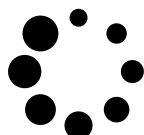


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Immersions and  
Dives: From the

Environment to Virtual Reality,  
Vol. 2, no. II (2023)

by Roberto P. Malaspina, Elisabetta Modena  
and Sofia Pirandello

Immersion

Dives

Installation

Virtual reality

Augmented reality

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From the Environment  
to Virtual Reality

Edited by Roberto P. Malaspina,  
Elisabetta Modena, and Sofia Pirandello

# Introduction

## Immersions and Dives: From the Environment to Virtual Reality, Vol. 2, no. II (2023)<sup>1</sup>



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### Introduction Vol. 2, no. II (2023)

The present volume *Immersions and Dives: From the Environment to Virtual Reality* of the journal *AN-ICON: Studies in Environmental Images* is divided into two issues, each one dedicated to a specific thematic analysis, originated by the same conceptual core. The volume reflects on the concept of immersivity, which has become increasingly prominent in many different fields, including contemporary art. The constant reference to immersive experience is redefining the boundaries of artistic practice

Keywords

[Immersion](#)

[Dives](#)

[Performance](#)

[Virtual reality](#)

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and fruition, highlighting the complex relationships between art, environments, and human perception.

The first issue of the volume, *Immersions*, discussed the recent “immersive trend” as applied to artistic perceptual dynamics and to display design. Through a perspective that combines both history and theory of art, *Immersions* provided a broad and heterogeneous mapping of the many uses of this concept, exploring it in different historical contexts and methodologies of analysis.

The second issue, *Dives*, shifts the conceptual focus to action. Diving, understood as a preparatory and essential movement of immersion, becomes a metaphor for investigating in particular those artistic practices that have engaged in various bodily forms with immersive environments. *Dives* also includes a non-peer-reviewed section devoted to contributions by artists and independent researchers who present their strategies to dive into immersive spaces and environments, in order to physically explore them.

## **Dives**

Performances mark identities, bend time, reshape and adorn the body, and tell stories.<sup>2</sup>

This issue focuses on performance art, as the practice that has best addressed and interrogated the relationship between body and space. Indeed, performance art has proven to be a privileged investigative tool for understanding the ways in which this connection evolves and changes, even in the contemporary arena. One of its main characteristics is to transcend a specific material medium, in order to rather explore the complex meanings generated

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2 R. Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (2002) (London-New York: Routledge, 2013): 28

by the various encounters between bodies, spaces, artists, and audiences (think of the foundational practices by Marina Abramović, Joseph Beuys, Wolf Vostell, FLUXUS, Viennese Actionism, or about the work of theatre groups such as Environmental Theatre and Richard Schechner's Performance Group). The 20th-century avant-garde performance artists disrupted the notion of art as "artefact" typically associated with artistic creation, and paved the way to new forms of practice that resisted aesthetic interpretations based on the traditional division between subject and object.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, since its inception, performance art has challenged the passive nature of the fruition of the artwork, developing other immersive dynamics in the space/scene in which the artist moves, questioning the role of the spectator and of spectatorship in general.<sup>4</sup> For example, according to Erika Fisher-Lichte, the presence of the public has the power to actively modify the performative space,<sup>5</sup> which every time results in a different event depending on the people who take part in it. Performance, therefore, has the capacity not only to activate and redefine a space, but above all, as stated by Richard Schechner, to create a system for the interweaving of art and everyday life that artists such as Allan Kaprow promoted.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, "performance exists only as actions, interactions, and relationships"<sup>7</sup> with the complex ecosystem of objects, bodies, subjects, and technologies that inhabit the space activated by it.

Recently developed media such as Virtual and Augmented Reality seem to resonate strongly with such characteristics: they function exclusively in relation to the

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3 E. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (2004) (London-New York: Routledge, 2008).

4 C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London-New York: Verso, 2012).

5 Fischer-Lichte, E., *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (2004) (London-New York: Routledge, 2008).

6 A. Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments, and Happenings* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1966); A. Kaprow and J. Kelley, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

7 R. Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*: 30

user and their operative space, concealing at the same time the material nature of the medium, which becomes increasingly transparent.<sup>8</sup> In so doing, they generate “an-  
icons,” namely images that present themselves either as immersive environments to be explored or as objects within the physical space.<sup>9</sup> These so-called “new” digital technologies seem to adhere to the sole dimension of action, leading their users to a constant daily performance. In order to properly work, they have to include the user’s gestures and behavior, as well as the human skin and the retinal surface.<sup>10</sup> Consider the widespread practice of experimenting with AR filters, both artistic and otherwise. In this case, playing with a virtual addition could have ambivalent consequences: on the one hand, it could lead to performative forms of political resistance or identity expression;<sup>11</sup> on the other hand, it could induce body dysmorphia and facilitate the incorporation of advertising.

Being portable and wearable, they show a tendency towards miniaturization as well as innervation, which transform a concrete context into a responsive and intelligent environment,<sup>12</sup> and the human body into a technical one. In this respect, Andy Clark famously stated we all are natural born cyborgs.<sup>13</sup> The reference to the cyborg, however, seems to satisfy more a fascination for science fiction than the need for a deep investigation of the actual intertwining between the technical and the biological. The studies on performance art could help understand the way

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8 J. D. Bolter, R. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000).

9 A. Pinotti, “Self-Negating Images: Towards An-Iconology,” *Proceedings*, 1, no. 9, 856 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.3390/proceedings1090856>.

