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Digital Stages for a New Performative Space. The Work of Random International

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Abstract

The main objective of the research is to analyse some artistic creations that, through the application of innovative technological and digital systems, have the capacity to promote a new performative spatiality. Something that is carried out on the basis of the digital projects of the creative studio Random International, as they constitute a good example in the creation of immersive experiences. Analysing this type of project involves understanding the terms in which the body is capable of responding to a device that interacts in real time, altering the reality of the space. Moreover, it should be added that the interest of these proposals is even greater when they are developed not only as artistic installations, but also as digital stages for a choreographic or performative action. With regard to the research methodology, we have selected those digital stage designs in which the relationships established with the architectural container of the exhibition or performance are particularly important. In this way, those spatial configuration procedures are discovered, which are related to the architectural supports of the wall, ceiling and floor. Procedures that seek action and narrativity, in proposals that integrate actors, spectators, digital devices and performance halls. In this way, the senses implicit in perception are incorporated into Random International's works, in bodily experiences from which a new spatio-temporal notion result.

Keywords: Action, body, digital stage, performative space, Random International.

Body and Space in Artistic Practices

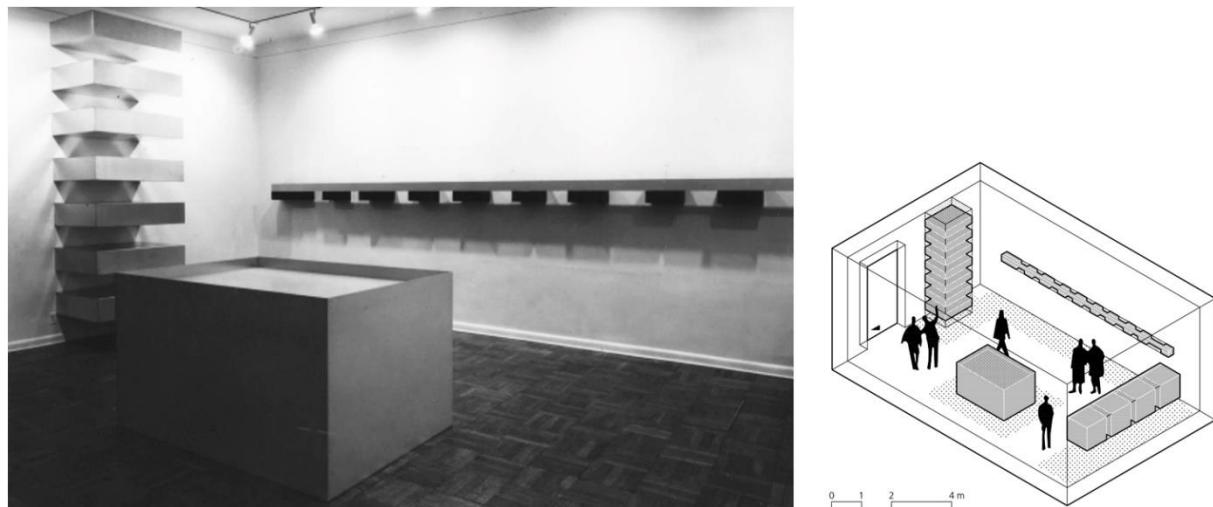
In the analysis of the relations produced between the body and space in creative action, contemporary manifestations that rely on the digital acquire great prominence. Manifestations that challenge the limits between the human being and technology, with proposals based on the creation of immersive environments. Spaces of enormous surprising power, which define new criteria for the relationship between the spectator and the works of art. This would be the

case of the work carried out by creative studios such as Random International, with creations that can be defined as artistic installations of a digital nature. A type of creations that, given their possibilities of interaction with the public, are also understood as digital scenographies, used in actions for dance or performance. These are the proposals that are analysed with the communication, in accordance with the theme of the congress at which it has been presented.¹

Figure 1

Donald Judd Exhibition, Held at the Castelli Gallery in 1966

Source: <https://www.castelligallery.com/>; drawing by the author of the paper



But before going on to make this analysis, it is necessary to present some antecedents that, in the artistic field, have determined the evolution of these relations between the body and space. First of all, it is worth looking at the contributions made by movements such as Minimal Art since the middle of the 20th century. Within this movement, artists such as Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris and especially Donald Judd based their creations on an investigation of the spatial relations established between objects, the body and the exhibition space. With regard to Judd, and as has been affirmed in recent studies (Llamazares Blanco, 2023), the minimalist objects proposed an activation of space, originating in this encounter with the spectators' bodies (Figure 1).

