Cyberformance – interfacing the physical and the virtual

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Abstract. For two decades performers have been using the Internet to create live performance in between physical and virtual spaces emphasizing a reflection upon the conditions of its own production, be these ones with a preponderance of the text, the code or the body. All these manifestations, from chat text performances to virtual world avatars animated by motion tracking sensors, have common characteristics: they are presented live and are mediated, intermedial, multimodal, hybrid, liminal, collaborative, aesthetically and socially interventional and low cost while using freeware technology.

This practice develops through tangible and visible interfaces that allow for an understanding of the virtual platforms it uses not as immersive but rather as augmented and hypermediated environments. In this poster/article I briefly reflect upon this *topos* of cyberformance – virtual worlds and platforms – and its implications not only for the practice of performance but also for distance communication as well.

Keywords: cyberformance, digital performance, Multi User Virtual Environments, Human Computer Interaction, distributed communication, *produsage*, *intercreativity*

Introduction

This article is, in part, a result of the research for my PhD thesis in Communication Sciences: «Cyberformance: performance in virtual worlds» (Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 2013) with which I intend to open the inquiry into the contribution of this recent genre for the contemporary arts, for Human Computer Interaction (HCI) and for changes in everyday distributed communication.

Cyberformance is performance art that links physical spaces with virtual worlds, environments and platforms, characterized for being live, mediated, intermedial, multimodal, hybrid, liminal, collaborative, aesthetically and socially interventional, being low cost while using, mostly, freeware technology.

This kind of performance has been developing for the last two decades connecting remote performers and audiences. Chat rooms and Multi User Dungeons (MUD) where the first cyberspaces where this artistic practice happened. However, soon it transited into graphic environments (The Palace) and virtual worlds (Multi User Virtual Environments like Second Life) even creating its own platforms and festivals (UpStage, Odyssey).

Cyberformance happens live, in cyberspace and its performers and audience are distributed physically, sometimes around the globe, developing a form of telepresence. It is risky, deals with the subjects that arise from its own technology and it is liminal in its experimentation. Cyberformance uses different sources but is mainly dependent on the computer and tends to never be finished and, so, to be an open work.

Based on my own artistic practice on the referred contexts and on recent academic research on digital performance, I tried a theoretical framework by working on an updated definition of the term

cyberformance coined by Helen Varley Jamieson (2008) for a better understanding of this artistic genre.

Cyberformance is an expression we (both me and Jamieson) do not impose on the artists or anyone: it is an operative term that allowed me to approach the practical and theoretical questions involved in live performance that happen in between physical and virtual places, allowing performer and audience participation through the Internet, usually using accessible low cost communally produced technology.

Cyberformance takes place in hypermediated intercreative environments

Inquiring into the relation between virtual and actual and analysing the spaces where this kind of art takes place I came to the conclusion that the openness of virtual communities creates a *topos* that is beyond simulation and allows for the rise of the «virtually human» (Boellstorff, 2008) that integrates cyberformance. This practice develops through tangible and visible interfaces that allow for an understanding of those virtual platforms not as immersive but rather as augmented and hypermediated environments.

The work of Piérre Lévy (1998) is crucial to the affirmation that virtual and real more than opposing each other, converge, that the virtual is real and that while experiencing it, we are «even more human». The interpretation of Second Life (SL) by Tom Boellstorff made me favour the expression «actual world» in detriment of real world as opposed to virtual world: the experiences of the residents of this environment are real and have consequences in their real lives; they are not a mere game play in a fantasy world: beyond each avatar is a person. This anthropological research as well as other investigations in the area of cultural studies are crucial to understand the psychological aspects of human relationships in this collective virtual environments as well as aspects of identity and embodiment.

Although some previous feminist and post-modern theories like the post-human (Hayles) or the metaphor of the cyborg (Haraway) are of necessary reference, when it comes to embodiment in the spaces of cyberformance, I prefer to oppose to those terms recent perspectives like the «virtually human» (Boellstorff, 2008). This contemporary human is phenomenological augmented (Merleau-Ponty) in virtual worlds, those places which are no mere simulations (like the dystopias inspired in Baudrillard pretend) but *topos* generared by personal and collective creativity much like cyberformance is.

The «transparent immediacy» (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) related with immersion in a simulation – that can easily take us to dangerous notions of disembodiment – is but an illusion. Virtual worlds are creative augmentations of our everyday life in which they exert concrete effects. This characteristic favours a cyberformance that does not hide its technological means, that believes the body is always present during the performance, aware, and that it can be kinaesthetically (and even synesthesically) enriched by virtual augmentation, as testified by some projects where embodiment goes beyond keyboard, mouse and screen like *Senses Places* (Cochrane & Valverde) and Stelarc's experiments with Second Life and various sensors (see the next section).

Thus, rather than seeking an impossible immediate immersion in a simulated environment, cyberformance is an activity that takes conscience of that impossibility, underlining, instead, the hypermediation of the virtual places and tools used, denying simulation in favour of collectively creative non-simulated environments, an activity that metamedialy reflects upon its own production techniques and conditions of existence, creating interfaces that, rather than taking the senses into a disembodiment, develop a sense of the body here and now, a body that can be augmented through the performance leading to a corporeal consciousness in connection with the virtual.

