

For a mixed reality Aesthetics

Marina Abramović and the immersive philosophy

Alberto Simonetti

alberto86simonetti@gmail.com

The paper intends to reflect on the function of digital technology within the field of aesthetics. Through Marina Abramović's work *The Life* (2019) the aim is to rethink the relationship between the artistic object and subjective consciousness in a phenomenological key. The Serbian artist's work uses the innovative and original technique of *mixed reality*; this new horizon leads to new philosophical frontiers relating to the perception of the body, experience (*Erlebnis*), experience and intuition. We will try to focus attention on the relationship between virtuality and reality by comparing mixed reality with purely virtual reality and augmented reality. Even the relationship with the public and the spectator is defined from a different, broader point of view in which the experience of the artistic object becomes a *philosophically immersive experience*. The *presence-absence* of the artist expresses the new aesthetic horizons supported by digital, opening up to a series of problems which, especially in the phenomenological field, mark the current debate.

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1. Introduction

The life lives on *complexity*. The concept of complexity affects a vast field today: from the philosophy of mind to artificial intelligence, from the eco-philosophical question to the theme of the relationship between virtual and real. The category of “complexity” indicates both a method of investigation and the description of reality in a phenomenal sense. A rigorous philosophical reflection must necessarily question all aspects of it and understand *perspectivism* as the status of reality. *Perspectivism* indicates the understanding of reality in its intrinsic multiplicity; plurality is the form of reality and the ability to reject any univocal vision of experience. The last phase of Marina Abramović’s work opens up a new scenario, going beyond the monodimensional perception of reality; in the performance *The Life* (in collaboration with the Tin Drum studio) the artist proposes a multiple and interdisciplinary horizon, a physical-digital phenomenology of the work of art. After the London debut in 2019-2020, the first Italian stop in Pesaro is recent. The Tin Drum Studio works exclusively on mixed reality, preparing the set up of the performance with which the volume of the artist’s physical image is acquired. The photographic representation is processed by 4D Views which, after having actually photographed the human being, creates his actions in a virtual environment. The Serbian artist’s approach allows us to rethink the problem of phenomenological *manifestation* because it takes on a new purpose, a new style, an original paradigm of gaze between the artist and the spectators. Clarifying the differences is very important. *Virtual reality* (VR) is a simulation developed as a real situation with which one can interact; *augmented reality* (AR) is reality as it is but enriched by data processed by technological supports, finally *mixed reality* (MR) is the fusion between virtual reality and augmented reality. The objective data reported here is defined by the CNR Research Area of

Bologna¹. The new frontiers of aesthetics cross artificial intelligence and the digital in a decisive way, however we must ask ourselves what relationship still remains between creativity and experience. The presence of the artist and the work of art remain fundamental pillars of aesthetics and of every philosophy of art; what do the possibilities of digital add and what do they take away from the artist's conscience regarding his own work and from the viewer's conscience in front of the aesthetic object? This investigation intends to reflect on the limits and possibilities of technological experimentation in relation to the expressive world of aesthetics, trying to understand the role of the artist and the spectators involved.

2. The artist and his presence

Persistence is a fundamental objective in Abramović's work. In 2010 the performance *The artist is present* at the MoMA in New York (736 hours in front of thousands of spectators) had deconstructed the relationship between artist and spectator by eliminating the mediation of the object because it was embodied by the artist himself. The relationship between artist-aesthetic *object-spectator* was made more subtle because the artist constituted the persistence of an aesthetic mobile becoming, the object coincided with the biological and social vitality of the work of art Abramović.