These possibilities of spatial interaction even led Donald Judd himself to participate in the creation of stage designs for dance. Designs where this relationship between the artistic elements he designed and the corps de ballet dancers who performed the choreographies was made explicit. Fundamentally, his participation in this respect would have taken place with Trisha Brown's dance company, for which he came to create the stage designs for three of her

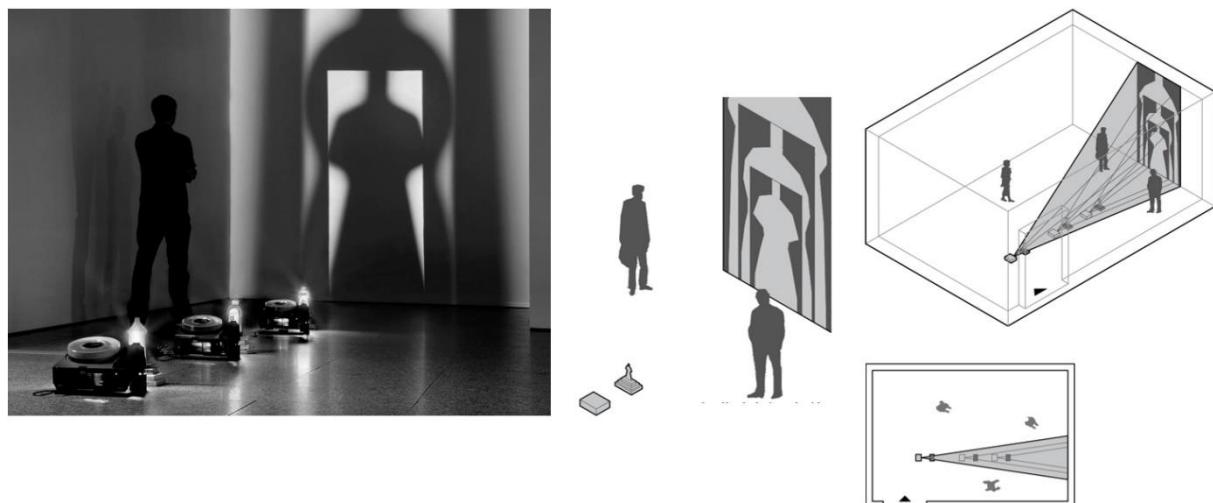
¹ This paper was presented at the "Digital Matters" thematic session of the *Performing Space 2023 Conference*, which took place on 7-9 July 2023 in the city of Nafplio, Greece.

major events. Stagings that have also been the subject of recent research due to their uniqueness (Rosenberg, 2017; Perron, 2022).

Figure 2

Eulàlia Valldosera, Envases: el Culto a la Madre, 1996

Source: <https://eulaliavalldosera.com/>; drawings by the author of the paper.



After the spatial contribution brought about by the Minimal Art movement, different manifestations would come to give continuity to this artistic stance that relates the body and space. Creative manifestations that have been collected under the broad denomination of artistic installations, and which have recently been analysed by the author of this communication (Llamazares Blanco *et al.*, 2021²). Some of these works were proposed merely as creations of action, while others, more complex ones, incorporated video or light projection. This is illustrated by the artistic installation *Envases: el culto a la Madre*, realised by Eulàlia Valldosera in 1996, which consisted of the projection of light on jars and containers of cleaning products, generating these spectres of feminine shadows (Figure 2). The graphic analysis of installations like this one has tried to recognise these spatial relations that are produced between objects and the public.

The most recent evolution in terms of these spatial relations has come about with the introduction of the latest technological and digital advances in art. Something that Random International echoes in its creations, incorporating an immediate response action in its artistic devices. A new milestone in the creations that propitiate this encounter of bodies and objects, due to their spatio-temporal implications. But before going on to analyse some of the works of

² This publication serves to illustrate the study in this regard developed with the R&D Project *ESPACTIONST. Análisis planimétrico, espacial y fotográfico de instalaciones audiovisuales pioneras en la Península Ibérica desde 1975* (ref. PGC2018-095359-B-I00). A project developed between 2019-2021 by the Recognised Research Group of the University of Valladolid *ESPACIAR. Categorías espaciales en arquitectura y otras disciplinas artísticas*.

the European studio, it is necessary to make an introduction to the key aspects that make up their proposals.