The practice of cyberformance brings into focus other questions: performance as a liminal act (Broadhurst, 1999); liveness as mediation (Auslander, 1999 and 2011); the rise of an intermedial audience (Jamieson, 2008) and the orchestration of the performing distance (Benford and Giannachi, 2011); identity in between the virtual and the physical, bringing about the split subject and the digital double (Causey, 2008); the fact that virtual worlds and environments are not simulations (Bitarello, 2008) but spaces built by *intercreativity* (Berners-Lee, 1999) as opposed to a myth of interactivity (Birringer, 2011), evidencing the means and the media, in the logic of the transcultural *produser* (Bruns, 2008) that fits a new geoaesthetics.

In terms of the interface of cyberformance the questions arising from of the intercultural *produsage* of tools and environments and, at the same time, the problems of liveness in the mediated as well as the, still, very limited interactivity (even using motion tracking and several kinds of sensors) are crucial to understand the way this kind of performance crosses the actual or physical space and the virtual one, which is the object of this article. However limitations of space force me to leave a debate around this subjects for another opportunity.

Word, Code and Corporeal cyberformance

The analysis of the creative process of some specific performances lead me to the conception of an operative typology for cyberformance where the types only exist dialogically and take effect through either the Word, the Code or the Body in interface with the virtual. These were defined according to their formal characteristics and their main mode of participation and, so, of interface (although all of them are multimodal): this can happen by writing in a text window; animating a 3D avatar or animating an avatar with your body in movement. Each type develops conceptually around the idea that defines it: Word Cyberformance chooses the poetics of text, spoken and written in somewhat more theatrical and script based acts; Code Cyberformance uses avatars, environments, animation and scripts in code to question the same virtual worlds where it enfolds, manifesting a strong connection with the visual arts; Corporeal Cyberformance uses the body in interface with virtual environments to augment it beyond the limitations of the keyboard, mouse and screen posing some of the same questions of dance-tech, but taking participation further with the live interaction of the audience through the Internet.

Examples of Word Cyberformance are the first performances in chat rooms, text games and MUD like *Hamnet* by the Hamnet Players (1993) or Stephen Schrum's *Netseduction* (1996); Desktop Theatre using the graphic rooms of The Palace; the Plaintext Players making a bridge between the stage and virtual platforms; Avatar Body *Collison,* a troupe of four that integrates Helen Varley Jamieson, and that is at the origin of the platform for cyberformance UpStage, which organizes a festival every year. Other more recent word cyberformances are: *make-shift* (2010-2013) and *we have a situation* (2013).

In the *CyPosium*, a web conference organized by Jamieson in late 2012 (resulting in a book to be published in November 2014) different kinds of cyberformance were presented and analysed by their authors and several academics, demonstrating that this practice moved beyond the original platforms, extended itself to virtual worlds and games and began using other interfaces, as 3D avatars, or different kinds of sensors in connection with the body (Chatzichristodoulou, 2013; Gomes, 2014)

Since the beginning of the MUVE Second Life, several artists began using it for performance: Gazira Babeli and the group Second Front are at the origin of Code Cyberformance, a tradition continued by Save Me Ho and the performers connected with the platform Odyssey, nowadays. Others, used this virtual world for cyberformance, like Eva and Franco Mattes with their *Synthetic Performances* or Joseph DeLappe with his *Salt Satyagraha March*, where is Gandhi avatar, animated by the steps of the artist in a treadmill, roamed SL distributing walking sticks of peace and good will. These artists and others used the code spaces of games (like World of Warcraft (WoW), the SIMs, Quake, American Army) to question the formal and social rules of these environments through cyberformance. Third

Faction, a movement that rebels against the organization of WoW, takes that idea to a totally political lever, echoing recent worldwide social movements in performances where avatars of different hordes demonstrate against the rules of the war game.

In Corporeal Cyberformance older technologies like chromakey in connection with the Internet and its virtual spaces are used in «portals» by artists like Paul Sermon to question the limitations of the body in between the physical and the virtual in performances that make use of the body as their main tool. These portals, also used by Second Front to connect SL to physical spaces, were taken a step further with Extract/Insert (2012) by Chafer, Upton and Stelarc: with 3D and infrared the visitor to a gallery is transferred to SL while the avatars visit the physical space of the gallery. This last artist has been using the Internet in connection with the body for several years. He began with *Ping Body* (1996) and *Movatar - Inverse Motion Capture* (1997-2002), where Internet participants animated an avatar that animated the performer's body, and lately developed performances like *Involuntary, Improvised and Avatar Arms* (2012), using the same logic with avatars in Second Life.

Senses Places (2011-2014), a project with which I have been collaborating, takes the role of the body in connection with the virtual through the Internet even further: in a hybrid environment participants interact physically and virtually through their avatars using motion tracking through the computer's webcam, remote controls from game consoles and other sensors like wearables.

Conclusion

Cyberformance is an example of a hybrid multimodal practice that converges de actual and the virtual in non-immersive non-simulated environments reflecting upon the technological conditions of its own production and taking distance communication, in general, and performance art, in particular, further. Evidencing the tools and techniques used, cyberformance denies the disincorporation of immediacy and immersion, evidencing a body that is always present in the liveness/mediation of performance and that, much like identity, is changed and augmented in this convergence of instances.

Lending us *prodused* tools and, above all, presenting creative ways for distance intercultural participation, cyberformance opens possibilities for the development of new interfaces for a more participated Human Computer Interaction.

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