

Digital Performance and Creativity

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INTRODUCTION

Each site involved in ‘Methodological Innovation in Digital Arts and Social Sciences’ (MIDAS) was a hub of methodological innovation, engaging in research on the body/physical interaction, and advanced digital technologies. Routine research practices were observed in situ by means of field-notes, photographs, and video recording in order to reveal the way these were applied and communicated, and what principles shaped them, thus disclosing the different ‘methods world’ of each site.

The location for the ‘Digital Performance Case Study’ was the Centre of Contemporary and Digital Performance (CCDP) at Brunel University, London. There were four case study participants: myself, Dani Ploeger (academic and artist/performance), and also two postgraduate students studying Brunel’s Masters in ‘Contemporary Performance Making’ which has a substantial element of digital performance: Bryony Kummer-Seddon and Francis Marion Moseley Wilson. For the project (and for their MA dissertation assessments) both created technologically informed durational performances, which comprise the primary focus of the following discussion.

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I will, as well as detailing the methodological approaches utilised in researching the case studies, investigate notions of bodily presence and digital creativity which were explored by the above performances. In looking at the performative element of the project I intend to highlight the role of technologically assisted creativity. According to Martin Heidegger: ‘Because the essence of technology is nothing technological, essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it. Such a realm is art’ (1977: 35). I will argue from these examples that the above insight is still pertinent.

I would like to discuss the resulting performance projects as exemplifying *Gesamtkunstwerk*, both in its Wagnerian connotation (Wagner 1993) and also in Antonin Artaud’s concept of ‘Total Theatre’ (Artaud 1958). I would argue that both performances by means of their creative engagement can be seen as contemporary manifestations of this paradigm, providing their audiences with, in varying ways, multi-sensory and multi-layered experiences.

MIDAS

MIDAS sought to address the pressing methodological problem of how to exploit the potential synergies across the arts and social sciences so as to support new approaches in researching embodiment, defined here as the reciprocal relations between human subjectivity, reasoning, and behaviour in our physical and social interactions with the world. Current theoretical trends place importance on this, particularly with the growth of ubiquitous technologies and innovative research methods. Exploiting methodological synergies has considerable value; overcoming ‘parochialism’ by opening up fields of study to different perspectives; by generating imaginative research questions; by furnishing a wider range of tools and perspectives for creative use; and enabling a deeper, more holistic understanding. At the same time, differences between arts and social sciences can raise challenges—for example, researchers tend to address their data differently, and may have different permitted levels of personal assertability.

The project had five key innovative features: (1) close interdisciplinarity, bringing together experts in digital embodiment, and methodological innovation across performance, fashion, information experience

design and technology mediated interaction; (2) an exciting experimental interdisciplinary methodological environment; (3) development of and work with a unique data set of interdisciplinary methodological case studies; (4) engagement in deep exploration of practice-based research across the arts and social sciences; (5) development of innovative holistic methods for researching embodiment.

MIDAS's aim was to map, exploit and extend the synergies between the digital arts and social sciences to develop an innovative methodological framework.

BACKGROUND

The MIDAS project engaged with the broad cultural, social and political context of the arts, and put forward the argument that arts-based methods (for example, critical or speculative design) are particularly suitable for addressing contemporary challenges that are often inflexible and require changes to fixed perceptions and 'behaviour' (Dunne 2011: 5). Graham Crow, Rosalind Edwards, Melanie Nind and Rosemary Wiles argue that interdisciplinary methodological innovation is best achieved through 'developing understanding and producing knowledge in the intersections and spaces between disciplines' (2011: 5). This project takes embodiment in technology rich environments as its point of departure, building on a common focus, including shared references (for example, Merleau-Ponty 1945; Harraway 1988) and common methods (again, for example, ethnographic methods, video-based research). It was intended as, and was successful in providing, a 'methodological playground' through which the team could experiment, examine, appropriate and interrogate methods (Dunne 2011: 5). Such methods have the potential to be relevant far beyond the project.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

A multimodal ethnographic study was conducted across the four partner sites. Research questions were intended to inform methodological approaches to embodiment and the outcomes contributed to NCRM's (National Centre for Research Methods) mission to promote the quality and range of research tools used by the social science community, with regard to 'influencing behaviour and informing interventions' (ESRC Strategic Priority 2).