The Work of Random International

There are several qualities that characterise Random International's work. Among others, and as mentioned at the beginning, the systematic use of new technologies, as well as electronic and computer devices. A resource with which the creative studio proposes an investigation into the relationships established between technology and the human being. This is a subject of study and work that is recurrently applied in various disciplines, and which artistic creation has not wanted to leave aside. Random International not only appropriates this theme as a *leitmotif*, but also makes it its main and most notable narrative and plot resource. This characteristic has meant that most of their artistic works promote a constant interaction between the devices they generate and the public that observes them. An interaction that takes on a special relevance due to the fact that it takes place in real time.

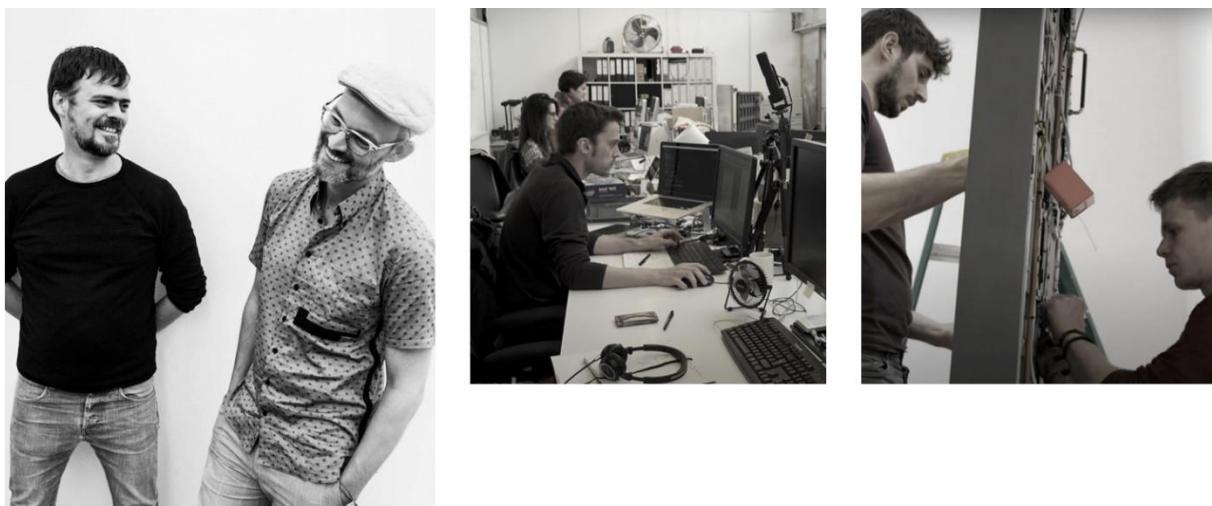
From a technological point of view, Random International's work would be picking up on a historical approach that began in the 1970s. This was a time when the performance of computer functions was improving and computer technology was becoming more accessible. All of this would have reached a high level of development, until the emergence of digital systems, thus characterising the formalisation of contemporary visual culture. A new development already identified at the end of the century as a distinctive feature of the information society, in which every stimulus is always accompanied by a reaction (Baudrillard, 1983). In this way, technology itself favours a system of response, which artistic creation would have taken advantage. As early as the 1970s, speculation was already beginning to develop about future forms of art that would be based on a novel interaction between works and spectators, and which could be called *direct contact art* (Davis, 1973). An intuition that would become a reality thanks to creative studios such as Random International, and others on the contemporary art scene.

But before going on to analyse some of the specific elements with which Random International configures its work, it is worth introducing the members of the creative collective and the profile of the team members who develop its digital installations. The Random International studio is directed by its founders, Hannes Koch and Florian Ortkrass, who began their artistic activity in 2005. A creative activity that from the beginning was oriented towards the development of large-scale interactive installations, including a wide variety of media such as sculpture, light, video or sound. As they themselves would have recognised, the handling of advanced resources such as custom *software* and *hardware*, circuit boards or behavioural algorithms, offers the possibility of creating immersive environments that challenge notions of

consciousness, perception and instinct (Escribano Tizziani, 2019). To achieve this, the team led by Koch and Ortakrass is made up of a number of specialists in various disciplines (Figure 3), including art, computer science, technology and industrial design.

