

## PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

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### New Technologies Reshaping the Performative Space: The site-specific set and the action props

*Paraskevi Bokovou*

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### **New Technologies Reshaping the Performative Space: The site-specific set and the action props**

**Bokovou Paraskevi**

Film department, Aristotle University, Thessaloniki, Greece

#### **Abstract**

Since the invention of film, emerging new technologies have been gradually taking over the stage and the performative space, reshaping the art of scenography. Performances nowadays are mostly participatory, and the spectators are directed via technological means, or, in interactive narratives, are the manipulators of the plot. Many site-specific performances become virtual and the spectators are presented with technological action props that act like catalysts for the performance. To support the arguments above, a series of examples will be presented in four categories of performances that use site-specific sets and technological action props. One axis is based on the technological means, and another on the space; real or virtual.

Visual directions are given on screen or via sound while the spectator is on the street of a city. For example, audio headsets provide the narration of the experience while the spectator becomes the performer. A virtual reality (VR) headset may even transport the spectator to another environment, for which the real set design may be a match, or no. A performance can now be a VR interactive experience: the spectator may even be at his/her place, anywhere with an internet connection, watching a tele-performance, having an experience not unlike a cinematic one.

There are many emerging new technologies that could be used for performance: the question is which to use and why. What more does this specific technology offer to the spectator? Does a performance become an experience just because it incorporates new technologies? How does technology influence the performative space and its scenography? New perspectives, extra information, new experiences, accessibility to all no matter the space and time: these are some of the reasons why performances pair well with new technologies.

*Keywords:* new technologies, performative space, scenography, site-specific, virtual reality

## The Emerging New Technologies Take Over the Stage

Emerging new technologies have been taking over the stage and the performative space for over a century, profoundly influencing the arts and, in particular, scenography as they tend to invade the space and become visible elements of the set.

Since the first photograph was taken in 1816, photography has challenged painters to rethink how landscapes and nature are represented. Similarly, the invention of artificial light created a new artistic role in theatre. In 1895 a film was presented at the Grand Café in Paris as a spectacle, and since then, films have continued to enter theatres either as standalone performances or integrated into the set design and narrative (Santorinaios et al., 2015). Notable examples include documentary theatre, Erwin Piscator's political theatre (Piscator & Palmier, 1983) and Josef Svoboda's multimedia experiments at Laterna Magika (Svoboda, 1993). The advent of synchronised sound in 1927, exemplified by Alan Crosland's *The Jazz Singer*, transformed storytelling by shifting the focus from the written word to the spoken word. Sound later entered theatre in the form of prerecorded effects, synchronised with the on-stage action. The invention of television in 1920 led to dramatic changes in cinema and theatre, fostering the rise of media-oriented practices. Peter Sellars and R. E. Jones pioneered approaches that eventually gave rise to video art, which was quickly succeeded by the transformative impact of computers, the internet, and social media. More recently, virtual reality headsets have merged physical and digital environments, to create immersive experiences for audiences accustomed to multiple choices, simultaneous actions and constant flow of information.

This type of spectator expects more from contemporary spectacles; as a result, performances nowadays are participatory, and innovative, with unexpected twists, and the use of different means and spaces. In interactive narratives, spectators may even manipulate the plot by making artistic choices that shape their experience. Many site-specific performances become virtual, or need technology as an "action prop" such as a mobile phone, to function like a catalyst for the existence of the performance.<sup>1</sup>

This paper presents a series of examples of performances in which performative spaces are site-specific and non-traditional; spectators take on the role of performers or co-creators; technological devices function as action props; and the boundary between virtual and physical realities becomes blurred. These examples are separated in four categories of

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<sup>1</sup> The term "action prop" is borrowed from the film industry as in cinema anything used on a set is a prop, but an action prop is indicated in the script and without it the shooting would not be possible; which is to say that the technological means indicated in this paper are only those with a meaningful role for the performance.

performances that use site-specific sets and technological action props, with one axis focusing on technological interventions and the other on the transformative nature of the set.

### Performance and (Mobile) Phones

The first category comprises performances that utilise mobile phones or other devices. This technology has become deeply embedded in everyday life, and is changing and reshaping so profoundly that its integration into interactive performances was almost inevitable.

#### Figure 1

Poster for the tele-performance *Esprit poétique* (2020), by Julien Daillère. (Source: <https://www.julien-daillere.com/fr/portfolio/au-telephone/>).