The Serbian artist has further opened up the possibilities of presence by bringing the concept of manifestation (the φαίνω of "appearing") to its contemporary reality in many places on the planet. The digital projection of the artist's body for approximately twenty minutes allows the public to experience a new semiotics of dialogue; in fact, the artist's presence is given by his material absence (the body exists elsewhere and in only one place), but the digital creation makes another form of presence tangible, a sort of *presence-absence*. Lambert Wiesing studies perception with innovation and originality. In fact, it is possible to understand the double *presence-absence* characterization as a relationship inherent to the transcendental and its possibilities (the crucial problem from Kant to Husserl's phenomenology). For Wiesing the notion of *presence-absence* is a protreptic to philosophy or one of the multiple perceptive experiences that man's own space-time unity can achieve. Wiesing turns Kant on its head like Abramović. In fact, he does not believe that the conditions of knowledge are in the subject; the starting point on the theme of the transcendental must be the *perception of reality*. After it has happened we must ask ourselves: what were the conditions of this perception? Abramović achieved this reversal with his hologrammatic creation of his body, forcing the viewer to ask the reasons for what he perceived. The artist's subjectivity becomes multiple and interactive

¹ Cfr. CNR Research Area-Bologna, May 2024.

reproducibility of the digitally cloned image. For Wiesing, the image becomes the key to accessing the *artificial world*. Images make things visible and since ancient times Plato's concept of *mimesis* has reflected on this point; the semiotic postponement of the *sign* in Husserl is another example of *Artifizielle Präsenz*. Wiesing says: «[...] stop asking about subjective conditions of possibility for perception, and instead ask what consequences the reality of perception [has] for a subject»². New media have increased the possibility of creating this particular type of “presence”. In particular, in the virtuality of our contemporary world the *image* is assimilated to the *imagination*. This perceptual chaos is another form of *Artifizielle Präsenz*, one of the most influential. The risk of illusion and mystification is very frequent today. The Serbian artist wanted to denounce it by reversing its characteristics and transforming it into an aesthetic experience. The possibility of transformation and deformation of reality is always possible today with new technologies. As Mark Hansen reminds us, “all reality is mixed reality”³. Wiesing explains: «Models are neither true nor false; they are only more or less effective [...] as soon as a model-making theory is faced with questions in which truth is at issue, every model must fail [...] Any model, subjected to an externally generated demand for truth, can be turned into a myth’»⁴.

Remembering Walter Benjamin, where is the *aura*? Or is it simply a question of technical reproducibility in series and without an aesthetic event? The hermeneutic problem concerns the relationship between the original model and the copy, between originality and replication. Benjamin says:

The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it. Since the historical testimony is founded on the physical duration, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction, in which the physical duration plays no part. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object, the weight it derives from tradition⁵.

The phenomenological paradigm of authenticity has always coincided with the clarity of the manifestation of the object; the “how” the thing presents itself involves the concept of *Vorstellen*, a way of clearly emerging the object of knowledge. Husserl himself distinguished between proper and

² L. Wiesing, *The Philosophy of Perception: Phenomenology and Image Theory*, translate by N.A. Roth, Bloomsbury USA Academic, New York 2014, p. 70.

³ Cfr. M.B.N. Hansen, *Bodies in Code. Interfaces with digital media*, Routledge, New York-London 2006.

⁴ L. Wiesing, *The Philosophy of Perception: Phenomenology and Image Theory*, cit., p. 9.

⁵ W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge-London 2008, p. 22.

improper presentation⁶. The performance *The Life* undermines this bipartition as the dimension of the *Vorstellen* is opened to a third condition: presence-absence. Marina Abramović breaks the simple traditional dichotomy by showing that the possibilities of digital are capable of building a different, other presence. For phenomenology the descriptive certainty of the manifestation is always direct (the vision leaves no room for doubt). As Textor writes:

Husserl argues in the *Logical Investigations* that the rightness of a judgement or proposition shows itself in our experience of self-evidence (*Evidenz*), which term Husserl takes from Brentano, but makes criterial not of truth per se but of our most secure awareness that things are as we take them to be, when the object of judgement, the state of affairs, is given most fully or adequately⁷.

Now *Anschauung* itself becomes plural in various “presences” in which the artist shows herself in a digital guise with her own kinetics. The acquisition and volumetric reworking of the artist’s body is undoubtedly a technical reproduction but for the viewer this new aesthesiological space is pervaded by a very strong aura: proximity. While in *The artist is present* the event was confined to a specific place of manifestation (the MoMA), now the hologram created by 4D Views has made the artistic event multiple, succeeding in the attempt to make the aura that has always been plural unique, indivisible and unrepeatable. The visual art of mixed reality is not about the mode of augmented reality and also modifies the notion of virtual. As Gilles Deleuze⁸ reminds us, there is a distinction between *virtual* and *possible* for which while the possible is not yet real, the virtual already has its reality. Abramović’s aesthetic effort is not to occupy a parallel reality, purely computerized and totally defined by artificial intelligence, but his goal is to expand reality through the support of technology. This support has a *multiplicative value* and does not modify reality but, according to *The Life* experiment, extends its presence in multiple places. The philosophical reflection concerns the function of Benjamin’s *aura*: is it there, is it not there or is it present in a new form?

