Online Education
Teaching in a Time of Change

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Online Education: Teaching in a Time of Change

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INTRODUCTION

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This proceeding publication is the outcome of the virtual conference, Online Education: Teaching in a Time of Change, held in April 2021. It was coordinated the research group AMPS, its scholarly journal ArchitectureMPS published by UCL Press together with several universities: Ball State University, USA; Beaconhouse National University, Pakistan; University of Pretoria, South Africa; University of Kassel, Germany. It offered a platform for multiple and diverse perspectives and interpretation of online education and research as it stands today.

The unprecedented changes faced by the world in 2020 produced many challenges and opportunities for the global academic fraternity. Educational systems required a sudden shift in teaching methods, communicative techniques, the use of the latest digital tools, and a quick revision of learning outcomes. On the brighter side, teachers and students proved adept at embracing innovation, and "online education" helped academicians connect across the globe; although the success of the transference to online education was not uniform, with some struggling with questions of accessibility and the ability to explore the online possibilities of this new era.

In the midst of it all, platforms like the Khan Academy and Skillshare got more attention than ever due to their effective online education structure, and disciplines whose assessment and delivery modes are heavily lecture and test-based, tended to thrive. On the contrary, those disciplines that require a physical presence due to the nature of their teaching or reliance on peer-to-peer learning, tended to suffer. Skills-based courses and exercises such as model making lost contact with the "materiality" of their subject matter. Science programs, reliant on lab experiments struggled to replace the materials or prototyping they depend on and, for the main part, the dynamic interaction of the design studio was reduced to interaction through a smartphone or computer screen. Overall, the relocation to virtual classrooms, online studios and remote seminars affected the standard work cycles of educators and researchers to such an extent that the repercussions are still to be understood. It all affects the current debate on online education.

The papers collated in this publication, and the conference which it documents, reflect the diverse perspectives of educators at this point in time. They offer a synoptic view of researchers and professionals who together are reconfiguring the possibilities of the new and emerging pedagogical realm.

Zain Adil

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INTRODUCTION

The Collins Word of the 2020 was "lockdown", "because it is a unifying experience for billions of people across the world".[1]

"Lockdown, with its heavy, clunking syllables and heavier associations, is the condition we've most dreaded in 2020 – a state of national stasis, where almost everything that constitutes normal public life is suspended. [..] We're quite literally housebound. It's not a shock to remember, then, that lockdown was originally a piece of prison vocabulary: it's when inmates are confined to their cells because of some disturbance on the wing."[2]

The theme of this article is introduced by the Collins definition because, in a synthetic way and at the same time representative of a phenomenon much wider than the sample considered in this work, it describes the scenario in which the research moved: a heavy condition of stasis. This perception finds confirmation in the action research conducted with museum educators, teachers and teachers in training, and in the answers given by different cultural actors at the international level.

After a prolonged phase of discomfort, in which the relationship between teachers, educators, curators and the recipients of their actions was reciprocally perceived as cold and meaningless, the aim of this article is to show how the apparent immobility of bodies and actions in front of a screen found in performative methodologies the tool to fill the void given by distances. It is an act of rediscovery of the body and gesture as a metaphor for reality.

Through the observation of the change of perspective on the digital and the new role entrusted to corporeity, the article describes how in an altered space-time it was possible to have pleasant and at the same time meaningful formative experiences.

Digital before and after the advent of the pandemic

Before the lockdown condition of public life, for all educational and training agencies (museums, schools, universities) digital technology was perceived as an important, but an ancillary, resource.

As Theodor Adorno already pointed out concerning other fields of application, the art world promotes critical thinking by definition.

This condition justifies a sceptical attitude towards the use of technology, which involved in the first instance (about twenty years ago) the reasons of conservation, documentation and archiving, subsequently, the debate extended to the themes of intellectual property and professional skills, with a mainly communicative function, until arriving at the recent contemporary period in which the dilemma on the use of technologies contemplated the role of the public and above all the quality of fruition. In a remarkably brief time and bound by necessity, the object of reflection was no longer whether to use technologies or not, but what was the best methodology to use them.

In fact, during the lockdown, if the main objective of educational and cultural agencies was to maintain the status of cultural and identity praesidium, the question was how to involve different audiences starting from the assumption that the aesthetic experience is an indispensable element.

How the museum can be a social resource, a node in a system of relations, an activist as the case may be, and above all, an educational agency has long been a matter of reflection. The proliferation of visitor studies and research on Audience Development methodologies and approaches shows how attention to audiences and especially to their needs has become a fundamental element in museum strategies and programming, almost on a par with the study and care of collections.

During the pandemic, we have witnessed a production of (digital) cultural content unparalleled in human history for its copiousness and variety, the credit for which goes mainly to the educational sections of the various museums around the globe, often decimated by their precarious staff, due to the lack of opening and especially the absence of school groups and tourists.

