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Relive the Virtual: an Analysis of Unplugged Performance Installations

Can retro media make us relive the virtual from digital media? Following McLuhan's thesis that the proper characteristics of a medium are revealed through remediation, it could well be that retro media re-enacting digital media can make explicit what the concept 'virtual' entails. Two recent works analyzed in this article take as their starting point antique theatrical techniques (the ballet pulley, the panorama) to evoke optical illusions, not to stage another illusion but for other purposes. Both works, which have no actual connection with cyberspace, include non-narrative interplay with antiquated technological installations that generate a challenging experience for the contemporary spectator in a digital era. The performance-installation *I / II / III / IIII* by Kris Verdonck stages a repetition in time in which the viewer gets trapped. By reviving virtual features into real ones and presenting them in replay-mode, the viewer discovers how a variation of sameness can evoke significant differences, or how identity arises due to a repetition in time. Hans Op de Beeck's installation *Location (6)* displays an all-round view in a real but generic space that induces the spectator's performative power – like an avatar, able to dwell in the virtuality of personal imagination. Robrecht Vanderbeeken has published on a variety of topics, including metaphysics, philosophy of technology and aesthetics. Formerly a researcher in the Theory Department of the Jan van Eyck Academy, he now teaches at the Royal Academy of Fine Art at University College Ghent (KASK), and is current researching the philosophical implications of technological innovations in art and culture.

Art is often a bastard, the parents of which we do not know.

Nam June Paik

TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIA on a stage can fulfil radically different functions. The theatre work of Erwin Piscator of the 1920s, for instance, used film onstage to insert an alienating document from real life playfully into a fictional spectacle. In contemporary theatre, however, a staged screen tends to assume the role of a scenographic prop, a narrative extra, or even a protagonist in the play. Instead of being merely an instrument, technology on stage can also be the subject of a performance, especially with the rise of new media which displays how the novelties and possibilities of new effects can take centre stage. Furthermore, a performance often aspires to uncover the phenomenon of technology itself and how it mediates the world we live in. A technological medium is not just a device, but a process that mediates our experience, knowledge, actions, or interactions.

This discussion will focus on how the staging of retro theatre techniques can reveal what is essential about the virtual stance of Virtual Reality and thus on how a 'backwards' remediation of new media by the old can make explicit the mediating nature of the technology at work. Note that this analysis implies a familiar media-theoretic assumption in reverse order. According to Marshall McLuhan in his *Understanding Media* (1962), the evolution of technology brings about new conditions that put existing media in a new perspective. In a similar way, using old media to restage new media might create an anti-environment that generates a unique experience due to the contrast in the psychological perception of both: the disused and nostalgic technology versus the new but daily used.¹

In a contemporary context, the observer's fascination with the logic of these retro-installations is to be found particularly in the liveness as well as the realness of the visual spectacle, by contrast with the recorded (or

reproduced) and the artificial (or virtual) nature of mass media.

Concerning liveness, the works discussed here do not stage a rehearsed text, as in traditional drama. Rather, they relate to performance art, in which a unique piece emerges here and now, on the spot. They are also exemplary with respect to the so-called post-medium condition: it is no coincidence that both directors are fine artists who explore the powers of staging in order to reinvent their relation with an audience.²

While reusing antique techniques, neither work aims simply to create a theatre of attractions, to provoke a shock of 'the new' for a contemporary audience that is unfamiliar with these outmoded effects. Nor are they intended to be variety shows reloaded for contemporary times.³ They are not about the illusion in itself; they are about what can be done with it.

The return to unplugged installations makes way for a retro-garde in creating a special kind of immersion that consists of a unique, self-reflective awareness. Verdonck, for instance, as we will see, uses a special effect to develop knowledge of repetition. Hans Op de Beeck turns a panorama into an introspection-machine.

Kris Verdonck, I/II/III/IV

Dance Performance Installation (2007)

This installation can be enjoyed without any reference to digital culture, and Kris Verdonck does not intend such a reference.⁴ Nonetheless, this non-digital (even non-electronic) work is very instructive when looked at in this way. In the first scene, we see a graceful dance of a ballerina buckled up in a ballet pulley that enables her to transgress gravity and flirt with it while making high ascending pirouettes. In a way, the infinite potentialities of virtual reality are literally embodied on this stage.

In each subsequent scene, a similar ballerina joins in, hanging sideways, which results in a beautiful and serene spectacle that also resonates virtual reality in terms of doubling, tweening and morphing. However, Verdonck does not just use the ballet pulley to create a

series of optical illusions. The technological effect is used here as an instrument for an artistic analysis that reveals much about the virtual in a metaphorical and phenomenological sense.

