Augmenting Virtuality

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Audience wandering through *kimosphere no.4*. 2017 © DAP-Lab

You enter the large installation space. Red light bathes the suspended, draping fabrics into a ghostly aura. The fabrics cover loudspeakers; to one side there is an igloo-like sphere, lit by thin blue electroluminescent wires that glow like dendrites. You move between the many speakers distributed around this fabric-forest, becoming attuned to the subtly changing sounds percolating through the atmosphere, like mist that slowly settles on branches and leaves. Clicking noises, small percussive shrieks, bird cries or whispers of wind, repeat rhythms, slowly echoing away.

You sense the dusky light, an in-between gray shimmering that filmmakers crave when they search for the blur of indefinite tones. You can almost smell the real leaves and patches of grass that are on the ground surface. From above, mellow light pours down, changing intensity and occasionally metamorphosing from red to blue, and back to red. Over there something moves, as if a figure had become visible behind the fabric. It turns out to have been the masked ghost of a

dancer, passing by. At the far end, a woman is typing poetry on an old typewriter, her fingers on the keyboards generating the sound that drifts through the space. She is a sound-writer. When she stops typing, the clicks continue to echo for a while, having transformed into audible words…

We   move   in   slow-motion,
      creeping inch-by-inch through the milk-light
              beneath brown bulbs of the tamarind.

       We raft over the
              crack
                gap
                  gulf
                    of millennia.
          Clinging to weed and log:
             We, the dauntless
             We, the night-wanderers
             We, the moonlit acrobats.

("Red Ghosts/Shadows of the Dawn," *kimosphere no. 4*)

On the other side you discover a floating coral reef, its under-water bluegreen color a digital projection, but you want to lie down in it, be carried by the waves of color and touch of light.

Visitor floating inside coral reef, *kimosphere no.4*. 2017 © DAP-Lab

After you have floated, you want to fly, perhaps become avatar-like in your unbounded leaps across the Malagasy landscape following the path of the lemurs, you, the moonlit acrobat. You are handed the VIVE headset and put on the goggles, now entering the VR world – night wanderer and dancer amid the tamarind trees. Your ears hear the footsteps ascending, your skin's uncommon senses pick up the currents of unseen rivers, you are transported and become the dance. Your hands reach upward to touch the branches, and even though they appeared to be virtual, you are shocked and thrilled when you in fact touch real branches.

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

Interactive and immersive media, it has been argued, are recording systems of motion capable of measuring the body as an instrument whose movements could be quantified and objectified (Salter 2016). Understandably, Salter is thinking of a (surround) motion capture environment or Kinect camera field where movement is notated and virtualized (computer readable for algorithmic analysis, re-inscribable). In an interactive feedback environment, moving bodies can also mingle with a moving (VR) world, either projected into the surrounding space or onto the screens of the wearable goggles. Whereas Salter warns us of today's enhanced *society of control*, where automated machines and algorithms are "technologizing the senses," my manifesto of
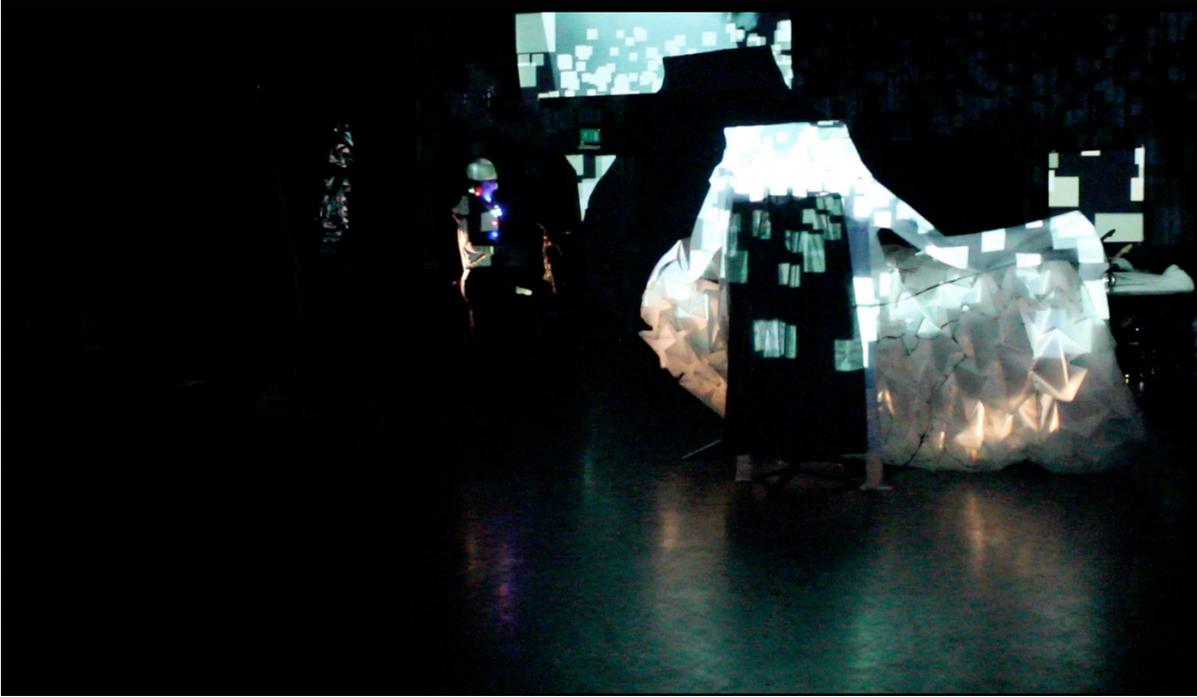