In this type of performance, visual directions appear on the screen, or sound instructions are provided to guide spectators as they move through the streets of a city, public spaces, or even their own homes. One tele-performance created by Julien Daillère during the quarantine of covid-19, *Esprit poétique*, is described as “apartment theatre audioguided” (Daillère, 2020). The spectator can either remain in their own location, or move to a designated site. They can choose to become performers themselves, interacting with others while following direct audio instructions, or simply observe and assist if they are present at the performance site.

This freedom of space enables anyone, regardless of geographic location, to participate in this exceptional experience facilitated by a technological device.

### **Performance and Audio Headsets**

In this category, site-specific performances are outlined for the audience through the use of audio headsets. These are usually handed out before the performance begins, and the spectators are invited to walk along a designated route while listening to audio directions and/or narration.

A very distinct example is that of the German collective Rimini Protokoll, which is renowned for creating interactive digital site-specific performances in various cities. One of those performances was *Remote Thessaloniki*, which was presented in Thessaloniki, in 2021. During the performance the audience was instructed by a cybernetic voice to where to go, what to do and even what or whom to observe. There were no traditional performers: passersby in the city and the audience members themselves became the performers. The narration was dystopian in tone and context, and challenged the participants' perspectives, transforming the once-familiar urban environment into a "remote" space as envisioned by the creators.

This "traveling" performance, adaptable to different cities, enables audiences from different countries to experience a similar performance. Yet, each iteration remains unique, as the site-specific set shapes the visual environment and influences the directions provided.

### **Figure 2**

*Photography by Tasos Thomoglou of the performance Remote Thessaloniki (2021), by Rimini Protokoll.*



## Performance and 3D VR Headsets

Performance spaces are no longer limited to traditional theatres: any space can be used for a performance. Museums, streets, and other public spaces have long been transformed into performative environments. With the advent of new technologies, such as 3D virtual reality (VR) headsets, virtual spaces are now integrated into these performances as well.

### *VR and the Real Environment*

In this category, the technological action prop is a 3D VR headset that provides visual and audio information, combining virtual and live narration. As the spectators enter an environment that resembles or complements the virtual one, they become performers alongside the actual performers.

One example is the interactive VR experience *White Dwarf*, by Giolanda Markopoulou in which the participants enter in small groups, and have a collective experience. They are welcomed into a space where they work with the performers and participate in a “science experiment” (Markopoulou, 2022, URL). Spectators coexist and explore the space, before putting on the headset thus experiencing the virtual reality individually.

### **Figure 3**

*Photography of the interactive VR experience White Dwarf (2022), by Giolanda Markopoulou. (Source: <https://www.onassis.org/initiatives/onassis-air/fellowships/yolanda-markopoulou-white-dwarf>).*



Another example is the *Terra Nova* spectacle, by Crew where each spectator wears a virtual reality headset and is guided through the space by performers. The physical set is carefully designed to align with the virtual environment, enhancing and amplifying the participants' immersive experience.

**Figure 4**

*Photography of the spectacle Terra Nova (2011), by Crew. (Source: <https://crew.brussels/en/productions/terra-nova>).*



