupture into everyday spaces, in this case suggesting that even a platform like Wikipedia could be a space for imagination, and its moderators, dance partners in an unusual choreography. Unexpectedly for Horvitz himself, the moderators themselves took on a problematic role that added a new layer to the intervention, revealing other kinds of performativity implicit in the platform's design and impact.

A more ethically complex example is the performance by Eva and Franco Mattes *BEFNOED* (2013-). An acronym for *By Everyone, For No One, Every Day*, it is an artistic and provocative approach to the world of micro-jobs and at the same time to the communities considered marginal on the internet around the world. The performance consisted of contracting, through crowdsourcing platforms, anonymous workers, without explaining to them that they would participate in an artistic work. They were given instructions to film themselves carrying out such absurd tasks as tying a fish with duct tape to their waist and giving it a drink, licking a car wheel or waving at the camera with a bucket on their head. The people involved were then required to upload the images to their social media and send screenshots to the artists. Their identities, locations and motivations remain unknown to the audience viewing the resulting videos on the artists' Tumblr or in galleries and museums. *BEFNOED* explores involuntary or semi-accidental performativity on several levels. This type of strange (or even morbid) behaviour paradoxically illustrates two contradictory aspects: on the one hand, the complexity of new processes of labour and geopolitical exploitation; on the other, the lost potential of the net as an irregular and diverse performative space, where the capacity to connect without mediatization and filters creates alliances and discoveries, surprises and collaborations, which now survive as empty and monetised phenomena, or isolated in subcultural communities.

There are many other subtly problematic ways to choreograph infrastructures. We would like to mention just one that is particularly relevant for the apparent simplicity with which it addresses the complex issue of artificial intelligence. In 2019, artist Lauren McCarthy designed the installation *Waking Agents*, a welcoming and immersive space where she invited visitors to lie down on large mattresses and take a nap with the help and assistance of a "smart pillow", which acted as a guide, supporting and caring for the user as they swung between consciousness and unconsciousness. However, the pillows did not actually feature any AI, rather each of them was controlled by a worker contracted by the artist on another continent. Her job consisted
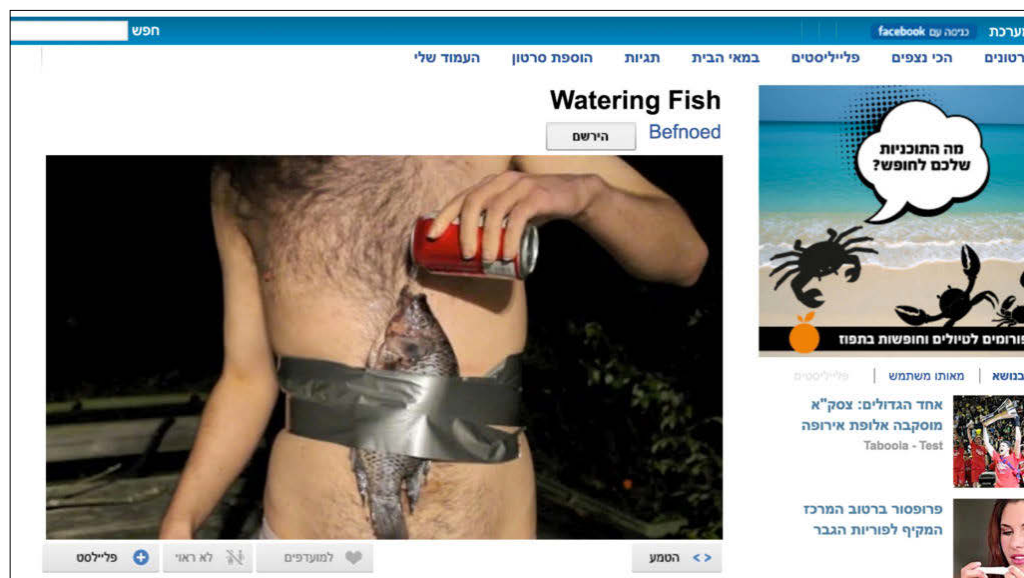
A person carries out a strange instruction for *BEFNOED* (2013-).

of impersonating an intelligent assistant, performing according to the codes and communication mechanisms of an AI. Seduction and deception are key elements of this performance, both uncomfortable and visionary: what aspects of AI require intense work that is impossible to automate? What social inequalities does it reflect and reinforce? Do automation processes diminish human complexity? Or do the capitalist design of working modes and mindfulness tempos, which are already forms of simplification and reduction of diversity, do so?

