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ESSAY

Navigating in the multiverse: Possibilities and limitations of creative practices in online environments

[version 1; peer review: 2 approved with reservations]

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Abstract

Currently, and especially since the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase of online concerts, talks and even artist residencies. There has also been a development of webstreaming sound studios and online interactive platforms that accommodate art works. Moreover, museums and galleries offer virtual tours to their exhibitions. All this is part of a promise of widening access to cultural, educational and creative opportunities and a suggestion to escape from the limitations and boundaries of time and physical distance.

Nonetheless, creative practitioners, curators and art aficionados are urgently compelled to critically analyse, doubt and challenge this promise of limitless possibilities that the online world is offering. In this era of digital information, what expectations does a virtual artwork raise? What is its utilitarian purpose and social value? How do the disembodiment and technological displacement of human beings shape and affect their cultural and communal bonding?

To find some answers or, rather, to extend these questions, I will reflect on my artistic practice and experience of creating works that are available on online platforms and controlled with the use of digital interactive tools. A primary analytical tool will be the phenomenological concept of the lived body as well as socio-anthropological arguments about time and materiality. My aim is not to create a fixed and dogmatic theory but to negotiate what role, if any, artistic practice can have in the virtual world.

Keywords

creativity, embodiment, interactivity, ritual

Open Peer Review

Approval Status ? ?

	1	2
version 1 29 Feb 2024	? view	? view

1. **Eirini Sifaki**, University of Thessaly, Thessaly, Greece

2. **João Pedro Amorim**, Universidade Catolica Portuguesa, Porto, Portugal

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Introduction

Examining the Internet, back at the end of the 20th century, when the World Wide Web was growing in phenomenal speed, author and cyber-guru Erik Davis observed that "detached from a common vision of public space and shared intellectual culture, online society becomes a hive of […] virtual communities made up of solitary souls"[1]. He also added that we inhabit not a universe but a multiverse in which it is difficult, if not dangerous to navigate[2]. And, truly, the online environment is full of fake news, bot accounts, cyberattacks and customized advertisements. Admittedly, the internet became from a place for open thought and exchange, to a forum for malice and cruel judgement. It is thus reasonable to question: where is the relationality, the intensity, the agency of the Internet in our activities as creative beings? In addition, would it be wrong to claim that the Internet's early promises of interactivity, of artists reaching wider audiences, of democratization of public speech have, at least to an extent, failed to deliver?

Arguably, the virtual world allows humans to escape the boundaries of time and space. However, is it really an escape, a liberation? Or, maybe, the sense of time and space is not extended but threatened? In his book *The Tyranny of the Moment*, Norwegian anthropologist Tomas Hylland Eriksen argues that human sense of "here and now" is in fact threatened. Time nowadays is extremely fragmented and attention, from other people on the Internet, is the most valuable resource today[3]. Already in 1994, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman had pointed out that something important today disappears without a trace tomorrow. Furthermore, Bauman strongly believes that the world we live in has lost its sense of continuity and unity. This discontinuity leads also to a loss of a meaningful whole[4]. And indeed, the way digital platforms are designed, it seems that things appear out of nowhere and disappear into nothing.

Focusing on culture, it presents itself as a collection of fragments and episodes that must have maximum impact and be instantly obsolete. Art is creating a temporal reality – not a continuous one which a community can collectively identify and understand. Back in the 90s, Bauman concluded, perhaps pessimistically, that human beings are no longer pilgrims-through-time but tourists-through-time[5]. As pilgrims-through-time, humans had a trajectory, a steady identity, an aim and a destination. In contrast, the tourist-in-time makes no attachments or commitments. People, things, and events are relevant and significant only as long as they serve their very temporary purpose. Inevitably, critical questions emerge: when artists upload a work, should they try to squeeze meaning in tiny fragments of time? Or should they perhaps challenge the notorious 15-second attention span and how would that be possible?

To focus on the human body, an online presence can be described as tele-presence. A plurality of presences, being in multiple parts of the world simultaneously, existing beyond the limits of the physical body. Nevertheless, human beings still have a body. Here I can draw a link to Merleau-Ponty and phenomenology. The main idea of this philosophical school is that the way of experiencing the world is embodied. Merleau-Ponty talked about what he called the lived body. For him, the body should be at the centre of human experience and understanding of the relationships with the wider ecological content that humans are immersed in. The lived body is also the means to develop sensitivity towards other people[6].

The value of being present is fundamental in creative practices. Examining a visit to a museum or a gallery from a phenomenological perspective, the experience is indeed embodied. It is not simply looking at an artwork. Instead, the visitors walk into a building, they look around and observe, they sense the atmosphere, they listen – whispers of other visitors, footsteps, a door slamming. The entire body participates in those experiences, it opens a dialogue with the exhibited works. Going to a museum involves all senses, holistically. It is not only an intellectual activity, not solely a visual stimulation, it goes beyond listening to an environment. It is a combination of all. In the end, one can notice how human bodies have the same fixed posture when they are online shopping, or chatting, or lecturing, or participating in a conference. Ultimately, it is the experience of a multi-sensory engagement of being-in-the-world that defines what it means to be human, "the lived-event itself, the intensities of the dirt, noise, and sweat of life, not the rationalized pure signal of its digital record"[7]. So, an urgent question emerges: is it possible to have an embodied, multi-sensory and holistic experience with online art? And, moreimportantly, what would be the purpose?

