

REVOLUTION: AN AUDIO- VISUAL ESSAY

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1. INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, in the years 2020-2022, the art world seems to have inched its way into politics in fascinating ways. Accelerated by this continuous pandemic state, culture, society and politics seemed to cross the in-person and virtual worlds, specifically across the notion of the body in relation to Performance Art. The body became a constructive element of identity which escapes uncertainty and the fragmentation of the contemporary world (Lyotard, 1984). Similar shifts had begun in the 1990s with the introduction of the Internet and computer in performances by artists such as Stelarc or Guillermo Gómez-Peña; the virtual body became a game in itself, as with “The Artist Is Present”, an 8-bit video game by Marina Abramovic (Phaidon, 2011), or migrations into games such Second Life (SL), where Beatriz Albuquerque performed her “Work For Free” project in 2005, or Silvestre Pestana and Vitus Flores performed Avatar in 2012 (Athayde, 2013). *Revolution* has also been presented in massive multiplayer online games (MMOG) such as SL, World of Warcraft (WW), or Minecraft.

Increasingly, the quality of interactivity between the body, computers, and cyberspace radically affects the relationship between subject and object in contemporary society (Albuquerque, 2008, 2012, 2018). If the physical world is a society of the spectacle (Debord, 1995), then the virtual world offers a parallel to this. In that sense, artists may choose physical or virtual media, taking into account that perception and interactions may change (Albuquerque, 2020). To better understand the relationship between computers and the world, the primary resources for exploration are interactions between people and things - a process that has existed for millennia (Levy, 1996). Body poetics through both material and immaterial spaces like MMOG is the new normal in performance art.

2. THE *REVOLUTION* PROJECT

The body can be a tool for change in role-playing insofar as role-playing can foster empathy (Albuquerque, 2012, 2018). Within this framework, *Revolution* was created as a call to action, a performance to give the audience the tools to emancipate and empower themselves, in the sense of Paulo Freire’s idea that, by modifying themselves, people can produce change in their surroundings (1975). This change, however, involves a kind of process that

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Freire calls “reading the word and reading the world” (1983b). Following this ideal, *Revolution* was founded upon theoretical frameworks posed by thinkers such as Marcuse (1964, 1965, 1972), who proposed that change is facilitated by encounters with aesthetic works. In that sense, artworks can raise awareness and result in political or social change. The project moved specifically towards the virtual body and virtual interaction in the virtual world as one more platform to bring change in/through the digital narrative arena (Albuquerque, 2008, 2012, 2018). As supported by Henry Jenkins (2006, 2018), different game platforms with various points of view from the same project enable active participation in inventing worlds. For Jenkins, this type of transmedia storytelling, which can have its origins in film or fiction, can be elaborated through different media, including as comics or videogames. This results in a possible relationship with users through virtual worlds (Belgum, 1990) such as *Second Life* (SL), an arena located between immaterial and material realities, where some of the laws of the physical world may be broken while others remain (Albuquerque, 2008).

As a performative (art)work, *Revolution* also follows Goldberg’s (2018) manifesto that performance art can be a form of interdisciplinary activism in its intersections with other media, providing a radical action-format with a political dint.



Fig. 1 - Revolution Project by Beatriz Albuquerque, street performance, New York, 2020; street performance forming part of the Family Film Project: Private Collection, Porto 2019; street performance inserted in Quarto 22: Colégio das Artes Gallery, Coimbra, 2019.
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Revolution began in 2016 in New York, sharing demonstrations within the Black Lives Matter movement in the political context of former Trump presidency and a resurgence of hate crimes. It has since been performed internationally at different venues and through various media, including on streets, in art galleries (Fig. 1), and during residencies, biennials, and MMOG such as Second Life, World of Warcraft, and Minecraft. In this on-going project, I explore the notions of revolution and evolution, while creating a manifesto to emancipate ourselves from oppression; namely the lack of equality and acceptance across gender and race.



Fig. 2 - Revolution Project by Beatriz Albuquerque, Advertisement, *Diário de Coimbra: Journal*, 1 March 2019, p. 16. © Beatriz Albuquerque

Media chosen to convey the message included in-person and virtual performances, accompanied by paid printed adverts on the coming of a *Revolution* (Fig. 2). Scored and staged like a street demonstration, both in the “material” and “immaterial” world, I used a megaphone and billboards to entice others to join the fight for equality and tolerance in the face of brutality and injustice. The audience interaction ranged between passive viewing, taking photos, to active audiences joining me and vocalising their opinion or raising questions. Audiences in MMOG such as SL could see and participate in the performance in multiple ways, including by interacting directly with the performer and forming part of the demonstration with their avatars or via audio and text messages in the chat.

