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CALL FOR PAPERS

REFLECTIONS ON PRESENCE, TODAY

By Luisa Costi

ABSTRACT

What does physical presence mean today, after two years of pandemic? Has our perception of “here and now” changed irreversibly? Can the Metaverse and avatars really be an alternative other than just an aesthetic frame? By using art as a privileged research ground, a reflection about the body as a multisensory subject, about the need of new ways of involvement, and about technological interaction’s experiments. In contemporary arts, with NFT grown which dematerialize the artistic object; in exhibitions, introducing spaces which are even more immersive, interactive and multisensory, and aim to a “super – presence”. And, above all, in the opera, by analyzing very recent shows as examples of experimentation of an artform that, more than the others, needs physical presence – and that had to come to terms with the absence of it during the pandemic.

Key words: Presence, Involvement, New Technologies, Contemporary Art, Exhibitions, Opera, Experimentation, Body

Today, Monday, May 2, 2022, is a day that many have been eagerly awaiting: the first Monday without the green pass required to enter schools, without masks at the bar, and so on. It marks the beginning of a tangible return to normalcy, to a presence unmasked, literally, by protections placed between our faces and those of others.

But is our perception of presence, which we have long awaited, the same as it was two years ago?

After having spent two years grappling with the differentiation between presence, distance, remote learning, online instruction, and other phrases that more or less imaginatively revolve around the same concept of “being there,” we all, whether we wanted to or not, found ourselves asking what it truly means to be present, and especially, how technology can make us present even when, physically, we are not – or at least not in the way we were used to thinking about it.

Starting with the pressing reality of the moment in which I write, an emblematic interview is that of Cecilia Alemani, curator of the 59th Venice Biennale, which was inaugurated in the past days. When questioned about the difficulties of organizing the exhibition during the two years of the pandemic, without the possibility of direct physical contact with works and artists, the curator admits that she suffered from not being able to stand in front of a painting, “not feeling the smells in the air, not being able to walk around a sculpture,” but she goes on to say that she “experienced something new: all those studio visits – hundreds of them, via Zoom – gave access to conversations that I would never have had in normal times. Dense, full of intimacy: they tackled much more introspective, almost confessional, topics that I would not have addressed in a face-to-face meeting ¹”.

**FROM RADIO TO THE METAVERSE:
TRUE ENGAGEMENT OR AESTHETIC
FRAMEWORK?**

Starting from the definition in the Treccani Dictionary, “presence” means “the fact of being present in a specific place, or of intervening, witnessing something²”.

It is thanks to technology that it is possible to be present, witness, and even intervene, despite being in a different location: a gradual process that began with the first telecommunications tools like radio (which allows us to witness through hearing), followed by the telephone (which also allows us to actively participate in communication), to which video was integrated, first with webcams and then with mobile phone cameras, which have become part of common use in the past two years.

In parallel, chat services and other channels developed, focusing on immediacy rather than audio and video fidelity (just think of Messenger in the early 2000s and its many evolutions, culminating in the undisputed dominance of WhatsApp).

But until now, it has been about making communication at a distance as realistic and engaging as possible, or as fast and immediate as possible, but always acting within the tangible reality we know.

There once was Second Life, back in 2003, and the promise was to live a parallel life in the digital world.

Today, there is increasing talk of the Metaverse, a concept born from the dystopian novel *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson in 1992 and recently revived by Facebook’s number one, Mark Zuckerberg. Essentially, the Metaverse promises (or threatens, depending on the point of view) to give three-dimensionality to our digital experiences, making them immersive.

The real novelty is that these virtual spaces

are starting to be chosen as locations for real initiatives, not just as settings for video games or nerd hangouts. One example is the contemporary art fair Booming, which has been present in Bologna since 2020 and for its latest edition (January 20-23, 2022) preferred a virtual space over those of the cultural district DunBo: the warehouse that was supposed to host the fair was rebuilt in 3D and will later host the live version of the exhibition in May. Simona Gavioli, director of Booming, explains how the two options integrate: “On one side, the physical fair; on the other, the one in the Metaverse, where there are huge potentialities, numerically speaking, obviously, with a potential audience of 7 billion people, but also qualitatively, with the possibility to profile collectors in ways we never could before, knowing what they’ve seen, how long they’ve stayed in a booth, and how long they’ve spent in front of a piece of art, for example”.

