

Apart, but Connected: Digital Performance as a Space of Collective Resonance

7061

Abstract

The intersection of analogue and digital mediums is reshaping artistic expression. This evolution was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, prompting artists to leverage advanced technologies to communicate their art and engage with audiences. In 2020, Francesca Fini presented "*s/confinamento*", a digital performance that utilized outdoor webcam movements to produce dynamic audiovisual content, fostering a bridge between audiences and the external environment. We conducted a comprehensive analysis of Fini's work, examining its innovative aspects and broader implications. After introducing 11 participants to the performance, we conducted follow-up interviews two years later to gauge their perceptions. Our findings revealed that the digital nature of the performance did not hinder, but rather enhanced, participants' emotional responses and sense of connection with others.

1. Introduction

Artistic expression has always been in flux, molded by the tools and mediums of its epoch. The recent digital technology boom has seamlessly integrated traditional analogue with modern digital mediums, transforming how artists convey their visions and how audiences interact. The COVID-19 pandemic amplified this transformation. Faced with physical distancing mandates, artists innovatively embraced advanced technologies to maintain their connection with audiences.

An example from this digital evolution is Francesca Fini's 2020 performance, "*s/confinamento*". Utilizing outdoor webcams in a novel manner, Fini curated a distinctive audiovisual journey, forging a touching link between confined audiences and the vibrant world beyond. Our study delves into this performance, aiming to unravel its pioneering components and broader significance. By presenting this to a varied audience and revisiting their impressions two years later, we seek to gauge the enduring influence of such digital artistry on its spectators.

2. Background

Artistic expression, intrinsically linked to the zeitgeist of its time, serves as both a reflection of and a response to prevailing societal norms and technological advancements. Historically, art forms evolved over centuries, capturing the essence of eras and anchoring them in time. However, in the realm of digital sciences, this evolution is dramatically accelerated, with significant shifts occurring within mere months or years. As artists integrate contemporary digital technologies into their work, they not only capture the present but also anticipate and shape future societal trajectories, offering glimpses into emerging paradigms.



Figure 1: *s/confinamento* - Francesca Fini

Francesca Fini's "*s/confinamento*" stands out against this backdrop. Its uniqueness stems not just from its integration of advanced digital mediums but also from its poignant response to the global context of social distancing. The performance, in essence, becomes a testament to the resilience of art and its ability to adapt and resonate even in challenging times.

2.1. Performance art and the digital era

Performance art, a term established in the late 1970s in the context of American experimental Art, involves live actions by the artist to engage with the audience. In the digital era, this form of expression has evolved to incorporate interactive technologies. Gold-

berg [Gol79] considers that artists have always used performance as a means of artistic expression - whether tribal rituals, Da Vinci's or Bernini's experiments, medieval religious plays, or others. Carlson [Car17] defines performance art by looking primarily at social science issues, pursuing a range of anthropological and ethnographic hypostases in culture and linguistic approaches that talk about the performativity of language. Schechner [Sch20] puts the process of searching for a possible definition more relevant than attempting to impose an (improbable) absolute result. This way he frees the constraints of disciplines such as music, dance, theatre, art history and others, making his approach as the foundation of performance studies, analysing artistic expression from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Building on this historical context, the digital era has introduced new challenges and opportunities for performance art. Dixon [Dix07] surveys the history of digital performance from emerging forms of participatory performance, to contemporary digital performance. Dixon enshrines the concept of interactive digital performance by taking each of these terms as independent, whereas in the other cases [Cha06], the established term for performances incorporating interactive digital technologies is intermediality. This refers to the blending of different media types in a single artistic expression.

2.2. COVID-19's impact on behaviour

Transitioning from the historical and digital evolution of performance art, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about unprecedented changes in societal behavior. We can thus assume that the COVID-19 lockdown was a unique social moment in which humans, technology and the digital space became increasingly inseparable. Interpersonal relationship perspectives also shifted as lockdowns reduced human interaction to flatten virus rates, damaging social and economic realms. The pandemic inspired new art, and many arts and culture providers began offering virtual activities (e.g., virtual museum tours), online organisations (e.g., internet book clubs), and streaming performances (e.g., concerts and plays). Many art forms became international cultural phenomena, with viral recordings of people singing from balconies and a jump in paint and wool purchases [tay20].