The creative act has its peculiarity in the imagination, that is, that moment-event that brings to the gaze something never seen before, an original production. One could perhaps find here the meaning of the meaning of art. This hypothesis is described by Husserl as Geniuses recounts:

Husserl’s phenomenology is exceptionally fruitful when it comes to identifying the different ways we can speak of reproductive phantasy. Following such an approach, I will argue that there are three fundamental

⁶ Cfr. E. Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy*, Kluwer Academic Publisher, Hingham (Massachusetts) 1982.

⁷ M. Textor, *The Austrian Contribution to Analytic Philosophy*, Routledge, London 2006, pp. 170–171.

⁸ Cfr. G. Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, University of Minnesota Press edition, Minneapolis 2000.

senses in which phantasy can be said to be productive in the framework of Husserlian phenomenology. First, phantasy is productive because it can intend “original” appearances - not in the sense of perceptual appearances, but in the sense that the phantasized appearances do not reproduce perceptual appearances. Second, phantasy is productive because it opens the field of pure possibilities and thereby provides consciousness with access to the field of the a priori as the field of essences. Third, and most interestingly, phantasy is productive because it intends configurations of sense, which consciousness can subsequently transfer from the field of phantasy to the field of actuality. In this third fundamental sense, phantasy is productive because it co-determines the meaning of perceptually given phenomena. Productive phantasy thereby proves to be a fundamental source that underlies the constitution of the lifeworld⁹.

It is necessary to clarify that in Husserl’s thought there is a difference between *imagination* and *fantasy*; imagination has a foundational role because it is a modification of the perception with which it is grasped originally and authentically. Fantasy is always an intuitive and non-conceptual character that has no reality (in German it is *Nichts*). Husserl does not bring fantasy or imagination back to the aesthetic stage because he remains in the epistemological and cognitive perspective. This paper intends to broaden this concept to relations with aesthetic expression. With *The Life* the creative process enters into relationship with the machine. The phenomenological experience changes the point of view, leading the body to be conceived by the spectator as a real, tangible object but virtually; this virtuality is not absence, it is a presence-absence that allows us to elaborate for the first time a concept of *virtual reality* that extends the body (both like *Körper* and *Leib*) to another perceptive stage. «The body’s movements, rather than simply occurring within the places we experience are, instead, the enactment of our experience of place»¹⁰. The body is the fundamental inherence. The term “inherence” is useful for understanding that the unique substance of reality is made up of multiple ways in relation to each other (even disjunctive); without inherence, or rather the relationship, the elements on which one reflects would lose their consistency. Making this process an immersive action means entering the multiplicity of reality with all its contradictions. Through Abramović’s work the body becomes a repeatable noeme in a *perspective sense*; the digital, however, despite the repetition has the effect of maintaining a certain form of aura which induces the viewer to have the perception of living a “direct” experience. The immediate reference to living corporality undoubtedly constitutes a concrete presence, however *mixed reality* possesses a *semiotics of the trace* which is not a simple replica (a real absence) because it interacts, it has a mediated form of

⁹ S. Geniusas, *Phenomenology of productive imagination*, Columbia University Press, New York 2022, p. 18.

¹⁰ E. Champion, *The Phenomenology of Real and Virtual Places*, Routledge, London-New York 2019, p. 287.

relationship which digital makes increasingly *immersive philosophy*. Hansen explains differences and similarities between *immersive reality* and *mixed reality*

The mixed reality paradigm differs most saliently from this fantasy in its deployment of the functional homology between virtual reality technologies and perception: rather than conceiving the virtual as a total technical simulacrum and as the opening of a fully immersive, self-contained fantasy world, the mixed reality paradigm treats it as simply one more realm among others that can be accessed through embodied perception or enaction (Varela). In this way, emphasis falls less on the content of the virtual than on the means of access to it, less on what is perceived in the world than on how it comes to be perceived in the first place¹¹.

