Apart but Together?

An assemblage of physical and digital salsa dancing

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"The trick is to use the science of technology to enhance the art of human movement"

- Dennis Docheff[1]

For the past decades and especially during these times of corona, our daily lives have become one enormous assemblage of physical and digital components, intermingling together into a hybrid reality. We are listening to digital sounds coming from our Spotify playlist while going for a walk in nature, we browse on the web looking for a new pair of shoes while discussing the options with our friend sitting on the couch, and we video call with our parents during dinner for company, as if they were having the same dinner. Just like German artist and writer Hito Steyerl describes in Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?: "the internet is moving offline, meaning that the "real" world is influenced by the virtual and that the "real" world again is traveling into the virtual".[2] Indeed, the two are merging, and therefore it is very hard to set a clear border between the "real" and the virtual. I am fascinated by this real-digital relationship.

In the text Revealing Technologies/Magical Domains, Barbara Maria Stafford talks about "artificial organs" and "magical artefacts" as (technological) devices of wonder that humans have used to perceive the world. Examples of artificial organs are the so-called "eye machines", for us more familiar as telescopes and microscopes.[3] Suddenly I saw my computer as an "artificial organ" that, via video communication platform Zoom, was able to transfer a virtual version of myself into someone else's living room to take part in a virtual salsa dance (side-note: I have a very big passion for salsa dancing). I even went one step further, I got inspired to create my own digital-real

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[1] Rebecca Weber, Megan Mizanty, and Lora Allen, "Project Trans(m)It: Creating Dance Collaboratively via Technology – a Best Practices Overview," *Research in Dance Education* 18, no. 2 (2017): 116–34.

[2] E-flux.com, "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?" Accessed May 31, 2021, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/49/60004/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/.

[3] Barbara Maria Stafford, and Frances Terpak, Devices of Wonder - from Thr World in a Box to Images on a Screen, Santa Monica, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2006.

assemblage in the shape of an experience in which digital salsa dancing, via Zoom, is combined with real physical salsa dancing, in one and the same dance. Instead of looking at the digital and the virtual as two different sides of reality, I wanted to merge them into a hybrid form.

In the first place, the goal of this artistic research project was to find out what it would feel like to dance together via these two different realities at the same time. But in relation to the subject Core Module 2: From Organizing the World to the Archive, of the masters programme Artistic Research from the University of Amsterdam, I researched if and how an experience like this can be archived. Therefore this text is divided into two parts. First I will discuss the set-up and the experience of the digital-real dance assemblage and then I will talk about my decisions with regard to its archiving process.

Digital dance + real dance = ?

At the starting point of this artistic research project I asked myself questions like: what does it mean to create an assemblage of digital and physical components? What is exactly real and what is digital; what are the similarities and differences? Are the two opposed to each other or not? Or can the digital be as real as the physical and vice versa?

In general, the digital/virtual is not seen as real, being an imitation or simulation of reality; "pretending to be real", as defined by Charles Sanders Peirce in his Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology.[4] In this case, the virtual seems to be on the other side of a spectrum, contrasting the real. Opposing the virtual/digital world versus the real/physical world suggests that the real world is the physical world and, as a consequence, that the virtual is unreal.[5] This would mean that the Zoom call you are having with your grandmother is not real at all, which does not make any sense to me.

Anthropologist Tom Boellstorff thinks we should rethink the placement of the digital. According to him, we should not think in terms of an opposition with the physical, but rather place the digital in a framework in which the physical and the digital can be both real and unreal (figure 1).[6] According to this definition, a Zoom call can be both experienced as real and unreal.

Boellstroff's matrix made clear to me that my project was going to be an assemblage of real and unreal components, but that this reality and unreality could both be found within the physical and digital experience.

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4 Charles Sanders Peirce, "Virtual," In *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, edited by James Mark Baldwin, 763–64, New York: Macmillan, 1902.

5 Tom Boellstorff, "For Whom the Ontology Turns: Theorizing the Digital Real," *Current Anthropology* 57, no. 4 (2016): 387–407.