During Europe's lockdowns, live streams were important for artists and spectators. Before the pandemic, live streaming emphasized "traditional" live events [Hol10]. Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube became live streaming platforms as venues closed. The live experience changed and raised questions about how live-streamed concerts foster social resilience and solidarity [JBTh22]. Recent studies have shown that Instagram, Facebook and online gaming can encourage ritual-induced collectiveness [BM20], therefore we can consider that virtual music rituals illustrate how culture reacted to COVID-19 [JBTh22].

The arts enhance coping by helping people avoid stress (by supplying diversion), re-appraise difficulties (by providing time and space to problem solve), and boost their self-confidence so they can tackle obstacles [FGS*19].

The trans-medium, the reflective and metareferential forms of art fare particularly well in capturing people's anxieties and existential

panic, and can also serve as a mild form of slow-release therapy: the very awareness and discourse is likely a more important factor into overcoming livelihood barriers than one might initially believe.

3. Theoretical Analysis

In this section, we delve into a comprehensive analysis of the performance, highlighting key aspects that underscore the innovative approach of our case study.

3.1. s/confinamento - the poetics of a shared solitude

Francesca Fini, an interdisciplinary new media artist, has a keen focus on digital performance art. Her project "s/confinamento" [fra20], developed during the global lockdown in spring 2020, stands as a testament to her prowess. Described by the artist as a "networked digital performance for webcam and synth," this piece leverages publicly available online webcams showcasing renowned places in Italy. These once bustling spaces, now eerily silent and deserted, are transformed into soundscapes and graphic visualizations for quarantined viewers. The performances were streamed across various platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, from March to May 2020.

3.2. The performative reality-shift

The term "s/confinamento" can be aptly described as an interactive digital performance, given its alignment with the genre's characteristics. Francesca Fini, as an intermediary artist, employs digital media to craft a live interaction between the spontaneous movements of reality and computational processes. This interaction not only presents the digital medium as a canvas for the audience but also redefines performativity in the digital age. Performativity, in this context, refers to the capability of speech and communication to perform actions and construct realities, extending to the realm of digital performance. Drawing from Goldberg's definition [Gol79], the audience is privy to a live performance. By harnessing new technologies, Fini orchestrates a change in ritual, echoing Schechner's sentiments [Sch20]. The artist serves as a conduit, enabling viewers to immerse themselves in the external world via webcams, crafting a meta-realistic visual narrative, an artistic approach that transcends traditional realism by incorporating elements that challenge perceptions of reality.

3.3. The philosophy of technology perspective

From a philosophical standpoint, technology in this context acts as an extension of the viewer's visual perception, reminiscent of Kapp's [Kap77] musings on technology's relationship with humanity. Through her artwork, Fini facilitates an external perception unhindered by the constraints of isolation. This piece presents a multifaceted approach to the philosophy of technology: while public cameras primarily serve surveillance purposes, they are repurposed to offer liberation, allowing individuals to observe the open world. Yet, the interplay of images with the synthesizer and other visual elements challenges the viewer to critically assess technology's autonomy and its potential to self-generate data.



Figure 2: *s/confinamento*: Interaction Screenshot Selection

3.4. Cronotop factors

The term 'cronotop' refers to the interplay of space and time in a narrative setting. In the context of this performance, it involves elements like the space of performance, rhythm, and repetition specificities.

3.4.1. Space

The performative space of the piece is defined by the artist's choice of social media platforms and is experienced by the audience within their personal confines, acutely aware of their isolation. This amalgamation of human and digital technology blurs the boundaries between the physical and virtual, resonating with Dixon's [Dix07] theories on cybernetics.

3.4.2. Rhythm and repetition specificities

The performance's rhythm aligns with a modified live stream of real-time images. Fini captures the altered reality of isolation, emphasizing the stillness and slower pace of the external world. As articulated by the artist, the sporadic movements in these spaces, whether of inanimate objects or humans, become narrative elements in a dystopian tale [fra20]. The interplay of movement and stillness, coupled with the element of repetition, evokes parallels with Tehching Hsieh's long-duration performances, particularly his concept of Doing Time [hsi20].

3.4.3. Interaction and intermediality

The graphically generated overlay offers viewers an additional layer of narrative. Geometric patterns forge connections, constructing myriad interconnected scenarios. The artist's adept manipulation of shapes and colors imbues life into objects, spotlighting them within the frame. The performance also incorporates an auditory dimension, blending synthesized sounds with fragmented narrations. The viewer, albeit an active participant, assumes the role of an observer, spying on their reality. Oscillators synchronize with detected movements, crafting a harmonious audiovisual ambience. Kattenbelt's distinction [Cha06] between temporality and vividness becomes pertinent when assessing the work's intermediality.