Phenomenology and philosophy in general must reflect on the sense of presence in mixed reality by attempting to show that digital cannot replace reality because it needs it as a material and interacting basis (rejecting the madness of “virtual life”) but that digital itself can make the empirical field broader. Kozel says: «[...] a chiasmatic, embodied, first-person methodology with the objectives of understanding, expressing, and extending lived experience»¹². The concept of embodiment tells of the infinite range of its expressions. The digital can observe them and replicate some of them but will always remain in a noematic difference specific to the object. Even if digital technologies come close to being almost indistinguishable copies of the original, a difference with the living body will remain. The digital will never be able to define itself as “lived” (*Erlebnis*) even by copying the sequence of states of consciousness, the waste that is the key to existence itself would remain. Narrative memory and the projection of desire towards the future are and will remain non-digitizable data. It is clear that the growing complexity of the *Digital Studies* universe will lead to this difference becoming more subtle; it is the task of philosophical-aesthetic reflection to reason about this gap¹³.

3. Perception and apperception

The history of the concept of perception is very long. We specify here the modern-contemporary difference between *perception* and *apperception*. Perception organizes the data of sensitivity, makes the data coming from the outside conscious; apperception (a term invented by Leibniz) is the awareness of one's own perceptual states. For Marina Abramović the perceptual threshold has always

¹¹ M.B.N. Hansen, *Bodies in Code. Interfaces with digital media*, cit., p. 5.

¹² S. Kozel, *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology*, The MIT Press, Boston 2008, p. 16. Cfr. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, London-New York 2012.

¹³ Cfr. S. Dixon, *Digital Performance*, The MIT Press, Cambridge-Massachusetts, London, 2007.

had a meaning extended to the public; like Marcel Duchamp you believe that the performance is not only participated in but completed by the spectator. In *The Abramović Method* she elaborates a synthesis of three works: *The House With the Ocean View* (2002), *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005) and *The Artist is Present* (2010). The public is guided by the artist to develop dynamic and interactive installations, in whose space perception expands and captures apperception as a tangible awareness of what is happening on stage. With *The Life*, apperception becomes a dissemination of presence that transforms the work in the development of digital dialogue.

Geniusas reminds us of the three cornerstones on which phenomenology seeks to understand subjectivity and the relationship between Mind and World: «I will contend that phenomenology of productive imagination is first and foremost concerned with enriching our understanding of subjectivity. It does this in three fundamental ways: (1) by binding imagination to consciousness, (2) with tongue, and (3) through the body»¹⁴. As Geniusas explains, what is defined as “life” is determined by the relationship between the *body* and its structures, by the work of *language* as an element that makes the world representable and nameable for us, but also by *consciousness* linked to *imagination*, a dimension through which we recognize our states of consciousness that take place in the world. Abramović puts into practice in her *body-work of art* the language that transforms reality into a place suitable for the expression and understanding of experience. Her *Erlebnis* is the relationship. The concept of *Erlebnis* is clearly outlined by Husserl and his phenomenological approach; the ability to make the contents of our experience of consciousness and our *intentional Ego* intelligible forms the historicity of our *Erlebnisse*: «By phenomenological epoche I reduce my natural human *Ego* and my psychic life - the realm of my psychological self-experience - to my transcendental- phenomenological *Ego*, the realm of transcendental-phenomenological self-experience»¹⁵.

Can digital be a tool that facilitates this communication? In *The Life* the artist appears, disappears, is present and dissolves in a perceptive-apperceptive journey between time and space. The artist communicates the *phenomenological manifestation* of his presence-absence by visually involving the viewer in an alternative stage of the binding between bodies. Speaking of other installations (*Platsbe-paling*, 1997), Kozel also seems to summarize the experience of *The Life* well: «She describes this installation as revealing intricacies about the relationship between bodies and large objects in space, and introducing something she calls “an embodied cycle of time»¹⁶.