Overall, the *Revolution* performance in the physical world led to a

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discussion around boundaries and differences in opinion, while audiences in SL often discussed specific topics such as gender equality, sexuality, and acceptance of the (physical) body. Thus, paradoxically, the immaterial body raised questions about the physical, transforming the user in MMOG into a multi-present person that is, simultaneously, in a physical place and multiple virtual environments as a result of their participation in a hypermedia environment.

In my immaterial performances, my avatar is similar to my real self, since I intended to mimic my material body, as well as the physical performances, to the extent that MMOG allowed. A performance in SL required hours of preparation to create the photo images used as “skins” for my custom-made avatar, in order for it to resemble me as closely as possible. The distancing process in creating my own persona for the physical performance and the avatar could, then, be seen as somewhat similar.



Fig. 3 - Revolution Project by Beatriz Albuquerque, virtual performances, Second Life, 2016-2020.
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Nevertheless, the much shorter duration of the 5 performances in SL – 1 hour – felt completely different when compared to the performances in the physical world, mainly because of motionlessness (Fig. 3). Furthermore, the audience engagement through chat was limited and, as previously mentioned, the questions differed greatly from those emerging during physical performances (including a performance in a moving car) (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 - Revolution Project by Beatriz Albuquerque, street performance, inserted in Quarto 22: Colégio das Artes Gallery, Coimbra, 2019.
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In some sense, it could be argued that the engagement of user/audience, specifically in SL, was limited to the technology, impacting not only the type of possible interactions but also the number of potential participants (the number of avatars in an SL region must be less than 100 users due to network workload/server capacity). Both artist and audience were also affected by their computer and virtual game knowledge and skill, impacting their creation and/or interaction ability. As a result, this digital form interactivity – or performance – was experienced as a dialogue solely between performer and machine through a graphic interface. In contrast with SL performances, however, my performances in WW garnered a different slant of interactions in the chat window. In WW, where many players use illegal/forbidden items to advance the play, the chats were not about sex or gender. For example, I was asked if *Revolution* was a reflection on gamers cheating in the game or in real life. As for Minecraft, another immaterial space where I have conducted the *Revolution*, the interaction happened passively, while the audience simply watched my interventions in virtual space (Fig. 5), having only received questions on social media about what I was doing at a later date.



Fig. 5 - Revolution Project by Beatriz Albuquerque, virtual performances, Minecraft, 2020.
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3. CONCLUSION

The computer can be a powerful tool for creative processes, including for the development of non-linear narratives that "move to all sides", which are more elastic and randomised (Manovich, 2003). Furthermore, computers and MMOG can also be perceived as a medium or interface to be used and embodied by the artist, creating a bridge between physical and virtual worlds and creating meaning and change (Albuquerque, 2008, 2011).

As inventor/computer and internet pioneer Engelbart said with his notion of interfaces, machines act as an "amplifier of the spirit" (Engelbart, 1962). This is how I see my immaterial performances. I use these "spirit amplifiers" in MMOG and this influences the engagement of users with the virtual performance. In SL, I have created a different layer in communication – a layer, however, mediated through digital interaction, a dialogue between man and machine. This is what Bairon (1995) called the interface, calling together two realities into communication to translate and articulate spaces between them. This interactivity takes place in the context of an exchange of communication, where man, machine, and programs are all "agents" that take certain roles (Laurel, 1990).

The positioning of the (material/immaterial) body in performance art via the Internet and MMOG provides a range of interactive possibilities to the virtual performer. For some scholars, importing a digital presence may be referred to as an avatar, which simulates a person and human behaviour with social interaction factors in virtual arenas (Fysh et al., 2022). In this case, software, hardware, internet, background noise, smell, lights, and other stimulus from the physical can act as limitations for performances in MMOG. In a live performance, an audience can interact with the piece through bodily gestures like coughing, clapping, making noise, and so on. Moreover, a live performance is a space for reflection. There is little dialogue between the virtual performer and the audience, whose interactions are mainly conducted through private chats, with virtual performances often competing for attention with other events taking place both online and in the 'material' world. The future of Virtual Reality and its application in virtual game platforms may bring an answer to some of these limitations in the present moment, and potentially impact performance art using mediums such as MMOG.

Performances can legitimately take place in physical and/or MMOG. While every performer must choose for themselves, there are conscious decisions to be made if performing virtually. A robust accounting for hardware,

software, glitch scenarios, and malfunctions is necessary. Either the virtual world or physical world may be the correct way to perform, if judiciously chosen; as such, interaction of the public, or its lack, should also be addressed in the conception, preparation, and implementation of performances.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank everyone who helped facilitate this active project. Thanks to Columbia University, Macy Gallery, Louffa Press, Printed Matter, Inc., Figment Festival, New Museum, Cyberfeminism Index in New York; and Kino Klub Split in Croatia; Coimbra University, Colégio das Artes Gallery, Balletatro, Family Film Project Festival, Gaia Art Biennial and CITAR in Portugal.