Figure 3

Hannes Koch (1975), Florian Ortakrass (1975), and Computer and Technical Developers of Random International. Source: <https://www.random-international.com/>



However, despite Random International's eminently technological approach on the contemporary art scene, the fusion of these new media with more traditional media is quite remarkable. Among the most frequently used and common in most of Random International's productions are lights, mirrors and frames (Figure 4). These are elements that appear again and again in their installations, seeking a connection with the spectators who are confronted with the devices. As these elements are easily recognisable to the public, they act as a nexus for the transmission of a digital and technological narrative that is much more intense than might be expected at first. This would be a strategy widely used in the most current digital creation, which has also been employed by other figures such as the artist Es Devlin in her renowned scenographic productions (Llamazares Blanco, 2022).

However, the recourse to these more classical media by Random International and others is connected to a long international artistic tradition. A tradition that would have its origins in the European avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, and which experienced its greatest development in the last third of the century in the American context. These would have been proposals that took as a resource some of these media such as frames, mirrors and lights, to promote an experience of enormous transcendence in the spectator's perception. Effects of great surprising power, which gradually resulted in what art historiography has called the dematerialisation of the artistic object (Chavarría Díaz, 2002). Thus, it is possible to find paradigmatic cases such as Robert Irwin with the use of frames and screens, Robert Smithson with the integration of mirrors, or Dan Flavin with the spatial arrangement of light fixtures.

Examples and references that underlie the new proposals of creative studios such as Random International, which incorporate the effects brought about by technology and the digital into these media.

Figure 4

Random International, Living Room, 2022; Blur Mirror, 2016; Self Portrait, 2010

Source: <https://www.random-international.com/>; <https://carpenterstworkshopgallery.com/>.



Having defined the resources used by Random International in the creation of its proposals, it will now be interesting to analyse the relationships that are promoted between the body and space. A relationship that, through the incorporation of the digital, defines a new three-dimensionality, which is modified in real time in response to the stimuli received. These works have acquired a notable scenic dimension, which has led to their use as stage devices for dance and performance actions. These will be the works of most interest in the search for some of the new spatial-temporal keys that define the scenographic creation of the 21st century.³ A challenge with which to test the role of digital and technological media in the stage creation proposed by the European team.

Digital Stages for Performative Action

The first scenographic arrangement that is of interest among those used by Random International is the one that has to do with the classical arrangement on the wall. A frequent resource in traditional artistic creation, where the works are placed on the wall. This is a classic set-up which, since the mid-1970s, sought a hybridisation between architecture, sculpture and

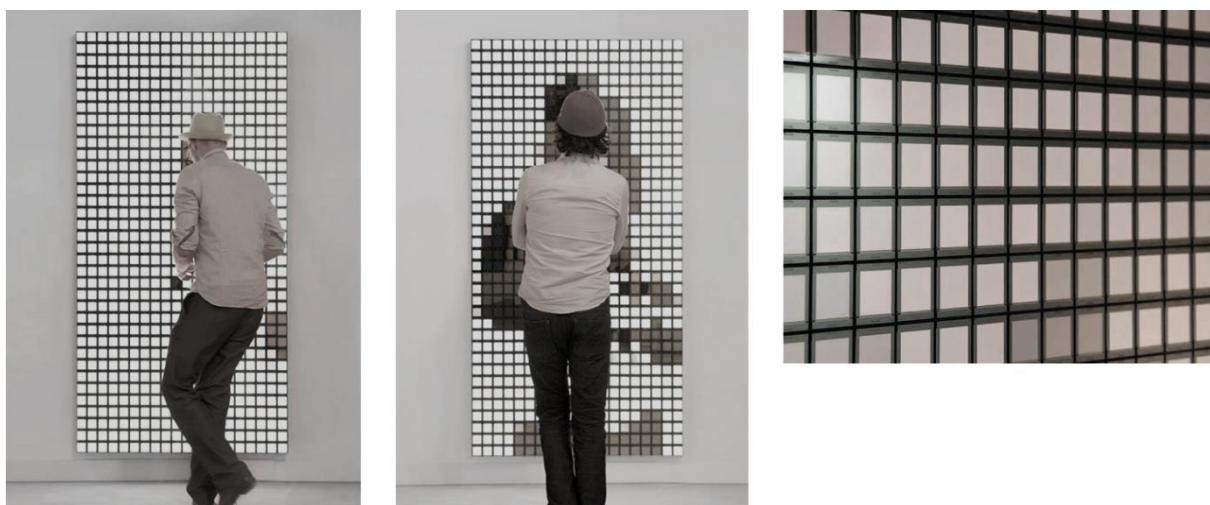
³ As a continuation of the research referred to in the previous footnote, the *ESPACIAR* Group of the University of Valladolid is currently involved in the R&D Project *DIGITALSTAGE. Análisis espacial de instalaciones escenográficas digitales del siglo XXI* (ref. PID2021-123974NB-I00). This is the reason why the study presented with this paper was carried out.

