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THINK PAPERS COLLECTION / 02

New Forms of Artistic Performances and the Future of Cultural Heritage

How can dance and performance artists interact with digital technologies to create new artefacts and events? How are new skills, which can coexist and complement traditional skills, developing in today's performing arts landscape? In which ways are cultural expressions from the past being currently reinvigorated and renewed with leading edge digital technology?

THINK
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This Think Paper is one of a collection of Think Papers issued by RICHES in order to stimulate further debate on the issues arising from the research.

Research undertaken by the RICHES project covers a range of subject areas including digital libraries, virtual performance, crafts, fashion, technologies and spaces.

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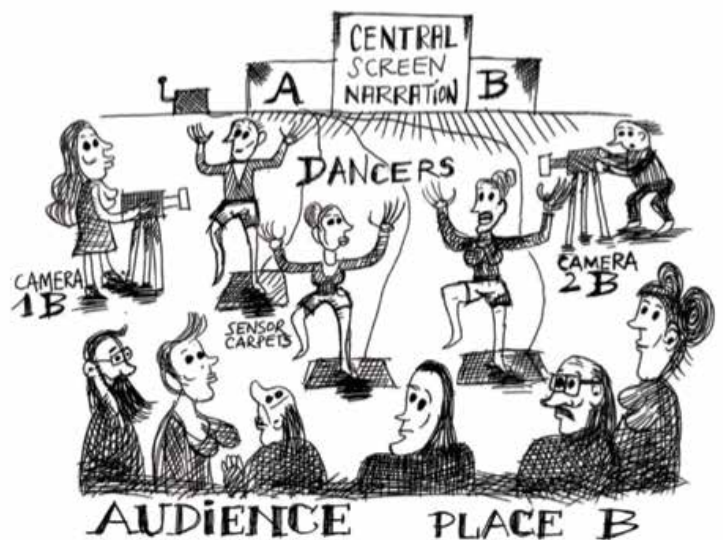
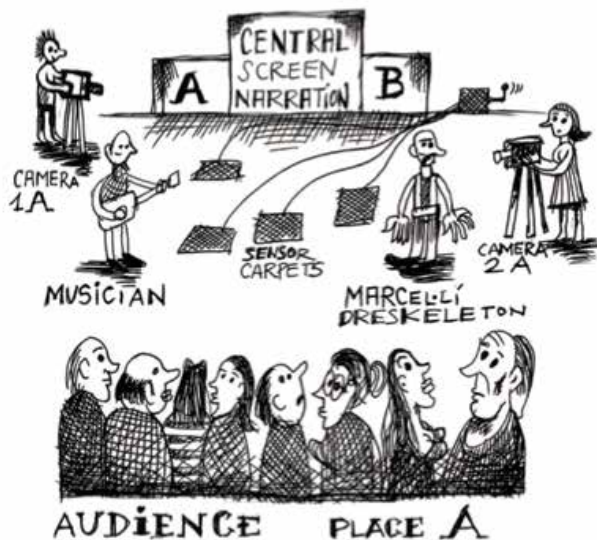


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All these questions intersect in the virtual distributed performance. As defined in the RICHES Taxonomy, virtual distributed performances are performing arts productions in which interactive technology and virtual spaces are used to mediate or augment interactions among performers, between performers and the performing space, or between performers and the audience. A wide range of virtual performances can be enacted, depending on artistic intentions and the modes of technology integration. Technology-enhanced interactions are generally distinguished by the way they facilitate connections among one or several physical spaces, among different virtual spaces, or combinations of virtual and physical spaces.

Distributed performances push the boundaries of what we traditionally recognise as cultural heritage. They propose a hybridisation of disciplines, a creative partnership between the performing arts and engineering. In many instances, this interplay entails an ingenious recrafting of cultural heritage elements to take full advantage of the possibilities of digital technologies. In doing so, they force us to reconsider deeply held notions of our cultural identity, placing under scrutiny the meanings we attach to elements of our tangible and intangible cultural heritage.



A case study in distributed performances: Marcel·lí Antúnez's Ultraorbism

Ultraorbism is an interactive distributed action between two networked connected spaces in two cities; Barcelona and Falmouth. It was conceived by Marcel·lí Antúnez Roca (Moià, Barcelona, 1959), well-known in the international art scene for his mechanotronic performances and robotic installations, as a joint creative venture with i2CAT Foundation, Coventry University and Falmouth University. The piece was performed simultaneously in Barcelona's Centre d'Art Santa Mònica and Falmouth University on the 9th of April 2015.



The performance develops a story based on a fantastic journey structured in several scenes. This journey is inspired by works such as “True Histories” by Lucian of Samosata (AD 125/180), “Comical History of the States and Empires of the Moon” by Cyrano de Bergerac (1619-1655) and “L’Autre Monde” by Grandville (1803- 1847).

Lucian’s book is considered a forerunner of science fiction, and tells us about an invented journey on which none of the places visited are real. In it, Lucian describes a journey into space on a sea of milk, and one of the places visited is the Moon. The story was written as a critique of the travel books of the era, which assumed many fabrications to be true.

Promoting open innovation in cultural heritage

Ultraorbism was successful in creating a hybrid virtual performance-as-experiment, by enmeshing digital technologies into the fabric of ancient Greek storytelling. Lucian of Samostata's vision of reaching to the unknown (the moon, the stars, the bottom of the sea) reflects a universal longing of humankind. By retelling the story with the aid of distributed digital technologies, a connection between modern and ancient audiences is created through this shared cultural heritage.

Marcel·lí's performance binds past and present together by reinterpreting a traditional cultural heritage storyline (an ancient Greek fantastic narrative), with the possibilities offered by cutting-edge digital technology (real-time video, mechatronics, audience interactivity, distributed action, feedback loops that push the performance further). In doing so, it proposes a new hybrid artistic form, merging the traditional features of intangible cultural heritage with the expanded possibilities of digital technology.

Ultraorbism exemplifies the relevance of distributed performances for cultural heritage research in today's digital arts landscape. New, tech-savvy audiences are willing to experiment with novel ways to engage with their cultural heritage, giving rise to patterns of cultural consumption different from traditional ways to access cultural heritage. Audiences were generally engaged and satisfied: technology was perceived as an integral element of the performance, especially as regards performer interaction (between Barcelona and Falmouth) and tech-enabled storytelling devices (mechatronics, screen animations).





The relevance of Ultraorbism to cultural heritage research also lays in that it brings to the fore a key question: what kind of role do we want cultural heritage to play in the future of Europe? Is it one marked by optimism and self-confidence, open to experimentation and world influences? Or closed-minded and insecure, always afraid of losing some imagined essence? The process of construction of Europe is also a process of co-creation of a shared pan-European identity. Involving the citizens in the creative practices of appropriation and reinterpretation of cultural heritage afforded by distributed performances can infuse new meaning to old stories, and mobilise our rich culture in solving the social and political issues of today.

*“Bringing cultural heritage and people together in a changing Europe
and finding new ways of engaging with heritage in a digital world”*

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