Among the reasons for preferring the Metaverse, there’s also the growing green consciousness, as explained by Mauro Defrancesco, artistic director of the Trento Art Festival, a native digital festival: “A traditional fair in an Italian city operates with a huge waste of money and energy: you take a warehouse on the outskirts, set it up with panels, lights, heating, various permits, and then drag 50-100 gallerists inside who, in the end, sell a drawing that weighs 100 grams. How sustainable can this 19th-century³ model be for the environment?”

Today, 350 million people already inhabit the Metaverse, and 43 digital worlds are already present⁴: “The die is cast,” one could say. But is the audience that visits a fair in the Metaverse in 2022, a carefully reconstructed virtual environment, more involved than the

listener of the distorted frequencies of Radio London? Obviously, the sophistication of the tool is not a guarantee of immersion: or rather, we must perhaps distinguish between “technical” immersion, achieved through technology, and emotional involvement.

Can the Metaverse and avatars really be an alternative to real presence, rather than just an aesthetic frame? The answer, formed through the experience of these two years of pandemic and isolation, is that the key factor is involvement: you are present where you are engaged, where you feel part of an event, a community, where you get emotionally involved.

The presence of the body is no longer the central element; it has become one of the possible options: not always the most economical, almost never the simplest from an organizational point of view. But if presence is no longer the obvious or most convenient choice, the risk of settling into the comfortable “hyperconnected isolation” that we see increasingly frequent among younger generations becomes evident, with a worrying increase in hikikomori.

The challenge of trying to reclaim presence as a value runs on multiple tracks: on one hand, making the real more engaging than the “improved copy of the real” (the popularity that the hashtag “instagram vs reality” continues to gain, even in its ironic connotation, is indicative of the fracture between the two universes), proposing authenticity as a value; on the other hand, not losing sight of the body as a multisensory subject, one that responds to stimuli (designed and controlled, as in the case of art) but also to the “effort” of presence: the emotional effort required by “being there in the flesh,” the proverbial *hic et nunc*. You can’t hide, you can’t disconnect,

you have to prepare and go out, walk through space, “lose” time on the journey... That too is perception, and it affects the enjoyment of the artwork, the perception of who and what is in front of me. As always, art helps to decode the present in real-time, artists are able to metabolize the time in which they live and give it back to the public in the form of answers to the questions of the present and open reflections. Contemporary art seems to have developed its own response to the theme of presence with NFTs (Non-Fungible Tokens). Whether it is a bubble or the future of art, it is likely both.

IMMERSIVE, INTERACTIVE, MULTISENSORY SPACES: THE “SUPER PRESENCE”

It is difficult today to find exhibition paths where the goal is not to make the visitor experience something and not try to actively involve them. An objective that can be achieved through various means, activated individually or in combination, and if we want to summarize them in three broad categories, we could talk about immersivity, interactivity, and multisensoriality.

Immersive exhibitions in the last year and a half have literally depopulated throughout Europe, these are those exhibition routes in which the visitor is “immersed” in virtual reality through the use of 360-degree projections: Images and videos are projected, replacing the physical artwork and allowing the public to “enter” the works of art, to walk on the paintings, and to touch the brushstrokes, thanks to a scale play that places the visitor’s body at the center and focuses on their perception of space. The reasons for such success are, on one hand, economic convenience and the agility in transporting and organizing these kinds of setups (borrowing a

painting by Monet, insuring it, and transporting it is certainly more complicated than projecting its works as digital files, potentially making a whole exhibition fit on a hard drive); on the other hand, the success of these setups and their ability to attract an audience – including those not accustomed to art exhibitions – lies in the ability to bring, or rather, immerse the visitor in art, allowing a level of engagement far superior to the traditional and frontal museum experience: a middle ground between cinema and video games, where the presence of the artwork is replaced by its projection, not only technically but also as a magnified representation. Paradoxically, the non-presence of the physical artwork is used as an opportunity to enhance the presence of the visitor's body, building the exhibition around it.