3.4.4. Liveness

In terms of liveness, the performance evokes real-time experiences, aligning with Auslander's [Aus08] theories. However, the mediated nature of the performance, presented via screens, offers viewers a distinct layer of perception.

3.5. The unseen performer

The performance introduces an invisible performer, the catalyst behind the show's intermediary engine. Whether it's inanimate objects swayed by the wind or individuals navigating the streets, all become unwitting actors in this dance of movement. Additionally, there's the unseen presence of Francesca Fini, the mastermind orchestrating the technological processes. In this dystopian setting, the world seems to operate autonomously, with minimal human intervention, reminiscent of Marina Abramović's "The Artist is Present."



Figure 3: *s/confinamento: Overlays Screenshot Selection*

3.6. Emotional experience

Beyond the immediate sensory experience, the artist evokes deeper layers of perception. The viewer, confined by circumstances, voyeuristically observes the inaccessible external world. This observation elicits a range of emotions: a fleeting sense of freedom, a resurgence of memories triggered by familiar sights, and a dystopian realization of a world transformed. The real-time synchronization of sound and visuals immerses the viewer in a cinematic experience, challenging their perceptions and beliefs.

4. Audience Reception

4.1. Method

To assess the audience's reception of Francesca Fini's avant-garde performance art, we conducted a two-phase exploratory study. The first phase took place in May 2020 and featured a live-stream of the performance on the Locked Room Sessions platform. The second phase was carried out two years later, in May 2022, where we conducted semi-structured interviews with ten randomly selected viewers. These interviews explored participants' habits in watching performances and live-streams, their emotional reactions to the performance, and their thoughts on the digital medium and the artist's presence. The two-year interval was deliberately chosen to evaluate the long-term impact of such innovative formats, especially in a climate shaped by collective trauma and the emergence of digital platforms.

Our participant pool was diverse, comprising six females and

four males, with ages ranging from 20 to 62. We limited the number of interviews to ten as we noticed recurring themes and patterns in the responses. To maintain confidentiality, all participants were assured anonymity. The interviewees varied in their familiarity and engagement with the realm of performance art. These interviews, conducted in English via Zoom, lasted between 12 minutes and 33 seconds to 27 minutes and 10 seconds, with an average duration of 16 minutes.

We employed a semi-structured interview format to allow for flexibility and interactive dialogue while adhering to a structured protocol for efficient data coding [Ars17]. The interviews started with broad questions about general viewing habits concerning performance art and live-streams, then narrowed to discuss specific aspects of Francesca Fini's work, before widening the scope once more. To enhance clarity, we inserted probing questions such as "What do you mean by that?", "Why do you think this?", and "If I understand correctly, you mean...?" throughout the discussion.

For the data analysis stage, we utilized a content analysis method to identify recurring patterns and significant themes [Laz17]. Given the small sample size, we determined that specialized software for qualitative data analysis was not required. Our inductive approach aimed not only to identify dominant themes but also to recognize outliers, thereby capturing a broad spectrum of digital experiences.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Live-stream experience

The pandemic significantly altered the participants' engagement with performance art. For example, a 26-year-old female escalated her viewing from once every few months to twice weekly, using performances as a form of meditation. Six out of ten participants increased their consumption of performance art during the quarantine. In contrast, four maintained or reduced their levels of engagement. One male participant (30) disengaged from performances, citing the ease with which he could turn off a live-stream. Another male participant (30) began actively avoiding live-streams, indicating diverging audience habits. Two participants adopted live-streaming as a daily "routine," suggesting a form of remote communal engagement during the quarantine. Post-quarantine, three participants expressed a desire to return to live events.

4.2.2. Visualisation Context

Referrals were a significant factor in drawing participants to the performance. For instance, a 26-year-old female participant was introduced by her sister, while a 30-year-old female came to know about it through a friend involved in the project. This information could be valuable for future marketing efforts. As for devices, there was a balanced split, with participants watching on both laptops and phones.

4.2.3. Emotional reaction

Emotions ranged from intrigue to discomfort. One participant (F, 30) found the experience "eery" and "uncomfortable," while another (F, 29) mentioned an "after-effect" where the performance lingered in her thoughts days later. While some participants were

captivated by the novel sound and visuals, others found the initial experience static but grew more contemplative over time. A segment expressed discomfort, attributing it to the voyeuristic nature of the performance and the unsettling musical accompaniment. These nuanced reactions point to the layered emotional impact of the performance.