¹⁴ S. Geniusas, *Phenomonology of productive imagination*, cit., p. 22.

¹⁵ E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967, p. 26.

¹⁶ S. Kozel, *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology*, cit., p. 177.

The fundamental core that the paper intends to bring out is the possibility, through Abramović, of pursuing, living and understanding a mixed experience in the same reality, a “real reality” and a “digital reality”. Spectators become visitors, they have an active part in creating the space for dialogue with the artist-work of art. For classical phenomenology, the body has always been the condition of knowledge and experience (Merleau-Ponty); Abramović’s work does not erase this assumption but, on the contrary, increases its potential. Mixed reality is not traditional virtual reality (the purely technological projection of a non-real environment) and it is not even simply augmented reality (the processing of additional information supported by software for the description of objects in the real environment). Mixed reality is an enhancement of both. We can define it as “virtual” (in Deleuze’s sense) because it is something that is actually experienced but also “augmented” because it makes the aesthetic object and the projection of the artist’s body plural. In addition to all this, it creates new forms of communication where the message embodies a new possibility of *eidetic reduction* (in Husserl’s classic sense¹⁷) because the phenomenon appears directly immediate even if the biological body occupies another place in the moment of manifestation before the spectators. Abramović essentially created and experienced an *extended reality* with *The Life*. The classical *eidetic reduction* (Husserl) involved removing every superfluous element to reach the essentiality of the phenomenon investigated. Abramović’s work intends to expand this investigation not by removing but by increasing the levels of reflection; the virtual appears as real but the spectator himself will try to understand the essentiality of the aesthetic message even if paradoxical and ambivalent. Abramović wants to achieve his personal eidetic by expanding and not reducing the accessory components. The provocation that has always been a focal point for Abramović concerns the analysis of the limits of the *Mind-Body* and *Mind-World* relationship through the concept of *energy*. How much can an artist communicate through this expressive form called “energy”?

She herself has explained in various interviews, seminars and philosophical-biographical books what her method consists of and what genesis and development it has had over the years¹⁸. The dimension of one’s own body (Husserl’s *Leib*, or the conception of the body as an active subjectivity in experience and not a simple organic complex) is always conceived by Abramović in the sense of *relation* (relation in space and relation in time). There is always a breaking point (the *provocation* we were talking about before) which leads to a radical choice both of the artist as performer (with all the

¹⁷ Husserl says: «A possibility which is itself not to be understood as empirical but as an essential possibility. The object of such insight is then the corresponding pure essence or eidos, whether it be the highest category or one of its specializations, right down to the fully concrete»; E. Husserl, *Ideas*, Collier-Macmillan, London 1969, p. 48.

¹⁸ Cfr. M. Abramović, *Walk Through Walls: A Memoir*, Crown Archetype, New York 2016 and J. Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies: A Biography*, MIT, Cambridge 2010.

consequent risks) and of the spectator who must accept this provocative pact. Once this agreement is established, the work truly becomes an energetic expansion (similar to Bergson's intensive and creative duration) and a spatial extension. The interweaving between the theoretical structure of art and performance is pursued in the various phases of the Serbian artist's work: from *Rhythm 05* (1974) to *Freeing The Body* (1976), from *Balkan Baroque* (1997) to *The artist is present* (2010). Especially in recent years, the expressive experimentation of the *mobile body-mind* has been at the center of Abramović's work. In the *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* (2020) the apperceptive fulcrum is the voice that gives body to the presence of Abramović divided and pluralized in the incarnations of seven heroines of melodrama interpreted by Maria Callas. The phenomenal content of the voice, ephemeral and elusive in itself, is retained in the aesthetics of the performance because the abstract concept and the vocal flow are retained by the artist who is present on stage to make what escapes tangible and visible. «It is difficult to separate when "conceptual" art ends and performance begins. For conceptual art contains the premise that the idea may or may not be executed. Sometimes it is theoretical or conceptual, sometimes it is material and performed»¹⁹.