DIGITAL PERFORMANCE CASE STUDY

The primary focus here was the project's performance study and related performances. As mentioned above, the site for the performance study was Brunel's CCDP.

The project was led by myself and included analyses of methodological approaches to digital performance making and resultant performances/installations by both Kummer-Seddon and Wilson. Kummer-Seddon is an artist as well as theatre director and designer and she has a background in Fine Art. Although Kummer-Seddon's interest was chiefly on backstage elements of performance, she performed her own works during the MA. She had no prior real experience of working with technology. Wilson is a sound and performance artist and she has a strong background in music technology. She is interested in electronic/electroacoustic composition, performance and taxidermy. Wilson came from the US to study with us and in particular with Ploeger.

This case study comprised observations and interviews across a period of 9 months, from October 2013 to June 2014.

In digital performance, the body is the main unit of analysis for research and for practice. Researching/practising with the body is manifested in working as individual-led (for example, Wilson) or collaboration-led (for example, Kummer-Seddon). The body is usually explored critically and is seen in conjunction with space, light and technology, making sense within a context, a space and an environment. It is seen within a 'world' which is not necessarily a merely physical one. In the performance site, the use (or lack of) bodily movements/kinetics is an important feature for narrating about it. The body serves as a language to talk about the body; in other words to quote from a previous writing of mine 'it writes itself literally in performance rather than supporting something that is spoken' (Broadhurst 2007b: 143). Kummer-Seddon explores the body using aesthetic and conceptual metaphors, as a 'means to an end', and stresses that a performer's background shapes the lens on how the body is conceptualised. She continues:

In general, I don't work with the body as a character, I work more with the body as a place, or body as a means to an end partly because I don't

come from a performance acting kind of background I come from a design background so I am seeing the body as aesthetic. (Xambó 2014)

A metaphor of the body explored by Kummer-Seddon's use of technology is the body as a landscape: 'the body as a place or landscape using extreme close-up filming', an approach found in her final dissertation performance (Kummer-Seddon 2014). It is her repeated theme of the ways in which the performer's background affects how the body is conceptualised and what role technology plays in this process.

In contrast to Kummer-Seddon, Wilson thinks about the body as a biological entity within a world of species. For her the performer explores the understanding of the human body by comparison with other living creatures. According to Wilson: 'I guess I have some interest with this link between art, kind of biological physical bodies, and how we think ourselves as similar to them' (MIDAS 2014). Francis is inspired by Mary Douglas' notion of the 'abject', and how death is sanitised in the Western culture (MIDAS 2014).

In her MA Performance Publicity Statement Wilson declared:

The artist performed overnight, and invited the audience to come and see the installation 19 hours later. During the installation the audience was invited to see and imagine the story of what happened during the night. Body traces (e.g. dry blood on bed sheets, photos and videos of Francis operating or sleeping are foregrounded. (Wilson 2014)

She adds: 'I am trying to make a space that is mine or make evidence that I have lived it overnight, which then will turn into this kind of installation' (Xambó 2014).

The following is a list of themes and terminology around technology in digital performance that were inferred and annotated during the study:

- The digital
- Technology as a toolset
- Technology as a magnifying lens
- Technology as a critique tool
- DIY and the making
- Trajectories between the bdy and the digital
- Tensions between the body and the digital. (Xambó 2014)

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO DIGITAL PERFORMANCE

There is a diverse range of research methods in this particular area which also vary depending on each practitioner, and project. As Kummer-Seddon says: 'I take every project as it comes' (MIDAS 2014). Research methods are divided into practice-based methods in which there is a hands-on learning based on bodily interactions and learning by doing, by practising (for example, test-runs, workshops, re-enacting performances, simulated interactivity, devising methods, reflection tools, using audio-visual tools, using video), intellectually based methods based on theory and intellectual discussions about concepts (for example, seminars and lectures), and design-based methods based on using creative design processes (for example, sketchbooks and promotion).