Another discussion concerns the interaction between the real and the virtual as a strategy for actively involving the public: whether it's portions of virtual setups activated directly by the visitor or gaming with interactive applications, it's now hard to find museum paths that haven't integrated an interactive section alongside the traditional setup. This trend, which began with activities designed for children, has expanded to every age group, targeting the potential audience and offering an ideal response in terms of interactive experience. While the primary goal of immersivity is emotional engagement, in the case of interactivity, the goal is to stimulate understanding and the processing of the proposed theme through playful elements.

An entire museum can exist without showing any tangible material "objects" but still provide the visitor with virtual material to interact with and process personally. Among many examples, I cite the Parco della Fantasia with

the new Rodari Museum opened in 2021 in Omegna, the birthplace of the writer. In this case, young visitors are offered interactive experiences by playing with Rodari's words, dismantling and reconstructing his stories, and "activating" virtual recordings and settings.

Multisensoriality is another mode of engaging the public, simultaneously stimulating multiple senses to create a more powerful experience: whether it's exhibitions focused on a detailed reconstruction of an environment or contemporary art exhibitions that reconnect to the performative aspect. The body in its entirety becomes the protagonist; here, the presence of the body cannot be replaced by a virtual experience. The materiality of the experience is the medium for emotional engagement. These considerations, although seemingly related to the art sector, can actually be applied to many fields. Even from a marketing perspective, for example, the key terms are now "experiential marketing" and "emotional involvement."

If it's true that the presence of the body is now one of the possible options, it is equally clear that when this option is chosen, it should be valued by exploring its potential to the fullest. In this sense, we can understand the desire to offer hyper-engaging experiences, stimulating a "super-presence" of the public, and we can intuit how this process is now irreversible: I can "be there" even at a distance, but if I choose to be truly present, it must "be worth it"; the involvement must concern the whole body.

In a world where we can be anywhere by opening virtual windows, the difference is made by where we feel present. Where we choose to open up and let ourselves be moved.

The challenge is to earn presence, especially

in terms of mental presence and attention: how many seconds of your time will you dedicate to watching the video I propose?

How can I convince you to click on the banner/open the content/watch the whole video?

Anyone working in communication knows that media attention is now measured in seconds, not tens of seconds. We are overloaded with stimuli, information, and possibilities. Where do we want to be, present?

THE THEATER AS A CASE STUDY

Theater is the art form that most embodies presence, the “hic et nunc” – here and now – of urgency tied to the present moment. Therefore, it’s interesting to analyze how theater has responded to restrictions related to presence, the strategies employed, and the new formulas experimented with, given that, more than any other form of art, it has suffered from such restrictions.

“Hic,” here, in Latin, in theater, takes on a unique meaning: there are two poles of presence, one on stage and one in the audience. These two poles communicate, exchange energy, and, like the positive and negative of a battery, are dependent on each other.

“Nunc,” now, to highlight how the energy of theater is fleeting, it is consumed in the moment it is created. There is no accumulation – to continue with the electric metaphor – but certainly, it is energy that sets off a chain reaction.

The expression “hic et nunc,” which in its original Latin meaning indicated the urgency of an imperative order, has since been taken up variously in the history of philosophical discourse across the centuries with different meanings. A significant role was assigned

to it by Walter Benjamin in his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, where he cites a brief text by Paul Valéry – *The Concept of Ubiquity*, eloquent in its title and now prophetic in its clarity – in which it is argued that the development of communication means would, in the future, allow the “transportation or reconstruction in every place of the system of sensations – or more precisely, the system of excitations – provoked in any place by any object or event.” From this, Benjamin concludes that it would be possible to reach an “essential condition of the highest aesthetic achievement⁶” by freeing the work of art from the “hic et nunc” tied to the body and space.

Without delving into the specifics of the philosophical debate, but starting from Benjamin’s valuable insight into the reproducibility of the artwork, the experience of the two pandemic years showed us the opportunity to enhance the particularities of various available media, integrating them with each other, experimenting with new synergies between live performance and virtual possibilities. I found the pro/con debate on presence in the theater world, in which I normally work, to be myopic. As it was said, theater is by definition about presence: the core of the debate is wrong; the real issue is how to relate the different possibilities.

Here are some very recent examples, already widely discussed, that have opened new paths in experimentation in this sense and can be seen as true case studies.