A post-digital body: Live Action Role Play (LARP) and Real Game Play (RGP)

At the end of our journey, we would like to hint at the possibility of going beyond our role as (more or less obedient) users and imagining the existence of hybrid forms of life and other speculative performative communities. Here, unnatural bodies and platforms as involuntary choreographies are some of the ingredients of a new ambiguous corporeality that we could define as post-digital, as a vehicle for anxieties caused by the contamination of experiences and logics that definitively erase the distinction between online and offline.[3]

Our journey ends somewhat as it began, returning to co-presence, but from a completely different perspective, away from webcams and video conference windows. We refer the co-present bodies of Live Action Role Play (LARP), a playful, artistic and even social approach that the Berlin collective Omsk Social Club has investigated with projects such as *Unrealism* (2020). The project reflects on concepts such as global connectivity, the lack of

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3.   On the notion of post-digital, the creative practices that brought it into vogue from 2008 to 2015 and its aesthetic and technopolitical consequences, we highlight in particular Kholeif (ed.), 2013; Cramer, 2014; Bishop [*et al.*] (eds.), 2016; Contreras-Koterbay and Mirocha, 2016; Cramer and Jandrić, 2021; Dewdney and Sluis, 2022.

singularity in digital environments, posthumanism, online life as a "cosmic depression" or the omnipresence of representation: "cosmic depression" (Omsk Social Club, 2020b).

Omsk works with what it calls Real Game Play (RGP). Within the world of role-playing games (RPG) — games in which participants adopt a role or character — there are live action role-playing games (LARP), in which participants embody and act out, physically and in real time, the actions of their characters. Omsk created the concept of RGP, which could be defined as a mixture of LARP and the participant's own identity or experience, a meta-structure composed of the player's self and the character they embody. A multimodal approach to exploring virtual reality. The aim of RGP is for participants to have unique and incomparable experiences, and for the game to mark them enough so that they emerge from the experience modified (Omsk Social Club, 2020b: 3, and Omsk Social Club, 2020c).

Unrealism is an RGP that is built with the participants. The dramaturgy is driven by Eastyn Agrippa, a non-binary, polyamorous, radical anarchist and fluid character in all aspects, who decides to live for fifty-six days online, using physical space only to exist, as a place where their body can reside while the person lives entirely online (Omsk Social Club, 2020c). Embodied by different people throughout the project, Agrippa settles in a room, in the Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien gallery, and creates around them a gamified experience open to any user, since this base or backend of users/viewers is what makes the experience, effectively, "lived" (Omsk Social Club, 2020b).

Participants can get in touch with Agrippa and each other through LARP, and embody characters (such as Agrippa's mother, a friend, their mentor, etc.) through social media such as Instagram, Twitter or Discord, as well as buying virtual tokens from Agrippa on the web.

At the same time, by constituting a metastructure between the character and the self of each participant, the experience becomes incorporeal and, paradoxically, at the same time, eminently embodied, which dismantles the Cartesian idea of mind-body division. Furthermore, it is an ephemeral, living and performative experience, which connects us very much with the attributes of live art.

For art critic Michael Fried, being present, rather than being in the same place or at the same time, is about engaging. Fried sees presence as "the special complicity that the work extorts from the beholder. Something is said to have presence when it demands that the beholder take into account, that he take it seriously" (Dixon, 2007: 134). On the website, Omsk stresses the need for engagement in its proposals: "Please remember that these works are very fragile and require collective participation to work. They will not work just for you, you have to give yourself to them and they will give you a return" (Omsk Social Club, 2020a).