As in other installations and performances such as *In, Dancer, Rain, Box, and End*, Verdonck investigates how technology can make artistic features visible and create situations in which chimera are materialized. This results in delusions that are not fake, but which are created truthfully, albeit with a mechanical set-up. Although Verdonck employs theatre's box of tricks, he avoids the higger-mugger of the magician and adopts an anti-illusionist stance; he wants to expose and enlarge tricks in favour of a visual study. This makes him a *homo faber*, a researcher who is interested in techno-science to the extent that he can use it to make art that reveals the laws of action and interpretation.

For that matter, *I/II/III/IV* is a dance improvisation repeated in sequences with one altering variable that is literally put in the spotlight. In this way, the spectator becomes enclosed in a time experience that discloses the virtuality of a repetition. In Scene One, amazement rules. It revives the grace of the white birds in *Swan Lake*. A ballerina hovers like an angel, turning perfect pirouettes. There is no resistance, doubt, or complaint in what is an elegant play of interaction, action, and reaction.

From the second scene on – which is identical to the first, save for the fact that a second ballerina has joined in – the perspective is radically altered. The spectators now know that two more similar scenes will follow (the extra space for two more ballerinas is suddenly very *present*) and it becomes clear that the dancers are not characters, but are mere moving bodies, puppets on a string. They do not improvise, but follow a rudimentary choreography that can be reproduced easily. However, in the process of repetition, the perfection disappears: now the spectator can see what is different and thus what goes wrong.

This emphasizes the failure and weakness of human action when bound by a system. The same weightless movements tend to



Images from Kris Verdonck, *I / II / III / IV*. Photos: Giannina Urmeneta Ottiker (above and opposite, bottom); Hendrik De Smedt (opposite, top).

transform into images of bodies dragged over the floor and turned upside down like hanging carcasses.

The doubling shows that this performance also presents jumping jacks that are constrained, in the sense that the common physical order we all obey is exchanged for artificial formation. This invisible condition, which functions as a metaphor for any social formation, including a digital system like virtual reality, permits free movement, albeit limited to a necessary pattern. The technical installation of *I/II/III/IV* is not shown, as this could suggest, as a struggle between 'man' and 'machine', which could distract one from the fact that technology is only used to display an abstract interplay between agents and the coordinates of a system, any system.

What is more, the dancers do not simply submit to this system, nor are they in reaction

mode, busily searching for a transgression of boundaries. Instead, they take imposed codes and conventions as conditions of possibility, and thus symbolize the insight that freedom starts at the very moment one accepts being determined. In fact, the same holds for the avatars at our disposal; they provide a circumscribed and hedged freedom only if we have mastered the skill to employ them.

A Fourfold Variation

The third scene introduces yet another dimension. The appearance of a third ballerina confirms the assumption that this performance will only display a fourfold variation. But now the spectator is left alone, wondering about the significance of this repetition, until he/she realises that the spectator is also trapped in a compulsive frame. Verdonck clearly does not want to titillate his audience with an effect of surprise, a sudden twist in the plot, a *deus ex machina*. At first sight, there is hardly any difference between the third and the second scene. The spectator is stuck in the wheels of reproduction. At the same time, the serenity of the play makes it too difficult just to get up and leave. The only escape hatch is to curse the artist silently and endure the boredom.

Following the dancers, it is now up to the audience to fold this imposed situation into a challenge: by re-examining something they have just seen. Spectators are given the opportunity of a double take in which small changes from the previous scene become noticeable. An intriguing world of transient details is made explicit: we perceive inaccuracies that managed to escape the control of the dancers, as well as the technological arrangement; we notice failed attempts to do things differently; and we see how difficult it is for three dancers to repeat precisely the dancing of the previous scene together. *Post factum*, the fresh memory of the second scene also adjusted, for the third scene highlights their mutual difference. Hence, in this repetition, identity is formed.

Finally, there is the fourth scene, where the initial function is probably to avoid the performance stopping with the third scene.

Despite the conveniently arranged and well-measured simplicity of this performance, it would clearly be too abrupt to end it at this point. Knowing that this is the last round, and because of the obstinate deceleration of the previous scenes, the spectator is now beyond boredom and needs a continuation, a recap, an encore in which everything can be observed again for the last time.

Scene Four primarily adds viewing time. As happens in scientific research, this is a final check that is meant to provide a definite impression and to confirm the performance as a whole. Therefore, the eventual function of this scene is to stage the repetition as repetition, for this final repetition emphasizes the succession of scenes and gives each one of them meaning in relation to the others. With Scene Four, Verdonck inserts a meta-level that raises form into content, since it shows the repetitive experiment as a structure, as something abstract which brings about its own cognitive mechanics. In doing so, he invites the spectator to question what is so special about looking again and again at virtually identical artistic formations.