Visitor wearing HTC VIVE headset, imagining strolling inside virtual forest. *kimosphere no.4*. 2017 © DAP-Lab

future immersive AV dance would take the opposite stance: Let us proclaim the end of theatrical control. Immersive dance gets rid of the illusion of community and immunity.

What virtual reality means for us, in DAP-Lab's real-time immersive dance installations, is a form of sensorial interconnection with the atmospheric, and simultaneously a playful subversion of VR technology, namely counterpointing its game-like 3D ocular-centric world with real sensorial materials that interfere with the virtual world as the visitor is surprised to touch, sense, hear and feel them. Airy wind touches the cheeks and skin of the visitor, as it would in a real forest. Ironically, the older theatrical term of augmented reality – where projective digital media were understood to be expanding and enhancing material scenographies – is now superseded by *augmented virtuality,* where the sensorially handicapped VR-worlds of games and films are revitalized, replenished with real material surfaces and substances – where earth and sky mix, as Tim Ingold as articulated it so emphatically in his perceptional movement anthropology.

Rather than just offering the telepresencing of 3D virtual and computational worlds that can be entered through wearables, we build a meshwork-environment, multisensorial, emergent, experienceable through touching, listening, and moving-through, with encounters that surprise, even puzzle, in a continuum of *atmospheric wearable space*. You become ensounded and entranced. The whole a wearable – in the sense in which William Forsythe created matter-of-factly choreographic objects that include algorithmic instructions, e.g. *A Volume, within which it is not possible for certain classes of action to arise,* or *Nowhere and Everywhere at the same time.* Except that we think of our immersive kimospheres as invitations, not instructions. For *kimosphere no. 3* we invited an audience of blind and vision-impaired people, offering them to touch the dancers' costumes to feel and hear how they move generating sound. We did not expect them to stay for such a long time, telling us in great detail all they imagined through sensing. We were taken aback. The blind effectively, excessively, saw more than we knew.

A real 3D scenographic world of objects and projections in *kimosphere no.6*. 2018 © DAP-Lab

Visitor wearing VIVE headset, walking into virtual forest, touches real tree branches. *kimosphere no.6*, 2018 © DAP-Lab

The audience dances through the intra-corporeal kimosphere (digital projections, sound, light becoming part of the dynamic embedded experience) which also includes a game console, where they can play a poem ("Red Ghosts"), and the intimate igloo-sphere inside which they listen to their temperatures after putting a GSR (galvanic skin response) interface glove on their hands that sonifies their body heat and sends the sound to headphones handed to them (a subtle, soothing

interface that mimics asmr). Rather than worrying about technologizing the senses, we give more weight to *immersion* as a kinaesthetic and somatic practice. The progression of technologies, as we know from the relative failure of interactivity in dance, is a relative phenomenon, and VR is also merely another ephemeral stage. The dance of augmented virtuality and biosignals is yet unexplored, and biosensors and binaural microphones need to learn to understand our organs better. An increasing number of artists, who may even use live coding and real-time media, are interested in retro media, strange confluences of old and new instruments, the noise of vibrational disorganization. This sensorial interconnection and social ambience of atmospheres (cf. Böhme 2013) offers new, vibrant potentials to examine how a space enters us, and how we enter an elemental material perception-space.

References

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Ingold, Tim. 2011. *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. London: Routledge.
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