The characteristics of digital provide the dual opportunity to expand the territory of aesthetic analysis and to support philosophical immersion within the work (today many installations float in front of and around the viewer through innovative plays of light, color and sound). Kozel says that it is useful «[...] amplifying the poetic capability of our mobile devices and their convergence with our bodies»²⁰. The obvious and recognized proximity between Abramović and Callas make this performance something more than a tribute; the Serbian artist crosses the forms of Maria Callas's scenic experience as a *heroism of death*. The mediation of digital, especially in the video sequences, which duplicate and make Abramović's presence repeatable, open a multiple register of empirical feedback on the work. The musical intensity that accompanies Abramović's obscene on stage goes beyond the boundaries of the permanent object because it risks, hinders itself, is close to death on stage. This is a characteristic that has accompanied the performer's entire work. In *The Life* this obscene extremization of the scene is created and permitted by digital technologies where the artist leaves the scene and makes everything an artistic stage, leading the spectator to immerse himself in the complexity of communication. The *presence-absence* of the artist and of the object of experience that is in front of the spectator changes the phenomenological structure of appearing because the physical reference point, as in front of a mirror, multiplies. These fragments, according to O'Shiel, change the intentionality towards the real; the experience of a *plural eidetic* has the characteristics of

¹⁹ S. Goldberg, *Space as praxis*, in "Studio International", September/October 1975, p. 136.

²⁰ S. Kozel, *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology*, cit., p. 283.

dispersion but also of immersion. As O'Shiel notes that «[...] the everyday perceptual real virtualities with their inherent “almost”, just-around-the-corner quality to all that we perceive, [and] the intrinsic and always horizontal elements of self, world, others and values that we never directly perceive even though we always assume and experience them through so many other related perceptual phenomena»²¹.

The aesthetic data is always in close relationship with the manifestation of reality in its many forms; from this phenomenological “appearing” the artistic elaboration can freely assume the expressive categories with which it wants to interpret what manifests itself. The same fantasy, the *productive imagination* (remember Kant and Fichte) always has a material substratum from which to start. The artistic object that emerges can be faithful to reality, it can distort it, it can insert surreal elements, it can imagine it totally. And the virtual? The virtual enters the real to open up other communication and relational possibilities within reality itself. Marina Abramović invents in *The Life* this immersive penetration into reality, making it appear even where the body is not present but is only a projection. What appears is not the false artist, but the artist who presents herself as a work of art in an extension of communicative “life” through the digital.

In *The Life*, to enter into dialogue with the work of art and with the artist herself, viewers must free themselves of any other support (from phones to watches) by wearing only the hologram processing device; the categories of *space* and *time* (central concepts for phenomenology) are therefore prolonged and empirically tangible in a new dimension where bodies are involved in a different way. The founder of Tin Drum says: «When we recorded Marina in her performance, we knew that we would stage it as something happening in the present time, not as an artifact of something that happened in the past. We wanted to take advantage of something that has never been possible before, which is the ability to convey the truth of a human being in the room»²². The digital created by mixed reality, therefore, has the potential to conceive and represent a new type of “presence”, offering another relationship between experience and consciousness different from both virtual and augmented reality.

4. Is a digital aesthetic possible?

Digital technologies have enormously expanded their channels of use, even merging with the work of art and supporting the artistic event. Marina Abramović's work allows us to reflect on these topics.

²¹ D. O'Shiel, *The Phenomenology of Virtual Technology*, Bloomsbury, London 2022, p. 84.

²² T. Eckert, Presentation interview of *The Life*.

The expansion of the field of experience changes the possibilities of the relationship between the consciousness inscribed in the time-space axis as the living reality of the body and the object placed in front of it; material absence takes on another value since, through digital, it is simultaneously confirmed and denied. As regards the affirmative part, the artist and the spectators themselves are aware that the concrete corporeity is not there, while for the negative aspect, digital allows us to show something that has its own reality in front of the spectator and with which he can interact. For these reasons, Abramović's work expressed the new status of *presence-absence* by linking art and technology. Taking another example, Carmelo Bene's dramaturgical work explored the *techniques of absence* and mixed the voice as a universal relationship with the technologies of sound sensitivity through a skilful use of microphones (all this is found in *Lectura Dantis, Canti di Giacomo Leopardi, Manfred*).