The very first opera performance to go on stage after the lockdown, in July 2020, was *Rigoletto* at the Circus Maximus, directed by Damiano Michieletto—an interesting hybrid between live performance and real-time video recording. It was a production

greeted with solemnity by both the public and institutions, as evidenced by the presence of President Mattarella. As is often the case with Michieletto's productions, it attracted attention and sparked heated debate even before opening night. Confirming how this production remains a hot topic, it was broadcast in prime time by RAI during the 2021–2022 holiday season.

The show was conceived at a time when anti-contagion measures were extremely strict. For this reason, an enormous stage—1,500 square meters, three times the size of the Teatro dell'Opera's—was built at the Circus Maximus. On this stage were placed six vintage cars (from around 1980), along with Rigoletto's carousel on the right and the trailer he lives in on the left. The soloists were meant to sit inside the cars, thus ensuring the necessary distancing. However, to make up for this rather peculiar, if not absurd, situation, live footage of the characters was to be projected onto a large screen placed at the back of the stage.

Later, when distancing rules became less strict, Michieletto demonstrated his talent and remarkable command of the stage by adapting seamlessly to the changing circumstances. He had the soloists leave the cars and move more freely on stage, occasionally surrounded by a modest number of extras, while the choir remained in a small, invisible lateral stand—greatly benefiting the fluidity and dynamism of the action.

However, it was no longer possible to change the scenic setup, so the action unfolded as planned on stage, but the dominant element of the production remained the screen. It was used to bring certain nuances of the acting into close-up or to reveal moments of the action that would otherwise have gone unseen. Most importantly, Michieletto used

the screen to delve into the psychology of the characters, making their thoughts, memories, and emotions visible through images⁷.

It is clear that in this case the video recordings were seen as an opportunity to enrich the staging with meaning, without attempting to hide the technical means used—in fact, quite the opposite: they were made visually explicit, thus creating an unprecedented layering of realities. The cameramen on stage filmed close-ups of the singers in real time, moving within the stage action while remaining external to it, and projecting their point of view onto the giant LED walls.

The show was designed with live viewing in mind but also—indeed, above all—for television or video, where the complex layers of interpretation were easier to decipher. In any case, the audience was offered an “augmented” experience of the performance, engaging them through multiple perspectives edited together—whether by video editing or through the live gaze of the viewer themselves.

A similar approach was applied to the trilogy produced by the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma in collaboration with Rai Cultura and directed by Mario Martone: *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* by Rossini, *La Traviata* by Verdi, and *La Bohème* by Puccini. Three titles were chosen for their popularity and approached through both a cinematic and meta-theatrical direction. This unique operation was possible thanks to the talent of a director who has long alternated operatic productions with cinematic works, creating a deep synergy between these two art forms. The common denominator of the three productions – or rather the three films, since they were designed to be followed on video – is the setting: in the impossibility of staging the three operas live with an audience,

the theater was used as a backdrop. The success of this artistic operation was sealed by the Abbiati Prize, the most authoritative in the field, awarded to *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* directed by Mario Martone, with the orchestra conducted by Daniele Gatti.

As Mattioli, a leading contemporary music critic, brilliantly sums up:

“The novelty is that Mario Martone did not attempt to make a surrogate of opera, but rather to transform the theatrical inconveniences imposed by the great plague into a new show, a sort of film-opera about opera, like a lyrical Truman Show or melodramatic Big Brother.”

Here’s the opportunity: the “non-presence” of the audience, the empty theater, becomes a privileged perspective to reflect on the mechanisms of theater itself, ultimately involving the audience in a nearly phenomenological discourse.

A stroke of genius: Figaro’s cavatina (yes, that famous “Figaro here, Figaro there”)—which is always a challenge, because no one quite knows what to make the character do while he belts it out. Usually, that results in a flurry of gags, side acts, and various bits of nonsense. But here, it becomes a scooter ride through Rome: the city’s Barber and his companion racing through the capital while the jack-of-all-trades (or fixer? We are in Rome, after all) takes care of his many errands.

Then the two arrive in front of the Teatro dell’Opera, take off their helmets—one is Figaro (well, that was obvious), and the other, surprise, is conductor Daniele Gatti already in full tails. [...]