6 Ibid.

Figure 1: Tom Boellstorff's digital reality matrix

	PHYSICAL	DIGITAL
REAL	A physical and real	B digital and real
UNREAL	C physical and unreal	D digital and unreal

The physical can be both real and unreal. The digital can be both real and unreal as well.

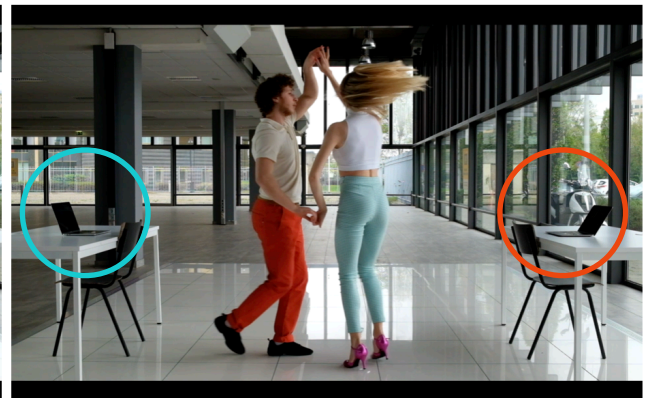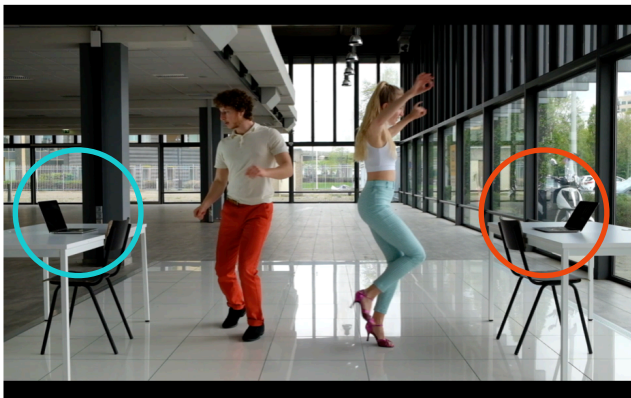**Figure 2:** Digital-physical assemblage set-up plan

See each other face to face (physical)
Feeling the presence of the digital

See each other via Zoom (the virtual)
Feeling the presence of the physical

Figure 3: Digital-physical assemblage actual set-up

Actual set up: two laptops were connected via video-call platform Zoom. Therefore we could dance together both in digital and physical space, during the same dance.

To conduct my digital-physical salsa dancing experiment I created a set-up as illustrated in figure 2 (see figure 3 for the actual version). Through this set-up, me and my dancing partner were able to alternate between digital dancing, via Zoom connected laptops, and physical dancing during one salsa song, played from an audio source placed in the physical space. Interesting to note is that instead of two people, there were suddenly four "people" in the room; two physical people and two digital copies.

Within the digital-physical salsa dance, there were a few moments during which a feeling of unrealness arose. The digital salsa dance via Zoom did not feel "real" because of a lack of eye contact and touch, image distortion, and delay. When looking at each other via the screen, we did not have real eye contact. Only when my dancing partner was smiling at me, I had the feeling that he was actually looking at me. Another strange experience was that we could see ourselves from the back via our screens. This feeling is similar to the experience of a surveillance camera in a shop; you see yourself from another angle on a screen, in real time. But the most unreal feeling arose when we were touching each other with our physical backs while, at the same time, we were looking at our screens. Here an interesting interplay happened between the sense of seeing and the sense of feeling. This multi-sensory experience relates to what Barbara Maria Stafford says when she is speaking of the idea of the Kunstkammer as an assemblage: "Putting distant things in contact with one another in order to make connections obliges the collector's five senses to converge in a kind of synesthesia."[7] This is exactly what happened, the digital-physical experiment triggered the senses in a very unusual, unreal, way.

How to archive this experience?

Because of the corona pandemic, artists seek for alternatives to showcase their work. Because of the many internet-connected devices like smartphones and laptops, the way people consume creative content has changed and many art forms, including dance performances, have embraced the engagement with the digital.[8] Speaking for myself, as a dancer and maker, I embraced the digital as well. Therefore I decided to make a video recording of the performance.