Because, arguably, the purpose of online art is art itself. I can take it a bit further and claim that the focus today is on the production of demand, rather than content. What is now a main point of interest is what social theorist Jacques Attali called the "spectacle of oneself"[8]; that is the ultimate functionality. As people consume information, they have an increasingly personal responsibility of how they engage with art. It is becoming a very solipsistic activity; they have become Davis's solitary souls. It is, therefore, reasonable to ask: Does this situation allow contact and communication within a community – if there is still one remaining?

To enable function and purpose and a sense of community, human beings need ritual. Musicologist Christopher Small claims that ritual is the mother of all arts[9]. Art is shaped into form, via ritual. Without ritual there is no art. Ritual is by default a participatory activity. Hence, a relationship with an artwork that is not participatory, turns ritual into a spectacle, an observation of a dead object. In extension, ritual not only provides a meaning in art making, but it also stimulates social connections and a wider understanding of the world in a collective way. So, how can human beings collectively ritualise while physically isolated in the virtual world?

To finish, I am asking these questions as a practitioner who is trying to understand how artists can find meaning to what they do. Currently, it appears that artistic value is mainly quantified by the numbers of clicks, views, plays, followers and so on. Artists are encouraged to use platforms that are totally out of their control but must keep feeding them with

content – their creative work, together with details about their personal lives. I consider this limiting, despite seemingly being the opposite. For example, an audiovisual work uploaded on YouTube will take its place next to funny cat videos and football game highlights, mixed with pop-up personalized advertisements. Online platforms and social media essentially force their users to keep uploading material with the aim of remaining relevant and continuing to attract the attention of other users. In other words, when art goes online the request is for quantity rather than quality.

Ultimately, I argue that these are complex times that demand complex thoughts and conversations – and those, in turn, demand the very time and space that seems nowhere to be found. It is critical to highlight the difference between connections or networking, a fundamental aim of digital communication, and relationships that are formed and developed via rituals[10]. It is thus essential to rediscover the value of embodied togetherness, the importance of collective gatherings for a concert, a soundwalk, a conference, a theatre play, and a meeting. This will increase the communal impact of creative practices and also help to formulate and explore wider social contexts.

Ethical statement

Ethical approval and consent were not required for this study.

Data availability

No data are associated with this article.

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Reference Source

Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ? ?

Version 1

Reviewer Report 22 May 2024

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The essay outlines an appropriate and interesting theoretical framework – one that I am currently very interested in pursuing myself. While some doubts might be raised by the lack of discussion with which the author presents their arguments, overall the theoretical build-up is appropriate to the scope of an article. As an example of those doubts, a presentation of Bauman's critique would have merited a problematization of the notions of continuity and unity, as these have been fundamentally challenged by Nietzsche, and later by Deleuze and Guattari [Ref 1]. In contemporaneity, Claire Bishop[Ref 3] has been challenging the ongoing critique of the fragmentation of attention, as she claims – borrowing from Jonathan Crary [Ref 2]– that the construction of attention was a disciplinary and instrumental endeavor and, therefore, the fact that a new regime of attention is fragmentary and discontinuous shouldn't be taken as inherently negative. Nevertheless, the theoretical background of the essay is solid and, despite its lack of problematization, it is a very interesting background for the development of original research and/or discussion.

The most serious problem with this article is that it never offers what it promises in the abstract: they never reflect on their artistic practice, they present but never discuss the online environments where art would be presented. Being this the most significant part of the essay, the one where some originality could be found, it must be further developed, discussed, problematized, even if on a first-person basis.

Other minor, but significant, issues would be the lack of coherence in the use of concepts. That is the case of the "multiverse" that appears in the title, that is only briefly mentioned in the article.

Overall, I believe the article deserves to be further developed in order to be a valuable contribution to its academic field. As someone that is studying these issues at the moment, I read it with great interest and I am hoping the author can develop it, as it could benefit the whole field. Artists and curators are still trying to understand how to create and present work on digital platforms, and a deeper reflection by the author could be an important contribution to the field.

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Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?
Yes

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?
Partly

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: image theory; critical theory; contemporary artistic practices

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 30 April 2024

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Eirini Sifaki
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The topic of the essay is very current and relevant. However, the references used are not always adequate to support the arguments.
The introduction presents a vague argumentation for the paper which could be improved with a more clearly articulated problem statement and research questions.
The paper needs to explain more clearly and in enough depth the approach of the study. The methods (or the material used) should be adequately specified and described, and show how the analysis will provide the answers to the questions.
The discussion is reasonably well laid out. However, it would be useful if the content was presented in separate sections that would help the reader see the connections between the work

and the literature more clearly. Additionally, I would encourage the author to more fully illuminate his analysis process by providing more solid argumentation and examples from music artist's online communities which can provide counter-experiences and discourses regarding social context or even embodiment. During the pandemic there were phenomenal advances through virtual concerts, livestreamings and recent research suggests that people can connect socially and emotionally in virtual environments.
In general, there is much opinion and generalised 'truths' and no solid argumentation, or logical progression of an argument.
The author has clearly the enthusiasm and capability to progress the work, but needs to dig deeper into the body of knowledge.

Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?
Partly

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?
Partly

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
No

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Cultural theory, visual culture, film studies

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.