And so it goes: the cameras follow the singers before they enter “on stage” and after they leave it. Costume changes happen in

plain view, with seamstresses wearing face shields and stagehands spraying disinfectant. The face masks become part of the show, constantly put on and taken off like in our miserable everyday reality. During the storm scene, we even get a shot of the wind machine [...] ⁸

The other two productions in the trilogy similarly – although, it must be said, with mixed artistic results – utilized the spaces of the Teatro Costanzi as a set, offering the public the chance to experience the backstage of the theatrical machine. Specifically, *La Bohème* welcomed singers, orchestra, and audience into the theater’s set design workshops.

Also worth mentioning is the 2020 edition of the Donizetti Festival, held in Bergamo during the second lockdown, which was even more significant due to the tragic situation in the city. The festival’s artistic proposal was notable not only for the theatrical productions but also for the video format it used to experiment with a new form of audience engagement.

All the performances were designed with video recordings in mind, particularly *Marin Faliero* by Donizetti, directed by the duo Ricci/Forte. This standout piece of the season, with its walkable set – a maze of stairs and metal beams positioned in the otherwise empty theater’s audience area – proved especially engaging for home viewers because the singers’ actions could be followed from almost a subjective camera perspective, in a striking contrast with the empty theater backdrop, the distanced chorus, and the orchestra wearing masks on stage. Despite the distance, it was an extremely immersive, unique, and unrepeatable performance.

But how can we convince the audience to pay to watch the performances or subscribe to

the Festival when an almost infinite catalog of opera recordings is available online? (It should be noted that in this case, Marin Faliero was broadcast live on Rai 5). By engaging them. Once again, physical presence is replaced by an experience that makes the viewer an active protagonist, far beyond the usual definition of audience. In this case, paying viewers had access to extra content for deeper engagement – a form of loyalty-building – and a live program schedule that allowed them to interact via the Festival's social platform. The live broadcasts of the performances could be followed in the traditional way or from the "Donizettian living room," where they were commented live by music critics, artists from various fields (including Elio and Rocco Tanica), and even by the Festival's artistic director, Francesco Micheli. This was a way to recreate the atmosphere of the gallery, the foyer, the spontaneous comments, and the presence of the rest of the audience, the second pole mentioned earlier.

The evidence that these experiences, of which only a few of the many examples have been cited here, were not just a response to an emergency moment but rather a direction that the pandemic only amplified by speeding up its evolution is clear. Their legacy did not end with the distancing measures, which as of the time of writing are being relaxed. *Macbeth*, the opening performance of the 2021-2022 season at the Teatro alla Scala, was held under still emergency-like circumstances, but certainly more relaxed compared to the previous year's *A Riveder le Stelle*, during which extremely strict restrictions were in place. However, the experience was capitalized on, and director Davide Livermore, who directed both performances, created a staging that was enjoyable both for the audience in the theater – finally back in full

attendance – and for the home audience: the use of LED walls made directorial details visible that would have otherwise been hidden. The movements of the artists and the set design were conceived with a video-directorial eye, catering to the television audience.

There is no going back: the audience can now choose, and is aware of the possibilities – and limitations – of the media. So are the theater organizers, directors, and artistic directors, who have realized how the audience wants to return in person but also how it has become more demanding in evaluating the experience offered, and how necessary it is to engage them in order for the presence to be experienced as a choice.

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Note

- [1] C. D'Antonio, Biennale 2022, Alemani: only art tells current events in an innovative and surprising way, «Domus web», April 4, 2022
- [2] Presenza, in Vocabolario online, Treccani, 2022
- [3] M. Colletti, Immergersi nell'arte. Così il Metaverso sta cambiando mostre, festival e fiere, «Change Makers magazine», February 8, 2022
- [4] Redazione ANSA, Metaverso, il mondo virtuale già abitato da 350mln di persone, «ANSA.it», April 25, 2022; the debate is more than ever heated on this subject and is already relevant for the reflections it provokes
- [5] P. Valéry, La conquete de l'ubiquité, published in 1931 in the collection Pièce sur l'art
- [6] W. Benjamin, L'opera d'arte nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica, Einaudi 2000
- [7] M. Mariani, L'Opera al Circo Massimo. L'Opera di Roma ricomincia alla grande con il Rigoletto, with Daniele Gatti, Damiano Michieletto, and an excellent cast, «Il giornale della musica», July 21, 2020
- [8] A. Mattioli, Il "Barbiere di Roma" arriva in scooter a salvare il teatro, «La Stampa», December 6, 2020

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