Next to a tool to showcase my work, the video became a way to archive the performance as well. When thinking about an archive we see it as a physical place in which material matter is stored, but the archive is also shifting towards more digital environments, in which everything can be safely stored in an imaginary cloud. To give an example, one of the first digital dance archives is the one

[7] Barbara Maria Stafford, et. al, "Devices of Wonder".

[8] Rebecca Weber, et. al, "Project Trans(m)It".

from choreographer Siobhan Davies (https://www.siobhandaviesreplay.com).[9] This website serves as a model of how contemporary technologies can change archiving of and access to our cultural heritage.[10] For this project I decided to make use of another very big digital archive; I decided to upload my video on video platform YouTube.

As a side-note on archiving dance, I investigated other ways to archive a dance performance and came across many kinds of dance notations to write down dance moves. Examples of these notation systems are the Benesh notation and the Laban notation.[11] However, since the rise of the digital video recording these notations are not used that much anymore.[12] Video is simply much faster and easier to work with.

But is it really possible to archive a performance? Is the video recording of the performance still a performance? If we see performance as ephemeral it would mean that it completely vanishes after performing. Or as Peggy Phelan explains: "performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, or documented." "Once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. Performance… becomes itself through disappearance."[13]

Though, I am convinced that not everything disappears: what about immaterial remains? What about emotions, and thoughts in the shape of memories, embedded within the body and the mind? In this case, the body itself can serve as an embodied archive.

According to Michel Foucault, an archive is never complete and it emerges in fragments, regions, and levels.[14] I started to ask myself questions about how to document and preserve my project on multiple levels, to make sure that the archived experience is as close to the initial experience as possible. Next to the video, *for you to see*, I interviewed myself and my dancing partner about our experience, *for you to listen to*, and I am writing this text about it, *for you to read*. Next to that, I keep the embodied memory of the experience, *for myself to feel*. If you want to feel it for yourself I suggest you connect two laptops via Zoom and ask a friend to join you in your digital-physical dance. It is very easy!

By making use of the different components as explained above, my aim is not necessarily to give you the same experience as the initial, physical performance - as Peggy Phelan's quote also

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[9] Ukri.org, "The First Digital Dance Archive: Siobhan Davies RePlay - Arts and Humanities Research Council," Accessed May 31, 2021, https://ahrc.ukri.org/research/case-study-archives/the-first-digital-dance-archive-siobhan-davies-replay/.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Don Herbison-Evans, "Dance, Video, Notation and Computers," *Leonardo* 21, no. 1 (1988): 45.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Rebecca Schneider, "Performance Remains," *Performance Research* 6, no. 2 (2001): 100–108.

[14] Michel Foucault, "The Historical a Priori and the Archive," In *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 2nd ed. London, England: Routledge, 2013.

demonstrates, it is never possible to completely archive an experience -, but with this multi-faceted approach the idea is to give you individual experiences of the experience of the performance. Each of you will create another subjective memory when watching, hearing, reading, and feeling.

I am not a fan to see the archive as a place in which everything is objective and fixed, in my opinion that is quite boring. I would rather see the archive as a subjective place of memory in which individual imagination flourishes. I think the beauty of an experience and performance is that it is ungraspable, ephemeral, and subjective.

To conclude this text, "Apart but Together? A Salsa Dancing Experiment" is about an encounter of the physical with the digital; a physical-digital assemblage. Through this encounter an experience, and at the same time a performance, was created in which the borders of realness and unrealness were explored. The performance is archived using a multi-component approach with the goal to give individual subjective experiences through watching, hearing, reading, and feeling. This experiment demonstrated that technology can be more than just numbers and data; technology can be used as both a creative and archival tool and dance and technology together are an interesting area for further exploration.

The video recording of the experiment and the interview about it can be found via the following YouTube links:

Video recording "Apart but Together? A Salsa Dancing Experiment":

https://youtu.be/zSbVZvvnYvo

Interview:

https://youtu.be/ia9eu77mCwE

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