The list of possibilities, dependent solely on a device and a good network connection, includes webinars, performances and various proposals on social media, meetings on Zoom, podcasts and even radio art.

All this variety stems from a significant fact: compared to other sectors, the world of culture has been somehow ready, since the languages that have characterised the quarantine have been the subject of reflection for some time. We have witnessed the affirmation of the *museum of everywhere* (Dziekan and Proctor 2019,177-192), in the blink of an eye, we have gone from "digital adoption" to "postdigital adoption." It means that contemporary life can be defined by a hybrid and problematic approach, through computation (Berry and Dieter 2015, 1-11).

Overcoming the heated debate about who is the proper repository of knowledge and, therefore, about who has the right and the duty to transmit it, museums through formal channels, but much more often through social media, have transformed themselves into platforms of creativity to inspire, foster critical and possibly participatory dialogue, keeping alive their community.[3]

Museum were present, often asynchronously and with little digital expertise, experimenting, sometimes improvising and often having to cope with financial difficulties.

As social distancing continues, e-Learning, in all its forms, has become the essential showcase for educational activities, in the same way as the various social platforms for museums. Alongside the new distance but synchronous proposals, based on meetings with artists and curators or experiential activities managed by the educational services, we would like to highlight the most recent experience undertaken by the Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, through The DIGITAL COSMOS project: a new museum itinerary entirely based on digital curatorship that "puts at the centre of its programme the contemplation and experience of real works of art designed to be online, but without the obligation of interaction and active participation of the public". The digital world, previously kept apart from institutional activities, now assumes the status of a space specifically dedicated to artistic and aesthetic experience.

FROM THE STILLNESS OF BODIES AND ACTIONS TO NEW SOLUTIONS TO FILL THE VOID OF SPACES

In the chapter entitled *L'armatura, la pelle*, the dancer Dominique Depuy describes the importance of the sense of touch in constructing danced space (2011,41- 48). To represent the process by which an educated gesture (a choreographed gesture), occurs, he imagines the skin to be an armour that imprisons the body. This metaphor is not only useful to visualise a state of matter, such as the presence of a body with its movement, but above all, it shows a state of constraint that is very similar to the one in which teachers and educators found themselves, during the lockdown. The impediment of which Depuy speaks represents an opportunity to find new solutions: "it is impossible to respond with formulae, passe-partout gestures, we must invent, play cunningly, without dodging the problem posed, but questioning it, integrating it, incorporating it" (Dominque Depuy 2011,44). The skin, through which "the tacit enterprise of the tactile" takes place, goes beyond the level of abstraction typical of this historical moment and by the involvement of touch (beyond sight and hearing) leads back to a common sense of knowledge. As Jean-Luc Nancy affirms (2011), the act of touching occurs even before the gesture and, above all, occurs precisely in distance, in absence. When two bodies separate (the archetype is that of birth), distinguishing themselves from each other, they discover otherness and, therefore, the possibility of being able to touch each other. The reconquest of this sense, through the computer screen, was one of the objectives of the actions described below. It is no coincidence that at the time of distance, many cultural institutions that found themselves deprived of the physical presence of their audiences felt the need to revitalise their halls through acts of dance. By way of example, and without any claim to being exhaustive, the following should be noted:

The project "Capolavori in Ballo" (Masterpieces in Dance) by the MOTUS company: a multimedia work and a performance in which dance combined with art to show some lesser-known aspects, often details, of the masterpieces conserved in the Pinacoteca di Siena. For the exhibition "Anselm Kiefer: Field of the Cloth of Gold", at the Gagosian, Hugo Marchadand and Hannah O'Neil danced to Florent Melac's choreographies, leading the spectator to ideally walk through the landscape created by Kiefer's works. Movement succeeds in giving a third dimension to wheat fields or threatening skies. Le Grand Palais de Paris, closed to the public for works until 2024, is shown through "La Ronde" the work created by Boris Charmatz. "#dancinbo la danza e danza a Bologna" was a four-part television format in which the city of Bologna is told through dance in places of art, architecture and monuments. During Black lives matter, the Tate Gallery broadcast on its social channels the performance by Enam Gbewonyo set to music by Liz Gre in which the fusion of sounds and movements created "an ode to Blackness and response". It was a work inspired by Lynette Yiadom Boakye's painting "Stillness", exhibited at the time. With the éreale project, on YouTube, the Royal Museums of Turin remained engaged with their audiences through a video in which dancers, acrobats, fencers and opera singers acted in the emptiness and silence of the rooms, describing and interpreting them.