scenography. Thus, over time, the simple confrontation between the artistic object and the exhibition space led to other formats that could be understood as installations, montages or environments. An effort defended by many artists, such as the Spanish artist Eugènia Balcells, who defended the maxim of trying to “*take the image out of the wall*” (Campo, 2012). It is for this reason that this artistic will to generate a transgressive spatial relationship between wall and image could be recognised. Two two-dimensional elements that clearly define the position of the spectators in the exhibition space, as well as their possibilities of interaction with the creations on display.

Figure 5.

Random International, Study of You, 2011.

Source: <https://carpentersworkshopgallery.com/>



Throughout their career, Random International has worked on numerous occasions with these elements. A resource that, more specifically, would have given rise to the series of works known as the *Light Plate Series*. This is a group of creations based on the generation of a screen from smaller elements that emit light. This would be the case of the work *Study of You*, from 2011 (Figure 5), whose title was already a declaration of intentions of what the installation seeks or pursues. The device has a whole series of intelligent sensors that recognise the figure of the spectator in front of it, reproducing all his movements in real time. It can be said that the image proposed by the installation, despite being located on the wall, is no longer a two-dimensional and static image. On the contrary, it becomes a three-dimensional element, with a spectator who, by interfering with its reflection, also becomes the object of the installation. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that the wall acts in its traditional role as a support for the image, the proposal is interpreted as an illusory window or interactive painting.

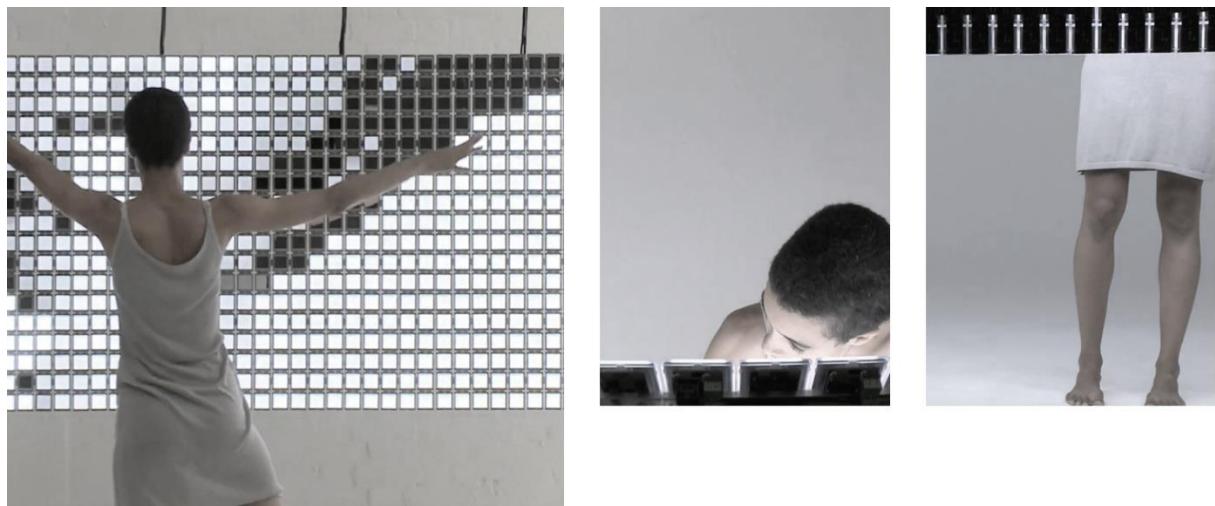
Given the possibilities of interaction of this type of proposals, Random International has used them in the generation of digital stages. Scenic presentations such as *You Fade To Light*,