As Patricia Locke notes, the hologram-body is not passivity:

He does not mean an avatar by "virtual body"; he means that I am already transcending my resting position, as an active agent. Yet an avatar is by its creation ready to explore worlds, to do deeds. Holographic humans appear before us not simply to sit as dolls on a shelf, but as interactive companions. I change my orientation and posture in response, and in so doing I establish a spatial level. In situations in which the milieu is at an angle or mirrored, or otherwise distorted from the orientation with which I am familiar, I inhabit the spectacle in order to achieve my goals²³.

In *The Life* these aspects of interactivity represent the core of the Serbian artist's message. The material absence of the singularity of the artist's body allows, at the same time, Abramović to prolong her presence (as a natural sequel to *The artist is present* of 2010); in fact, she fluctuates appearing and interacting in mixed reality mode in times and multiple spaces.

The philosophical reflection that involves phenomenology concerns the possibility of an aesthetic status of the digital; Arthur C. Danto does not hesitate to bring Abramović's work back into a philosophical debate on art; the use of technical supports such as suspended instruments, various tools, more complex sound mixing have always been a characteristic feature of performing art (also for Gina Pane). Today we can say that digital can be another tool for performance, another stylistic choice, another means to broaden the artistic resonance of the event represented: «Artists are not saints, but there is certainly a sense in which the question of their presence in a performance has at

²³ P. Locke, *Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty, and Questions for Augmented Reality* in E. Champion, *The Phenomenology of Real and Virtual Places*, cit., p. 272.

least a resonance in the metaphysics of art»²⁴. The central core of digital aesthetics is the relationship of fusion and intertwining between the physical appearance and the digitally processed appearance. The empirical data finds its original substratum and its matrix in the body and subsequently the digital work allows this body to proliferate, makes it plural and allows it to be present in a different way. It is not another body, it is that same body of the artist-art object that is disseminated. Reality does not have a simple informative-descriptive increase, but an expansion of plural presence.

The spectator's point of view moves with that of the artist-art object; in fact, there are neither barriers nor obstacles and the spectator-agent can experience *The Life* from different angles. Even in digital aesthetics intentional consciousness finds *epistemological contents*; these elements are not empty or simply mass-produced copies. The work *The Life* shows us the possibility that mixed reality is capable of φαίνομαι (“show” and also “show itself”) as a knowable object. The body-hologram is not the purely present body but it puts the phenomenologist in the transcendental conditions of asking himself how it is determined and how I can know it and experience it. The *body-hologram* is a contemporary novum that represents a new frontier for the spectator-phenomenologist since transcendental analysis must investigate the conditions of knowledge starting from a product defined by multiple artificial mediations. The task of transcendental analysis is the search for the conditions of knowledge before the object located in the world. The body-hologram is not an object like the others since it is designed as a special interactive object, an object that “appears” like another subject and not a simple object. It is about broadening the categories of transcendental analysis into still unknown territory. The question that starts from Kant and reaches Husserl would be like this today: how do we know an interactive object that appears as a subject similar to me? The difference compared to Benjamin's analysis of *aura* and technical reproducibility is to consider the work and its communication without ties; the intervention of digital technologies, in the case of Abramović's performance, offer points of transformation and creativity in the relationship of gazes between present-absent artist and spectator. Rousseaux claims:

Trying to match those two description levels, by maintaining some philosophical and ethical scientific discussion, is probably a powerful perspective for turning our Informed Virtual Environments into creative workshops. But such a research project cannot be settled without admitting that technical gestures can never be simply repeated: they singularise themselves, they change/mutate by being directed again, they adapt to

²⁴ A.C. Danto, *Danger and disturbance: the art of Marina Abramović*, in *Marina Abramović The Artist is Present*, exhibition catalogue *The Artist is Present* (New York, Moma 2010), edited by Klaus Biesenbach, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 2010, p. 29.

become more and more concrete/accurate/efficient, as discovered by Eugen Fink, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Gilbert Simondon²⁵.

Therefore *The Life* presents itself as an antidote to the growing passivity generated by the mass media, favoring, on the contrary, new forms and dimensions of dialogue:

A hundred years from now, when everyone who knew Marina Abramović is dead, there will be people who will watch *The Life* and hopefully feel that sense of connection – of human experience. This is really the point of the work: to try to create an authentic human connection between artist and audience beyond the simple observation that dominates our current media”²⁶.