10 M. Carbone, *Filosofia-schermi: Dal cinema alla rivoluzione digitale* (Milan: Cortina, 2016).

11 R. Malaspina, A. Pinotti, S. Pirandello, “Emerging, Filtering, Symbiosing: Experiences in Augmented Art,” *VCS. Visual Culture Studies* 3, no. 4 (2022): 101-126; S. Pirandello, *Fantastiche presenze: Note su estetica, arte contemporanea e realtà aumentata* (Milan: Johan & Levi, 2023).

12 E. Crescimanno, “Software e design: i media digitali nel quotidiano,” in G. Matteucci, ed., *Estetica e pratica del quotidiano*, pp. 137-148 (Milan-Udine: Mimesis, 2015).

13 A. Clark, *Natural-Born Cyborgs: Minds, Technologies, and the Future of Human Intelligence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

the animate engages with the inanimate, based not on the paradigm of the implant but more on the one of relation. Interaction is preferred to assimilation, as claimed by the anthropology of material culture.<sup>14</sup>

*Dives* addresses the contemporary discussion between these latest digital technologies and performance art practices, considering the transformative consequences on both sides. If, on the one hand, these technologies have an inevitable impact on artistic actions and practices, on the other hand, it is art itself that invests the means it uses with new meaning and cultural and political awareness. How has a new technological paradigm dictated a reconfiguration of the concepts of body and space, their interaction, and the artistic disciplines that study them? How much and what kind of space is there for the human body in technological and immersive environments? Can we speak of an excessive delegation of the body to technology? Can the proliferation of immersive digital technologies be read in continuity with the perspectives that characterized performance in the 20th century, or does it herald a new way of interacting with and acting upon space? Is the performative dimension of the user more or less dominant than in the past?

In trying to respond to such questions, Valentina Bartalesi's text opens the volume with a contribution that explores immersiveness in Laure Prouvost's work, emphasizing the connection between her environments and films. The paper demonstrates that immersion in her moving images arises from the mixture of various strategies, including layered visuals, word-image relationships, montage, and non-human bodies as sources of sensory knowledge. The study employs a theoretical framework involving "system

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14 L. Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind: A Theory of Material Engagement* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016).

aesthetic,” Munsterberg’s psychology, and haptic vision, while also tracing Prouvost’s art-historical lineage.

The text by Anthony Bekirov and Thibaut Vailancourt investigates cross-media storytelling in Alternate Reality Games (ARGs). In fact, ARGs like *This House Has People in It* and *Ben Drowned* involve a horizontal relationship between creators and participants, extending beyond art institutions. They offer immersive experiences unconstrained by time or space and can be seen as liminal experiences, akin to anthropologist Victor Turner’s concept. These games empower 21st-century spectators to challenge societal norms by gaining agency and criticising our relationship with digital devices in an information-controlled society.

Anna Calise’s analysis delves into those technological advancements and changing epistemological paradigms which influence museum displays and their relationship with visitors’ bodies. It highlights the role of artistic intuition, technical innovations, and philosophical ideologies in shaping museums and discusses how visitors’ bodies adapt to evolving epistemological norms, contributing to shared ideas of art and knowledge in society.

Margherita Fontana examines the potential of interactive online spaces in order to challenge heteronormative structures. She analyzes in particular *g(Ender Gallery)*, an artwork created in Minecraft in 2021 by Cat Haines, showcasing how the platform can serve as a playful yet critical arena for questioning gender norms and exploring trans\* experiences.

In *Techniques and Poetics of the Submarine in Film: A Pretext for an Archeology of Immersion* Elise Jouhannet considers the history of underwater cinema, including precinematic elements like 19th-century public aquariums, to reveal a shared desire to immerse audiences in aquatic experiences and image materiality. This fascination

with underwater themes, extending into modern media like Virtual Reality, underscores water's central role in redefining and "archaeologizing" the concept of immersion in art.

Stefano Mudu writes about Laure Prouvost's art, as respect to how it immerses viewers in intermedial installations blending various objects from diverse origins. Her works create indeed eccentric atmospheres, erasing hierarchies between observers and observed. Using Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), this paper analyzes Prouvost's project at the 58th Venice Biennale, *Deep See Blue Surrounding You*, as a hyper-enactment, which invites viewers to construct non-linear narratives within interrelated objects/images.

Julia Reich's essay explores acting within images in AR and VR art, emphasizing the role of the (virtual) hand in creating immersive experiences. It discusses three forms of actions involving the hand: as a stage, a symbiotic contact zone, and a designing hand. Through artworks by various artists, it illustrates how the (virtual) hand facilitates immersive interactions in the virtual realm, blending distance and closeness.

Referring to her own artistic practice, Sofia Braga's contribution reflects on the ambiguous nature of centralized social media platforms, which offer connectivity but also commodify personal data. Braga critically questions whether artistic engagement within these platforms can be considered an efficient strategy to avoid the ubiquitous surveillance culture.

Alice Volpi examines urban design through theatrical perspectives. She suggests to experiment with navigating and designing cities, incorporating randomness and external direction to transform urban spaces into theatres.

The interview with Emilio Vavarella closes the volume. By answering questions on his work *Lazy Sunday*, part of *THE ITALIAN JOB* series, Vavarella faces themes



like artistic legitimacy and virtuality. The artwork involves a 12-hours movie shot with a 360° camera, filming one ordinary summer day of the artist. Viewers could experience it through a Virtual Reality headset in January 2022 in Casa degli Artisti in Milan, which turned the residency into a shared, immersive experience.

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**AN-ICONOLOGY**  
**History, Theory, and Practices**  
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