from 2009 (Figure 6), which, with the same device as the previous creation, generated a screen of light with which the dancers interacted. In the specific case of this proposal, its dimensions lead us to understand the work as a wall independent of the support of the room. Thus, this wall of light acts as a theatrical or scenographic backdrop, which the actors can question and modify in real time. Despite the novelty of digital image generation, the theatrical or performative representation scheme responds to the traditional arrangement of elements. A frontal action, organised from the arrangement of the screen on the architectural support of the wall. In front of it, the dancers or actors who perform the action, sharing the space of representation with the spectators. This results in a total immersion of the audience, who witness a dematerialisation of a front wall, which changes its appearance with the action of the dancers or actors. The greatest achievement of this type of scenography therefore consists of detaching itself from the wall and extending its influence on the surrounding environment. In turn, it ceases to act as a backdrop and acquires an immersive three-dimensionality.

Figure 6

Random International, You Fade To Light, 2009

Source: <https://www.random-international.com/>



In the exploration of some of the spatial categories that Random International tries out with its proposals, we come across a new formalisation. This is a new category which, in its relationship with the main limits of the room, is linked to the ceiling plane. It is well known that the ceiling is not so important in the generation of a space, as would have been claimed from the theories of visual thought (Arnheim, 1979). Fundamentally, architecture has historically

been established from a floor plane, with its subsequent delimitation in the form of an enclosure. This is why, in a related way, the format of art installations has been concerned with proposing a work in relation to the floor and walls, and less so to the ceiling. Nevertheless, there are interesting examples based on this relationship with the upper plane, such as some

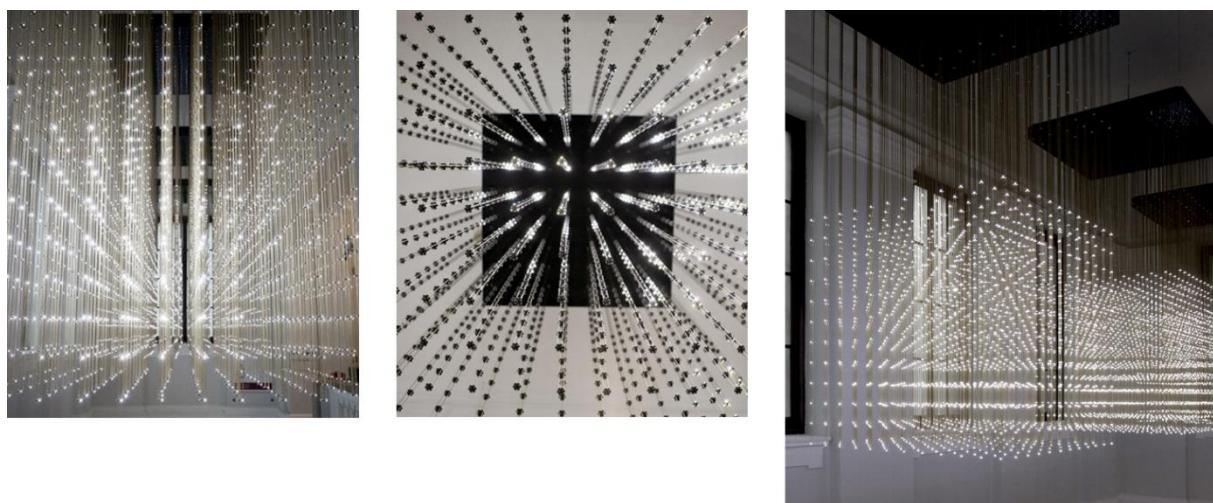
of the proposals made by the Spanish artist Cristina Iglesias. Installations such as *Alabaster Room* from 1993 or *Tilted Suspended Ceiling* from 1997 exemplify this, suspending different planes from the ceiling that manage to dematerialise the work. The recognisable limits of the room are thus altered, with the generation of a new three-dimensional element, creating what could be called “a fiction of a place that is not present” (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2018).