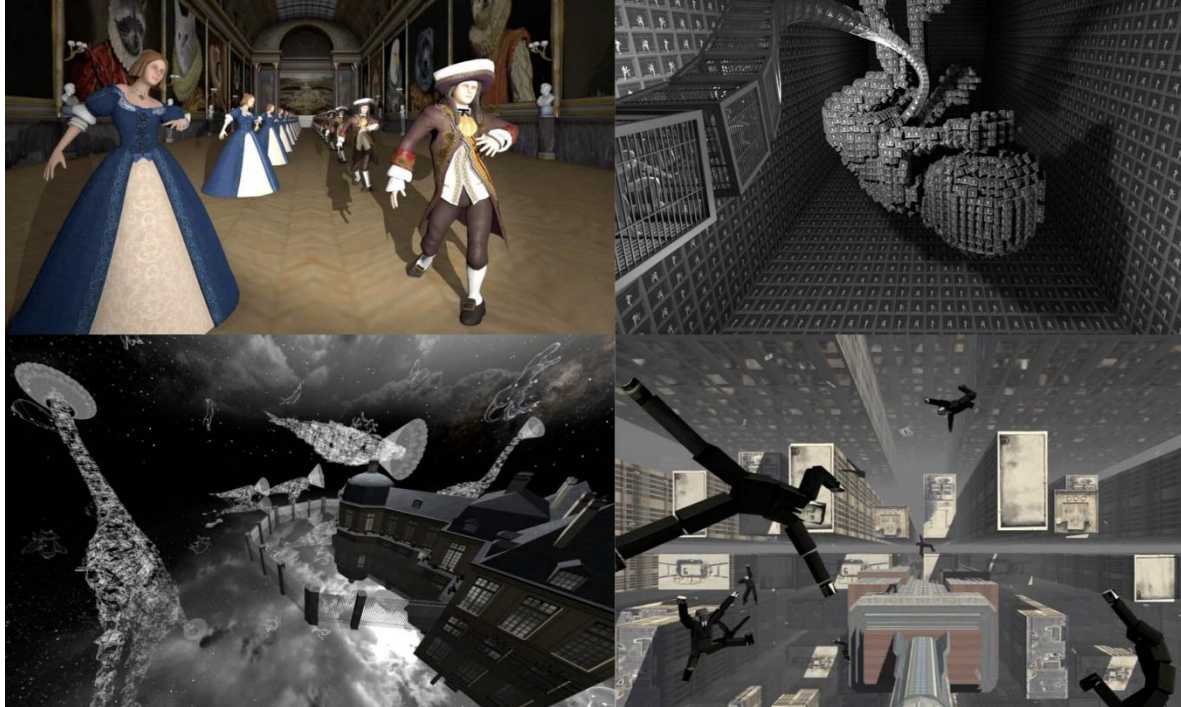
***VR Exclusively in the Virtual World***

An increasing number of artists are turning to the virtual world where anything is possible. They are creating virtual performances that offer the spectator a unique experience. In these cases, one or more spectators may enter a space designed to accommodate them, either seated or standing, and are equipped with the necessary VR gear.

A notable example is the VR interactive installation *The Eye and I*, by Jean-Michel Jarre and Hsin-Chien Huang, which took place in a space covered in black curtains and provided no information other than details of the technological equipment and seating. Although two spectators could enter simultaneously, they did not interact with each other during the performance. It is referred to as a performance because spectators assume the role of performer within the virtual environment, making choices that affect the narrative, plot, and duration of their experience.

**Figure 5**

Screenshots from video of the VR interactive installation *The eye and I* (2023), by Jean-Michel Jarre and Hsin-Chien Huang. (Source: <https://www.filmfestival.gr/en/event-tdf/event/1087>).

**Performance and Laptops-Projections**

Theatre and cinema have been crossing roads ever since the latter was invented. Advances in video, projection, and digital technologies are now being used creatively, pushing the boundaries of performance and audience engagement.

***The Spectator Anywhere with an Internet Connection***

In the first subcategory, the action prop is a laptop or computer. Spectators can participate from anywhere in the world with an internet connection, often experiencing performances in fully virtual environments.

One example is the “game-play/play-game” (Shaw, 2020) *The Seagull on the Sims 4* (2020), by Celine Song an artist who was due to stage *The Seagull* (1895), by Anton Chekhov. However, due to the lockdown of the global pandemic, the project had to be adapted. Using the Sims 4 game, with audio and a live chat available for everyone to participate, she recreated this well-known play via a game engine. Spectators enter the game as avatars and become co-creators during pre-production (a one-hour casting session), rehearsal, and the five-hour performance itself. Additionally, several well-known writers made live phone calls and shared their opinions, further enriching the interactive experience.

**Figure 6**

Screenshot from the game-play/play-game *The Seagull on the Sims 4* (2020), by Celine Song. (Source: <https://www.vulture.com/2020/11/the-best-online-staging-of-chekhovs-seagull-is-in-the-sims.html>).



### ***The Spectator Present in a Space with a Filmed Projection***

In this case, the action prop is the projector. Cinema and theatre are entangled in this cinematic kind of performance.

Spectators may be situated in a space that mirrors or complements the projected environment, as in *The 7 Deaths of Antona* (2022) by Bijoux de Kant<sup>2</sup>, or in a more conventional viewing setup, as in Dimitris Papaioannou's video installation *Inside* (2024).<sup>3</sup> As in cinema, spectators primarily assume the role of observers, but the experience is different in that it links the visual with their environment. "Not a stage performance, not either a film. Theatre made to be projected on screen" (Bijoux de Kant, 2022) highlights the distinctive nature of this category.