At the same time, he provides an answer. While scientific verification is meant to specify facts and confirm empirical tendencies, *I/II/III/III* demonstrates that artistic verification does not necessarily exhaust the viewer. On the contrary, it generates an interesting diversity of dimensions. As it happens, this reveals the virtual nature of repetition: it demonstrates its potential to create diversity, but this very potential also indicates its spuriousness, since repetition is meant to be an identical series of sameness.

Additionally, the fourth scene procures a bizarre experience. At its end, everything seems to come together in a perfect unity, after all. The dissonance of the previous scene seems to have yielded to symmetry and balance. This leaves the spectator with an open ending. Is the harmony of the last part a real or a psychological phenomenon? Is it because the combined play of the dancers works out better after being repeated four times? Or is it because the spectator has become so acquainted with this formation that it is completed virtually?⁵





Hans Op de Beeck, *Location (6)*
Sculptural Installation (2008)

The non-digital work of Hans Op de Beeck does not explicitly focus on digital culture either, but it is significant for digital culture in at least two ways.⁶ First, in so far as it is appropriate to assume a common denominator in Op de Beeck's work, it often revolves around the virtuality of spaces. He created several works that literally embodied a virtual spirit and thereby underscored how superficial public space (and life) can be, whether offline or online. Now, in *Location (6)*, the spectator can actually discover an essential condition of the virtuality of a virtual space like VR.

To begin with the first. Op de Beeck is a multimedia artist (who also produces photographs, sculptural installations, video works and drawings, as well as short stories) whose work often concerns the clichéd but nonetheless inescapable atmosphere of public places, such as crossroads at night, a shopping mall after closing time, a motorway diner, or an abandoned amusement park. These are, in a way, non-places that generate non-situations which are, at the same time, very familiar. These places welcome the observer, as an extra rather than as an individual character.

Op de Beeck's unique style does not shy away from an aesthetic or even a kitsch look, thus resulting in strong images that tease the





Location (6). Sculptural installation, mixed media, mist and artificial light, 18 metres diameter x 4 metres high (cylinder). Opposite: view from the exterior. Above: spectator in the interior. Below: scopic view from the interior. Photos of this installation by courtesy of Galleria Continua, San Gimignano and Beijing; Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna; Xavier Hufkens, Brussels; Galerie Ron Mandos, Rotterdam and Amsterdam.

viewer with respect to the established codes of minimal and conceptual art. Yet at the same time he manages to express the incapacity of these spaces to fulfil their intention of bringing about a pleasant or even a festive and lively air.

Op de Beeck's work is not about communicating an idea but about evoking a palpable experience. He creates serene places whose exterior reveals an interior that communicates present-day modes of being-in-transit, without becoming moralistic or nostalgic. The aesthetics of these heterotopias balance on an ambiguity between revolt and resignation, and irony and Zen. In his life-size installation *Location (5)* of 2004, for instance, Op de Beeck rebuilt some seats from a snack bar at a motorway diner which invite the

spectator to take a break and gaze out of the window at a nocturnal and deserted highway, imitated by means of a magnified perspective. Here, the viewer can actually enter the sculpture, become part of the space and perceive it from the inside out. Due to its fake setting, the spurious realm of these non-places awaits its guests in full force.

With respect to the virtuality of virtual spaces, the installation *Location (6)* includes a mental special effect. Even though an immersion in VR is primarily a purely visual experience with minimal narrative guidance, the experience itself only works thanks to a massive input of performative power by the spectator, and especially the input of mental projection. *Location (6)* highlights the latter in an original manner. Obviously, there is



always a minimal quantity of denotative code that escapes the control of the artist due to the use of materials and the construction methods. This is no different in *Location (6)*. Nevertheless, Op de Beeck opts for a vanishing denotation. That is, he reduces the details and references of his landscape to their bare minimum in order to free the connotative code of the maker.

This reduction strips the display of evident narrative, changing these places from a token into a type: they represent any and every such place. Their presence can easily be ignored or even forgotten. However, as their anonymity is exacerbated, so too is their metaphorical quality enhanced. The lack of detail belonging to real surroundings is precisely the artifice that triggers the viewer's own store of memories, thereby making an empathic involvement possible. Thanks to the generic modelling, it is not the artist but the spectator who makes the link between presentation and meaning or recollection.⁷

Location (6) is, in a way, a materialised copy of Virtual Reality. This indoor sculptural installation has the shape of a box that encloses a hermetic image-space. One must pass through a long dark corridor (which emphasizes the start of a journey into the unknown) to enter this interior landscape. Inside, once logged in, there is, literally, a modelled three-dimensional view: the visitor can sit down or wander around and experience this 360° panorama that seems to be put under a bell jar.