Faced with the challenge that the incorporation of the ceiling in proposals of an artistic nature implies, Random International resorts to it in some works. Specifically, it is a resource employed in series such as *Swarms Study Series* (Figure 7). A series proposed in the form of very thin bars or filaments, suspended from the ceiling, and which incorporate different aligned points of light along their length. The particularity of works such as these is that these points of light have the capacity to be activated in response to the spectator's stimuli. In short, the suspension of these creations from the ceiling and the novel incorporation of light, refer to the set of lights and spotlights that are placed on a traditional stage where some kind of action is performed.

Figure 7

Random International, Swarm Study III, 2011

Source: <https://www.designboom.com/>; <https://www.random-international.com/>



It is in these terms that Random International has created scenographies that have served to propose a performative action around an interaction device hanging from the ceiling. This would be the case of works such as *Future Self*, produced in 2012 (Figure 8), in which the mechanisms used can be appreciated. The elements with light that are suspended from the ceiling create something like a kind of scenic and virtual curtain inside a room, which again modifies the conditions of spatiality. Thus, the digital device is able to reproduce in real time the movements of the dancers. A dialogue of great visual interest, which would lead to question the limits in the relationship between human beings and technology, as Random International

intends to do in all their work. Regarding the scenographic disposition of the whole set, it is necessary to say that here it is modified with respect to the devices that were related to the wall. The scenic device created here can acquire a central position in the performance hall, making the dancers perform the action in its perimeter. Something that would also happen with the spectators, whose position remains unclear and undefined, allowing external movement around them. This means that the ceiling is no longer a forbidden support to perception, as in classical theater, allowing to contemplate those elements that make possible the physical suspension of the scenography in space.

Figure 8

Random International, Future Self, 2012

Source: <https://www.random-international.com/>; <https://www.dezeen.com/>



Finally, and in third place, it is worth paying attention to the capacity of the floor to generate space and time. A resource also used by art installations, given the dynamic spatiality it produces, at the service of the diegesis or narrative development. The horizontal plane acquired a great protagonism with the Minimal Art movement, as Donald Judd himself would have expressed: "Placement on the floor and the absence of a pedestal were inventions. I invented them. (...) My work on the floor was a new form, creating space amply and strongly" (Judd, 2016, pp. 839-841). From there, the sculpture descended to the plane previously reserved for the viewer, thus altering those relationships between elements. The circulations of the public came to interfere with the works, annulling the distant vision and involving all the elements in a scenic movement. From that key moment in the history of art, the floor plane has favored a conjunction of room, object and subject. A conjunction that favors a diegetic action, characterized by the incorporation of time. A circumstance that already in the 1960s, with the Minimal Art emergence, led critics to consider the "theatrical" condition of this type of creations

(Fried, 1995). An interpretation based on the use of objectual elements on the floor, on the same plane that is shared with the space reserved for the public.

This third resource is again used by Random International, in some works that materialize as objects and are arranged on the ground plane. Some of these works are those that would integrate a new series, which could be called *Glass Sheet Series* (Figure 9). A series whose works are configured as sheets of glass overlapping at close range, and whose interstices again include hundreds of aligned points of light. Its compact organization leads to read these works as unitary objects, on the horizontal surfaces of the rooms. A kind of element, like an *atrezzo*, in charge of responding, as in other series, to the stimuli provided by the public. Due to their scale, these objects not only have their own artistic dimension, but also refer to a functional condition. To a kind of furniture related to the spectators. In these terms, the floor plane enables the direct encounter between the work and the public, enhancing the action in the exhibition space. The reproduction of the spectator's movement in the digital device favors a greater connection between object and subject, coexisting in the same scenic space of representation. A space that acquires a remarkable temporality, as a category of modern architectural spatiality.

Figure 9

Random International, Swarm Study, 2017

Source: <https://fondazioneberengo.org/>; <https://www.random-international.com/>



Random International has also found in the digital installations that made up this series a great scenic potential. Given the real-time reproduction of the body's movement and its placement on the plane of representation, these devices have been a new avenue for the realization of dance and performance events. As objects, the effects become even more surprising than the previous series. All this can be analyzed from works such as *Self and Other*, presented in 2016 (Figure 10). The superimposition of glass sheets, with the incorporation of

hundreds of points of light, generates as a result an effect of virtual three-dimensionality, where the movements of the dancers are reproduced in an exact way. This type of device produces a minor modification of the limits of the room, but a greater notion of time comes into play. The dialogue between object and subject is intensified, and thus the scenic representation acquires a greater degree of narrative and temporal sequencing. In the case of the spectator's point of view, it is again the same as that identified in the suspended devices, but here the audience is more intensely linked to the device. The fact that the narrative development takes place on the same plane of representation and that the scale is related to the human body, favors this linkage.