Consensual realities, such as the one produced in *Unrealism*, are the result of narrative frames or collective hallucinations. In fact, this dissolution of personal identity, a kind of antidote to the hypersensitive subjectivity of the precarious body, mixes elements of rave culture, a certain post-digital sensibility and the rules of LARP, here converted into *Real Game Play*. It is
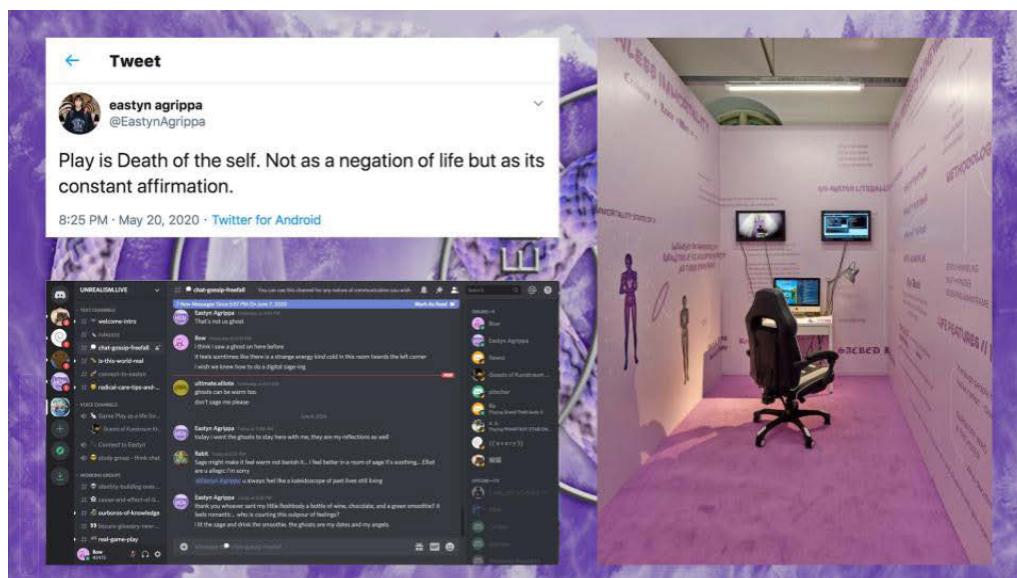
Twitter (now X), Discord or an art gallery are some of the tangible and intangible spaces where *Unrealism* (2020), Omsk Social Club, takes place.

along these lines that Omsk's experimental work seems to be a strategy to assert the need to recover the capacity for action in the face of the collective distraction of propaganda or the great capitalist role-playing game.

Once again, then, the platform becomes central to the performative act. Not only as a playground or dance floor, but as a dance partner or even the protagonist of this collective dance between users and platforms. The subversion of the logics of presence — in its most literal sense — expands performativity towards a scenario where the human body is not necessarily the main protagonist and the *here* and *now* acquire new dimensions. This exploration of other scales seems fundamental to us, not only as an evolution of the performative arts, but as an opportunity to imagine new creative communities and establish an emancipatory and transformative relationship with digital technological infrastructures.

Conclusions: bodies, scales, relations (there's a lot of dancing to do)

Our collection of projects and practices shows that digital mediatization is not only not an obstacle to performative practices, but can actually give rise to unprecedented phenomena that would be unthinkable without it. The *speculative presence* we have referred to does not replace, and even less try to imitate, the analogue presence linked to the more traditional notion of live art. It is another space for exploration, both for artists and for all kinds of creative agents or users. At the same time, it is also worth observing the materiality of the contexts in which these manifestations occur: as we have previously announced, the platforms where most of these cases take place are driven by commercial interests and very specific political, ideological or economic values.

And yet, it is in this network, located in a specific historical space and time, where we find the possibility of this collective body, where everything

is propagable, albeit volatile, where the authorial logics of the market are disseminated, and where there is room for new forms of corporeality, radically contemporary. Less natural and often hybrid bodily expressions, where the notion of body is shared with complex bodies that are not exclusively organic and not necessarily on the scale of the individual human body. Where the platform acts as a non-body body capable of performing by itself or of being performed, danced, by any user, consciously or unconsciously.

In this ecosystem, a space is opened for art to create fissures, ironies, critical or poetic expressions, which put the focus on the mechanisms of power and the forms of representation of digital platforms. In this context, what seems playful, as is the case of Real Game Play, actually establishes new unstable grammars of relationship and creation of a common narrative, within the framework of a new fragment of shared consensual reality.

The practices studied in this article are just one sample of a continuum of manifestations that occur further and faster — and more disorderly — than a comprehensive and rationally organised archive could encompass. In this changing context, we advocate for cross-disciplinary research approaches, and even outside disciplines, that combine different perspectives and methodologies, academic or non-academic, and that are in direct and deep connection, not only with conceptual analysis but with artistic practice.

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