4.2.4. Involuntary Associations

The Italian setting evoked various associations. One participant (F, 26) felt nostalgia due to her previous travels to Italy, while another (F, 30) drew a stark parallel between the empty streets in the performance and real-time war footage from Ukraine. These associations show how the performance resonated on both personal and global scales.

4.2.5. The lonely spectator

Most participants didn't feel isolated. For example, one male participant (33) felt a sense of community seeing other users watch at the same time. However, a female participant (30) felt the people depicted in the performance were lonely, an interesting twist on the concept of isolation in communal experiences.

4.2.6. The invisible performer

The artist's absence led to a spectrum of interpretations. One participant (F, 20) found the artist's invisibility to make the performance "more powerful," while another (F, 30) felt as though the computer itself was the observing entity. The unseen artist also evoked feelings of "divine intervention" or "magic". The consensus was that digital performances like this could be a glimpse into the future of art, echoing the sentiment of a male participant (33) who simply stated, "I think it's the future."

4.3. Discussion

Our interviews provide valuable insights into the interplay between creators, critics, and the public. Our meticulous analysis of Fini's work reveals its multifaceted nature, incorporating elements such as graphics, sound, rhythm, and liveness. Notably, 8 out of 10 interviewees emphasized the live aspect of the performance, accentuating the universal appeal of real-time experiences, especially in our increasingly digital age.

Moreover, the audience's feedback aligns with the analytical perspective in several ways. For example, both our analysis and the audience's responses highlight the emotional resonance of the work. Out of the 10 interviewees, 7 reported feelings of connection, while 3 mentioned feelings of alienation or unease. This duality in audience perception is fascinating and corroborates the idea that 's/confinamento' has the power to evoke a wide range of emotions, including feelings of both connection and disconnection.

Conversely, the professional critique delves into abstract dimensions like narrativity and authorship. Interestingly, 6 out of 10 interviewees expressed that they felt the artist's tangible presence through real-time graphic manipulations, emphasizing the artist's enduring influence on the audience.

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a significant pivot in the

art consumption landscape. According to our data, 9 out of 10 participants have increasingly adopted digital platforms for art engagement due to pandemic-induced restrictions, suggesting a broader cultural acceptance of digital art forms.

As elucidated in Figure 4, the digital space serves as a vital "window" to the outside world, especially poignant given the quarantine conditions for both the performer and the audience. The performer engages with the outdoor environment through this digital conduit, simultaneously transmitting their artistic output. The audience, too, is actively engaged in a feedback loop with both the performer and the external world, facilitated by this digital interface. In the figure, arrows illustrate the digital space's dual role. For the performer, it acts as both a receiving and transmitting medium. They engage with the outdoors solely through this digital layer, and it is through this channel that they also broadcast their own generative input, essentially their artistic performance. Similarly, the audience interacts with the outside world and the performer through this digital "window." They are not merely passive observers but are in a constant loop of receiving and interpreting the performance, as well as the outside world, through the digital space. The performer has a double function, being the source of the network, a double facilitator and modifier, while the audience is receiving the already processed information through social media. The virtual space becomes a link between the indoor universe of the performer and viewer with the outside world.

Figure 5 introduces the concept of 'involuntary performers,' adding an additional layer of complexity. Random elements in the outdoor environment become unintentional contributors to the overall art experience, introducing unpredictability and depth.

The artwork becomes a new kind of meeting place, reminiscent of the relational aesthetics concept [Bou98]. This concept suggests that the essence of art lies in the inter-human relations it establishes, serving as a kind of social interstice. This idea of the artist creating a communal space in art can be seen in various forms across the art world. For instance, Marina Abramović's 2010 performance at MoMA, titled "The Artist Is Present," was a profound exploration of time, presence, and artist-audience connection. Inspired by her belief in stretching the length of a performance to alter our perception of time, Abramović fostered a deeper engagement with her audience [Ves12]. Drawing parallels, both works deeply engage the audience, albeit through different mediums. Abramović's work emphasized the physical presence and extended engagement, principles that translate effectively into Fini's digital realm, enriched by the presence of involuntary performers and other digital elements.