One of the first hybrid exhibitions (both in the presence and at a distance) offers a further opportunity to reflect on the themes of this article: The Paradox of Stillness: Art, Object, and Performance at the Walker Art Center, Contemporary Art Museum in Minneapolis. This exhibition explores the notion of "stillness", from the point of view of performative and visual gesture. "Stillness and permanence are common qualities of painting and sculpture. Consider, for example, the frozen gestures of a historical tableau, the timelessness of a still life painting, or the unyielding bronze or marble figure. Translating these traditional mediums into actions, artists use performance to investigate the interplay between the fixed image and the live body".[4] We are therefore witnessing the materialisation of the metaphor of reality, thanks to the body and objects. As the choreographer and dancer Yvonne Rainer affirmed, the

body "must be handled like an object, so that objects and bodies can be interchangeable", in this sense space can be understood through the practice, or taking up Agamben's theories, the use and care of bodies (Giorgio Agamben 2018, 1005-1280). It is a conceptual operation that contaminating material and immaterial elements, through the perceptive experience of the body, come to a more meaningful knowledge of space. The gesture of the dancers is certainly the most evident form of this relationship between space and body. In this sense, an example that was considered in designing the training activities discussed below is *Hand Movie*. This is a 1966 video by Yvonne Rainer in which, in front of a fixed camera, a hand moves. The movement of the hand combined with the viewer's gaze determines the infinite possibilities of the action. A fixed camera, like the one on the trainers' laptops, the bodies of the observer and the one acting, as in distance learning.

THE SPACE MEDIATED BY THE SCREEN, LIKE A FRAME.

We have interpreted the screen of our computers, thinking about literature in the field of screen studies, and looking at the now historical theories on frames.[5]

Georges Simmel, probably the first to reflect on the frame, noted the relationship between it and the public gaze. According to Simmel, the frame draws the eye, not to itself, but its content, assuming the function of isolating it from the space outside it. This media function has a connotation of unreality, as recalled by Rudolf Arnheim who, observing the phenomenon from the point of view of the gestalt theory of perception, shows how the iconic spatiality circumscribed in the frame is often optically unreceivable and cannot be assimilated with the reality of the viewing subject. From our point of view, this aspect was a further reason to reflect on the need to find footholds and valid metaphors of reality. This medium has been conceived as a hybrid between inside and outside, in which the experience of a sensory nature, in particular the tactile one, has represented a valid solution. Transferring the thought of Josè Ortega y Gasset to our medium, the screen-frame can be perceived as a frontier capable of neutralising the disturbing elements, favouring the attention towards what he defines as "the aesthetic island", understood as a strip of land sprouting right in the middle of the sea. In choreographic language, the frame is the structure in which the gestures take place. This point of view makes it possible to change the approach to the management of the training/educational exhibition. Talking about structure leads to understanding the screen as part of a linguistic code. This conception has made it possible to overcome the restriction determined by the formal two-dimensionality of the frame screen, rediscovering a space of concentration with strong symbolic potential, in which gestures and words follow a rituality proper to the educator's profession.

THE EXPERIENCES OF ACTION RESEARCH

In contemporaneity, pedagogical and other practice and research had endeavoured to overcome the so-called Cartesian dualism between *res cogita*ns and *res extensa*.[6] In the era of quarantine, there has been a return to a rigid dualism between mind and body, in transmissive styled. The setting of lessons and, the supposed acquisition of knowledge has long been based on intellectual processes and symbolic practices, in which phenomenological experience has been denied. As Dallari states, "To be attentive and to be concentrated means to be still and to forget to be bodies" (Marco Dallari 2002, 96). In the following space, we will dedicate ourselves to the description of some training experiences, carried out following the dictates of action research, with the aim of finding effective answers to the problems of contingency. The case studies reported here follow in time the evolution of quarantine in Italy. At the end of the first lockdown (May/June 2020), the writer had the opportunity to carry out a training course with twenty-seven museum educators from the municipality of Milan.