These projection-based performances extend the continuum of digitally mediated theatre, moving from fully remote participation to shared, physically present experiences.

<sup>2</sup> Bijoux de Kant. (2022). *The 7 deaths of Antona* [Performance]. Onassis Foundation <https://www.onassis.org/whats-on/the-7-deaths-of-antona-bijoux-de-kant>

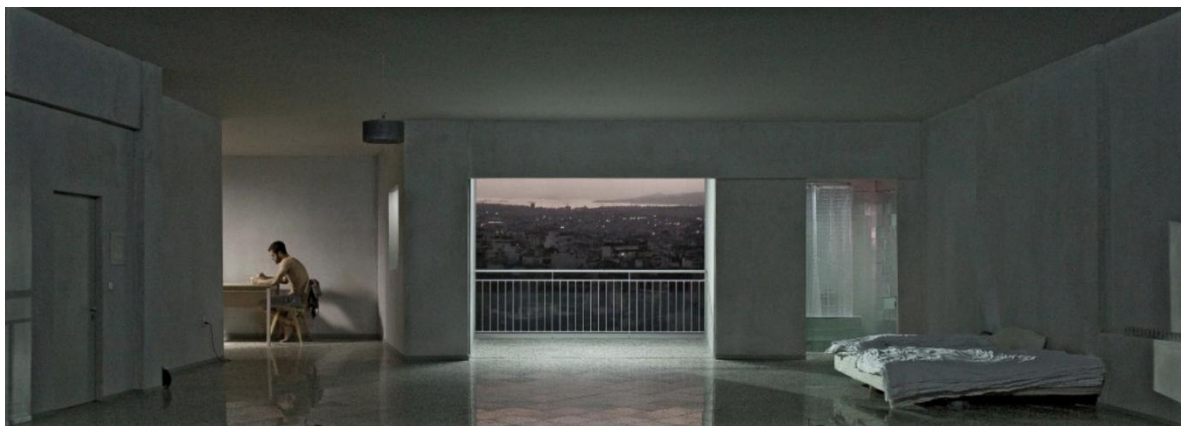
<sup>3</sup> Papaioannou, D. (2024). *Inside* [Performance]. Thessaloniki Documentary Festival. <https://www.filmfestival.gr/en/event-tdf/event/1086>

**Figure 7**

Photography by Michalakis Dimitris of *The 7 deaths of Antona* (2022), by Bijoux de Kant. (Source: <https://www.onassis.org/whats-on/the-7-deaths-of-antona-bijoux-de-kant>).

**Figure 8**

Photography of the video installation and backstage documentary *Inside* (2024), by Dimitris Papaioannou. (Source: <https://www.filmfestival.gr/en/event-tdf/event/1086>)



In this category, a LED screen can serve as the technological action prop, as in the performance *I have no name* (2025), by El Conde de Torrefiel<sup>4</sup> which pushes the boundaries even further. With no visual imagery beyond subtitles displayed on what may or may not match the spoken audio narration, spectators sit or stand in an outside landscape and watch

<sup>4</sup> El Conde de Torrefiel. (2025). *I have no name* [Performance]. National Theatre of Northern Greece. <https://www.ntng.gr/default.aspx?lang=el-GR&page=91&newsid=5243>

a technological performance with no human presence and no performer other than the occasional passer-by. Performances using LED screens emphasize how digital media can redefine spectatorship even in the absence of live performers.

### Figure 9

*Photography by Bokovou Paraskevi from the word performance I have no name (2025), by El Conde de Torrefiel. (Source: <https://www.ntng.gr/default.aspx?lang=el-GR&page=91&newsid=5243>)*



### Conclusion

Technology has expanded the possibilities of performance, transforming any space — physical or virtual — into a stage. Contemporary artists must consider not only how they use new tools, but what these technologies contribute to spectatorship: a new perspective, additional information, or a novel experience. VR, projections, mobile devices, and LED screens blur the lines between observer and performer, cinema and theatre, and the real and the virtual, challenging traditional definitions of performance. Ultimately, technological interventions are not merely instruments: they reshape the very nature of theatrical experience, pointing towards a future in which creativity and innovation coexist across digital and physical realms.

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