The large windows inside (which also function as 'a window on the world') between the look-out and the white space that locks in the senses of the visitor, echo the glass plane of the monitor. Next, there is the phenomenological perception that is comparable to avatar-scopic vision, albeit in a real fake world. *Location (6)* offers the visitor an unplugged encounter with a piece of enlarged reality, here and now; it imposes a fixed perspective on the audience, defying the eye to roam and survey. Like VR, this world has come to a complete standstill, and the spectator can dwell on its view. This reality is there, continuously. There is no hurry; nothing will change while the visitor looks

away. The fake snow establishes a peaceful prospect and ensures that the environment will remain permanently frozen, for the simple reason that fake snow does not melt.

Also the limitedness and spuriousness of the first-person perspective are challenged in this panopticon. On the one hand, the staged world is laid out with the eye in mind; it can explore every inch of the landscape right up to its own boundary. The illuminated borders of the view form a true all-round horizon that coincides with the physical capacities of the human eye – its maximal scope. On the other hand, the eye fully dominates a panorama that exposes nothing but a white void, which is fresh and ready for the spectator's imagination to spill onto it.

Thanks to this tension, *Location (6)* lays bare the importance of the imaginary power needed to resurrect this 'world'. The pleasure of sculpting, for Op de Beeck, is to be found in the ancient idea of mimesis that drives the history of art – the attempt to construct something authentic. Furthermore, in the case of sculpture one can actually make a world with one's bare hands, and thereby gain a sense of being in control of the making of a fantasy. However, *Location (6)* is not an illusion that is meant to trick the visitor like a *trompe-l'oeil* painting. Rather, it is a clichéd and abundantly clear construction that eventually underscores how monitored and artificial the spectator's real world has become.

Op de Beeck strips all details and erases colours in order to obtain an anti-spectacle which is vacant; white; and even the waterless puddles and the sparse, windless trees lack shadow. This pristine sleeping beauty shows nothing new. But it is precisely this absence that arrests the visitor's attention and makes way for reminiscences, for a somewhere to tilt into this nowhere, or for spells to undo the missing dimension of this infinity.

The stripped scenery guides the observer into the realms of personal imagination so that one can complete the depiction for oneself. The truthfulness of a scripted imagination is made possible by oblivion. Of course, this shift can only happen on condition that the spectator is prepared to suspend his/her disbelief and accept the invitation of the fake

landscape to finish it, to interiorize it and hence bring it alive in his/her experience. And that, in my view, is exactly what the virtual stance is about.⁸

References

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Notes

1. This unplugged strategy, by the way, is already a common artistic disposition. For instance, recall the pixel aesthetics in the paintings of the German artist Gerhard Richter. The Belgium artist Nick Ervinck makes

colourful (yellow) sculptures that emulate organic virtual structures; the American director Andros Zins-Browne created the dance performance *Second Life* (2007), in which old and young dancers simulated retired avatars on stage; and the Belgian artist Laurent Liefvooghe created the performance installation *Viewmaster* (2007) based on the Pepper's Ghost trick, which allows two dancers to create real morphing effects. The discussion on still/moving in cinema montage is actually put on stage in this work. Cf. Laura Mulvey *Death 24 x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (2006). More information and video at <www.vooruit.be/en/event/1609/media> or <www.liefvooghe.be>.

2. Rosalind Krauss (1999) coined the term 'post-medium condition' in order to pinpoint crossovers and intermediality in the fine arts. Contemporary artists hardly work within one specific medium any more. Instead they are highly aware of the diversity of (old and new) media. They combine, upgrade, and mutilate media in order to generate interesting mutations.

3. Strauben (2006) discusses how post-cinema experiments resonate with the early cinema preceding classical, narrative cinema. Similarly, contemporary post-dramatic theatre has a tendency to restage vaudeville aspects. But since theatre often responds to cinema culture and lacks a similar technological evolution, contemporary performances often also return to the cinema of attractions (mechanical effects, slapstick, and so on).

4. More info and video: <www.vooruit.be/en/event/1085/media> or <<http://www.margaritaproduction.be>>.

5. This minimal performance is also rich in other meanings. For instance, it refutes the influential definition of special effects being 'scripted spaces' (Klein (2003). *I/I/III/IIII* is not a walk-through or click-through environment. It encloses a time script based on a chronology.

6. More information and video at <www.hansopdebeeck.com>.

7. Oliviera and Oxley (2008) coined the term 'generic re-enactment' for this strategy.

8. This generic experiment clearly is a controversial 'echo object', as noted in Stafford (2007). Here it is the absence of features that does the cognitive work.