Figure 10

Random International, Self and Other, 2016

Source: <https://www.random-international.com/>; <https://design-milk.com/>



Conclusions on Performative Space

First of all, and in view of the above, it is necessary to note Random International's recourse to certain spatial categories, which are of great interest for architecture. These categories have been previously identified in artistic installations carried out since the 1970s (Zaparaín Hernández *et al.*, 2022), in proposals that combine different media and formats. In addition to the usual use of light and sound in this type of creations, Random International has incorporated the technological and digital in their works, enhancing the immersive nature of the experiences they propose. These experiences have been developed from artistic stagings that, due to their scenic possibilities, have given way to digital stages for dance and performances.

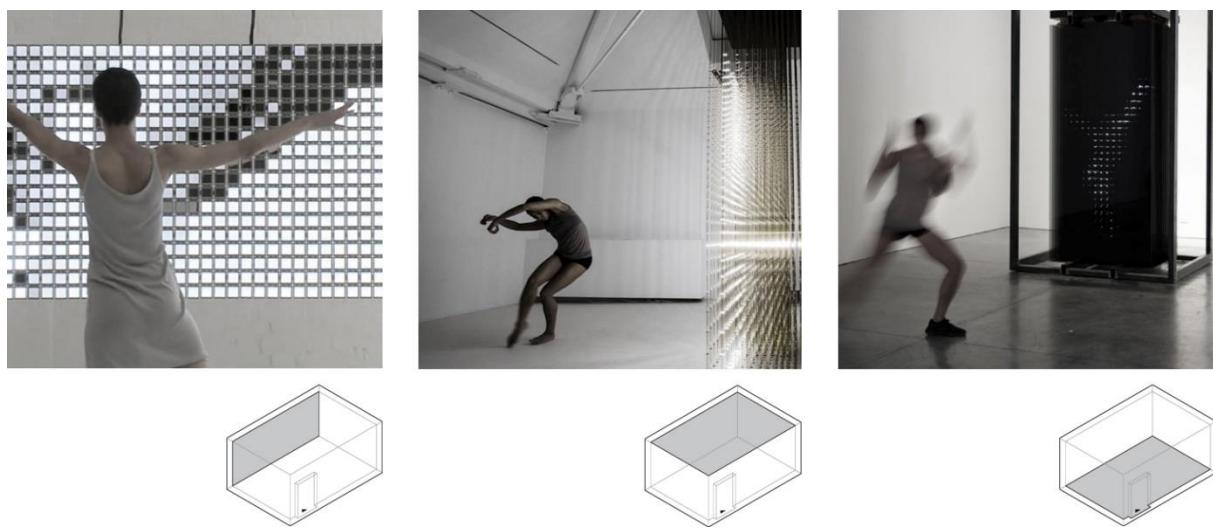
Based on this, and with regard to the performative space that Random International proposes, it can be said that it is resolved as a total scenography. A presentation where actors, spectators, digital devices and spaces of representation are integrated. A fact that gives greater

action and narrativity to what is represented, with the consequent interest in the notion of time. This makes Random International's digital devices good scenic resources in the configuration of narrative discourses, with new spatial-temporal keys. In this interest in action, and as we have seen, we have analyzed the different procedures they use. From the screen that is presented as a new wall to the object that is placed on the plane of action itself, as well as other types of devices that hang from the ceiling (Figure 11). In any case, and apart from the distinction between procedures, what all the configurative options share is the circumstance of pursuing a scenographic synthesis of space and time.

Figure 11

Random International, You Fade To Light, 2009; Future Self, 2012; Self and Other, 2016

Source: <https://www.random-international.com/>; drawings by the author of the paper



And beyond all those elements that make up Random International's scenic proposals, it is worth mentioning the importance of the dialogue they seek in their proposals between actors or spectators, and digital technology itself. A dialogue based on the relationships established between human beings and technology, as a theme present in all their artistic projects. A circumstance that leads us to affirm that Random International's digital scenographies manage to blur the limits of reality, presenting a new way of experiencing space. A new milestone in contemporary artistic creation, which takes the digital as the main resource for creation and design.

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