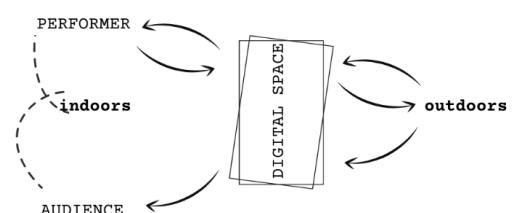


Figure 4: The digital space

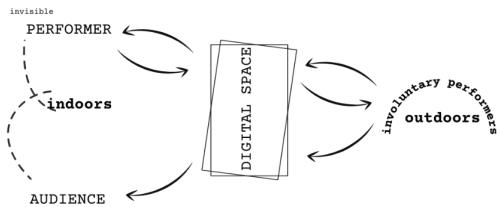


Figure 5: The involuntary performers

The impact of 's/confinamento' on its audience highlights the complex societal shifts catalyzed by the pandemic. These changes will likely require years to fully understand. Works like 's/confinamento' serve as critical cultural snapshots, capturing humanity's evolving relationship with art. They underline the importance of documenting our collective experiences and perspectives amidst global challenges, ensuring that live performances remain enduring chronicles of our shared human narrative.

4.4. Limitations

The inherent subjectivity of our qualitative approach poses challenges. Opting against the use of specialized analytical software and entrusting the content analysis to a singular researcher may have introduced certain biases. A more collaborative interpretative process in future endeavors could mitigate such biases.

The two-year interval between the performance and the subsequent interviews might have clouded participants' recollections, given the mutable nature of memory. Additionally, our sample, though diverse, was limited to ten participants, potentially not encompassing the full breadth of audience perspectives. The demographic data, while detailed, might not mirror the larger audience, hinting at representational discrepancies. The random selection of participants from the live-stream viewers could also skew the findings, not accounting for the myriad motivations that drove viewership.

Conducting interviews via Zoom might have missed subtle non-verbal cues, and the virtual medium itself, with its potential technical hiccups, could have influenced the discourse. While interviews were our primary data collection tool, diversifying methods in future studies, perhaps through observational techniques or diary entries, might yield a more nuanced understanding of audience engagement.

Feedback post-interview wasn't solicited from participants, which could lead to potential interpretative deviations from the intended sentiments. Furthermore, the overarching global milieu, especially the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, could have tinted the participants' feedback, making it challenging to discern if reactions were solely performance-driven or influenced by broader societal shifts.

Future studies on this topic should recognize and address these limitations, aiming for a more comprehensive and unbiased method in collecting and analyzing data.

5. Further Research

Future research endeavors should delve deeper into the emotional intricacies of digital performances. Given the diverse emotional responses, from uneasiness to intrigue, a focused exploration using psychological tools might elucidate the underlying triggers. Drawing inspiration from Marina Abramović's "The Artist Is Present" [Ves12], it would be intriguing to probe the influence of the artist's perceived presence or absence on audience reception in the digital realm.

Furthermore, the role of narrative structures in digital art and their impact on audience comprehension warrants attention, especially the dynamics of clear versus ambiguous authorship. The temporal aspect of our current methodology, with its two-year gap, raises the question of how immediate versus long-term reactions to performances differ and evolve. Building on the principles of relational aesthetics [Bou98], there's an opportunity to assess how digital platforms are shaping communal sentiments among viewers and how these platforms contrast with traditional art spaces.

The evolving relationship of viewers with new media, especially in the aftermath of global events like the pandemic, is another avenue ripe for exploration. Ethical considerations, particularly surrounding involuntary participants in digital art, could be a focal point of future studies. Lastly, as technology continues to mediate our experiences, it's crucial to examine how different technological tools and platforms shape, enhance, or detract from the viewer's experience in digital performances.

6. Conclusions

Francesca Fini's 's/confinamento' offers an interesting exploration into the digital realm of performance art, capturing the essence of a society grappling with the challenges of a global pandemic. Through its layers, the performance not only showcases the adaptability of art in a digital age but also underscores the deep-seated human need for connection, especially in times of isolation.

The audience's reactions to the performance provided valuable insights, emphasizing the significance of live experiences in fostering a sense of community. Their feedback, juxtaposed with the analytical interpretation of the performance, present a vivid picture of the dual nature of 's/confinamento'. It evokes feelings of both togetherness and alienation, mirroring the broader human experience during these unprecedented times.

However, our study is not without its limitations. The qualitative nature of the study, coupled with potential biases in research methodology, underscores the need for a more comprehensive approach in future investigations. These potential areas of improvement, while acknowledged, can show the way for deeper dives into the evolving relationship between digital art and its audience.

In essence, 's/confinamento' stands as a proof to the resilience of art in challenging times and a reminder of art's enduring power to resonate, reflect, and inspire, as the world around us undergoes profound transformations.

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