It is therefore also an exercise in memory, a fundamental phenomenological function to connote the category of recognition as well as that of knowledge. The concept of the *eternal* investigated by Abramović does not refer to a spiritual dimension but is linked above all to the work of art; in *The Life* there is an element that goes beyond the conservation of a work (in fact the nineteenth-century invention of museums was precisely a way to deliver works to an eternal present); since in Abramović’s performance the artistic object is the body itself (*Leib* according to Husserl and classical phenomenology), it is the artist and his physical and vocal characteristics that become, in absence, pure presence. The eternal in the work of art is what is so much within time that it does not have a single duration but a multiplicity of durations that are always renewable spectator after spectator. Exploring the *digital sensorium*²⁷ and its relationship with the human means grasping both the possibilities and the contradictions of the use of digital in the artistic field. Both the rational and emotional aspects are captured in a different link with psychic grasp and sensitive immediacy because consciousness leads to knowing that the object does not coincide with the “real” presence. However, this presence is still “real”, it is developed in a mixed reality.

The limits of a technocratic drift of aesthetics can be fought if the technical apparatuses remain within philosophical reflection and do not try to dominate it.

There are only after-the-fact ethical problems about technology’s misapplication. However, recent approaches to the philosophy of science have shown that science is laden with philosophical presuppositions, and many feminists, ecologists, and other social critics of science have claimed that

²⁵ F. Rousseaux, *Phenomenological Issues in Virtual Reality: Technical Gestures Directed Like Virtual Pieces of Performing Art* in *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai-Philosophia. Dossier Phenomenology of Digital Technologies*, year LV, n. 3/2010, Cluj-Napoca 2010, p. 69.

²⁶ T. Eckert, Presentation interview of *The Life*.

²⁷ Cfr. P. Montani, *Emozioni dell'intelligenza. Un percorso nel sensorio digitale*, Meltemi Editore, Roma 2020.
Itinera, N. 28, 2024

science also is laden with social presuppositions. Many recent approaches to philosophy of technology claim that technology is not primarily, or even is not at all, applied science²⁸.

The role of a phenomenology of the digital is also to maintain the horizon of technologies at the service of a richer experience on both a cognitive and emotional level.

5. Conclusion

Through the work *The Life* by Marina Abramović, the first mixed-reality artistic performance, we attempted to understand the aesthetic possibilities offered by this new frontier of art and its phenomenological consequences. Compared to Walter Benjamin's clear separation between aura and serial reproducibility, the work of the Serbian performer, by making her hologram body coincide with a sort of presence-absence, has shown that reality can be expanded through a certain use of digital.

This is not virtual reality (a simple universe created artificially and not present in reality), nor a mere augmented reality (a descriptive and non-empirical extension); the mixed-reality used by Abramović shows the potential of a virtuality that is anchored to reality, which is already a reality (see Deleuze on Proust and Bergson). Digital technology has allowed her to go beyond the limits of material presence by expanding materiality with an absence that is presence in a different way. *The Life* experience leads to a new threshold of aesthetic-digital relationship with viewers. Abramović's philosophical immersion represents the potential that digital has to give access to knowledge and cognitive and emotional recognition that is more active and not simply passive. The angles that the viewer experiences are contemporary with the artist's hologram-body. The spectator is inside the work, communicates with it, transforms and creates new spaces for interaction with it.

With these words Abramović presents his new frontier of performance: «I believe that the art of the future is an art without objects. Just a pure transmission of energy»²⁹. Philosophical and phenomenological reflection has the task of thinking about this new horizon of aesthetics and this new mode of relationship between *consciousness* and *aesthesiological experience*. Maintaining attention on possible technocratic drifts is the ethical aspect that is necessary so that we do not degenerate into commodification and reification. The boundaries of aesthetics show that they are always capable of renewing themselves and creating new forms.

²⁸ D. Idhe, *Philosophy of Technology. An Introduction*, Paragon House Publishers, St. Paul (Minnesota) 1993, p. 6.

²⁹ M. Abramović, Interview about *The Life*, 2024.