The course consisted of six meetings to update the educators. It based on topics, methodologies and actions at the international level and supporting the planning of future activities. After the first shocking period of closure, it was believed that in September everything would be back to normal. This thought also applied to the educators who, during the proposed activities and through two questionnaires, had shown absolute reluctance to do distance activities, synchronous or asynchronous activities. Despite the wide range of case studies proposed, for these twenty-seven ladies, the only possible activity was the one in presence to the detriment of all the rest. The turning point in the writer's journey took place between November 20 and January 21, thanks to a training course for twenty-two teachers with Pirelli Hangar Bicocca and performer Marcella Vanzo. The project, entitled "#fareinsiemesquolapubblica"[7] (doingtogheterpublicschool), through a process of a laboratory and collaborative nature, between all those involved, it aimed to offer primary school teachers a new approach to their teaching. Starting from the performative practice of the artist, who engaged the trainees with simple activities of an almost playful nature, the teachers were able to measure themselves against contemporary art, which is less frequented in training and refresher courses, conceiving it as a tool and not just a discipline, useful for interdisciplinary teaching activities. Theory and practice alternated circularly and dynamically thanks to the expert support of pedagogues and art historians. Through two questionnaires and the observation of the results reported in the work with the children at school, it was possible to document a positive change. The stillness and the blockage in proposing interactive activities, based on finding solutions to problem situations or researching real experiences, had fallen. The small exercises which brought the body and the use of objects concerning space back to the centre of teaching practice were fundamental in the third training, this one with twenty-seven museum operators from all over Italy. A focus group with some of the participants showed that the contamination of languages and methodologies from different disciplines made the activity dynamic and attractive. In this case, the activities proposed mixed experiential exercises of a sensory nature with suggestions deriving from visual research on some contemporary artists which emphasised senses other than sight and hearing. The request to work with tools such as photography, storytelling, drawing and the visual interpretation of words allowed a different relationship with the space mediated by the screen, changing attitudes and approaches to the different disciplines. All these experiments have been incorporated into the distance learning course in Art Didactics and Pedagogy, aimed at university students who want to become teachers. In addition to the contamination between disciplines and tools, the search for an objectuality through the screen and the link between reality and the surrounding environment as a fundamental element of an active and experiential type of teaching, work was done on the creation of rituals. A fundamental element of performative methodologies, ritual, due to its close relationship with a time decoded by symbolic actions that are repeated, has a strong educational value and is fundamental for the creation of a community. This last point was one of the aims researched to establish a relationship with students. As the philosopher Byung- Chul Han states "rites are processes of embodiment, bodily preparations [...] they are inscribed in the body, incorporated, internalised through the body. Thus, rites create embodied knowledge and memory (Byung- Chul Han 2021, 22-23).

CONCLUSION

Not long before the advent of the pandemic in 2019, reflecting on the disappearance of rituals as a symptom of community erosion, Byung-Chul Han noted how digital communication represents a reverberation chamber inadequate to create a resonant environment and useful only to reinforce an "echo of the self" (Byung- Chul Han 2021, 22).

This vision clarifies the sense, expressed by teachers and educators, of a lack of meaningful relationships through the screen. The researches carried out by the Italian Educational Research Society, (SIRD)[8], by the various platforms of confrontation among teachers set up by different universities (such as the Politecnico of Milan and the Normal of Pisa), as well as the action research work briefly recounted above, highlight in addition to the state of stillness described by Collins, the difficulty of managing a temporal dimension of work perceived as almost infinite. Alongside this perception, teachers highlighted the unease of managing educational environments and involving students. To overcome this crisis, on the one hand, there has been questioning and overcoming of the criticality of the use of technologies in the world of art and education through numerous proposals, sometimes specially designed, sometimes somewhat improvised, and on the other hand, it has been necessary to rethink the approach to teaching. The performative practice, through its transmissive capacity, that is to say, that capacity of the performer to suspend the habit of the body, has represented the key to this rethinking.[9]

As the choreographer Virgilio Sieni states, transmission is an "exercise in listening, waiting and welcoming. All this must be experienced, practised and put into dialogue with time, duration and repetition. [...] The only thing that coincides with time is the body because it follows its course." (Pitozzi Enrico 2019, 30).

The performative approach allowed a reification of the space mediated by the screen frame. It is also particularly appropriate for its balance between presence and absence and its processual character, whose main feature is to always renew itself according to circumstances. These aspects make it possible to overcome the feeling of loss of connection with reality brought about by digital environments. Above all, it allows the reactivation of the body, after a moment of suspension, as an active tool to produce knowledge.

NOTES

[1] "The Collins Word of The year 2020 is..." https://www.collinsdictionary.com/it/woty.

[2] "Lockdown." https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/lockdown

[3] For an overview of this topic, please refer to the forthcoming text Alessandra De Nicola, Piero Magri, Franca Zuccoli "Heritage assets, fairs and museums. Places of encounter and presence in times of pandemic."

[4] *The paradox of stillness*. https://walkerart.org/press-releases/2021/walker-art-center-presents-the-paradox-of-stillness-art-object-and-performance

[5] For example, the work of George Simmel, Josè Ortega y Gassett, Ernest Bloch, Jacques Derrida, Rudolf Arnheim.

[6] According to which cognitive processes were separated from perceptual-experiential ones.

[7] Pirelli Hangar Bicocca project website https://pirellihangarbicocca.org/universita/fare-insieme-squola_pubblica/

[8] We are referring to the work of Capperucci 2020, Girelli, 2020, Lucisano, 2020.

[9] In this sense see the work of Giorgio Agamben (with) choreographer Virgilio Sieni about *the Accademia del Gesto.*

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