Devising methods are used by Kummer-Seddon for coordinating a big group of people with different roles (techs versus actors) in a big place. Kummer-Seddon especially likes to work in collaboration.

I know a lot of people who don't like to work with other people because they need to rely on other people. I am aware that lots of things that I want to do are complicated and I need other people in order to do them ... I like to have someone to bounce things off, I don't like to [get stuck] with my own ideas. I like working with other people a lot. (Xambó 2014)

She also highlights potential tensions:

One of the most that I found was that words mean different things in theatre than in sonic arts ... what I would call a soundscape [the sonic artist] would call it something completely different. That made it a little bit awkward [in terms of problems in communicating]. But I don't have the programming skills that he does. (Xambó 2014)

Kummer-Seddon comments about the difficulty on summarising the methods she uses, and then outlines her personal skills, decisions and goals as methods:

This is kind of difficult for me. As far as I am concerned, I just do the thing. I don't really think about how I am doing it ... it's just what I do. I am very big on sketches. I always have a huge book on sketches because I am a very visual person I need to visualise how it looks like. (Xambó 2014)

Wilson, speaking about her methods, highlights the importance for her of using video as a tool for documentation:

Documentation in the process is very important to me ... For me watching a video is an opportunity to confirm whether what I see is what I want to communicate. (Xambó 2014)

It is my own belief that there is a continuum in the role of technology; it depends on the digital performance artist. My approach is that of incorporating technology as an independent layer to the performer (the performance could stand alone), and also there is some indeterminacy (in contrast with everything being in sync). In relation to this indeterminacy, when 'interacting with technology there are chances that it might not happen'. On the other side of the continuum there is no place for indeterminacy (everything is scripted), and technology is a dependent layer to the performer and here I am thinking of the performances of Troika Ranch who have mentioned on several occasions that performance and technology must develop together (Broadhurst 2007a: 118–120).

At the MIDAS Symposium and Performance event held at Brunel, Stelarc sums up the position as follows:

Alfred Whitehead, a mathematician and philosopher, spoke about our imaginations as only as good as our instruments. So the paradigms of the world that we construct would not have been possible without microscopes, thermoscopes, MRI scans ... These are devices and instruments that generate unexpected images and unexpected information about the world, and this is what the seduction of technology is, about the seduction of the digital because it continues to feed our curiosity, it continues to generate unexpected information and images. (2014)

He continues:

The body is this biological entity that can perform and perceive the world in its pure physiology and sensory apparatus. It's augmented, it's extended, it's sensitised by its instruments. (2014)

The overall conclusion that was reached by the MIDAS project was that there does not seem to be any one theoretical or practical framework that can be applied; rather, it would seem that a varied range of methods is

needed in order to develop skills appropriate to the diversity inherent in these technological art practices. However, what we did realise was that methodological approaches in the Social Sciences could also be appropriate in some instances for the Arts and approaches from the Arts relevant in the Social Sciences.

EMBODIMENT AND DIGITAL CREATIVITY

For her final performance Kummer-Seddon created an installation, *Landscape* (2014), which, as she mentions, explores the ‘reframing of the body’ (Kummer-Seddon 2014). This consisted of an audio-visual screened enclosure on which were projected large and intimately close images of her body. The seductive and strikingly attractive *mise en scène* presented a form of ‘Total Theatre’ with the focus on the absolute centrality of the body. Although Kummer-Seddon assumed audiences would visit for only a few minutes, each stayed for much longer. As her publicity statement puts it: ‘Skin and hair become a landscape to travel across and explore, the focus not being a silhouette but the intricate nuances of the intricate body’ (Kummer-Seddon 2014), in fact a ‘virtual body’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 138) with its phenomenal ‘place’ defined by task and location (25) (Fig. 2.1).

In contrast Wilson created her durational performance, *cuddle* (2014), as a participatory immersive environment around herself as a performer. The audience were invited to the first stage of her performance where she dissected a rabbit, transferring its entrails, eyes and teeth into a teddy bear at the same time transferring the bear’s insides into the rabbit (including its voice box which when massaged or ‘cuddled’ asked to be loved). Francis then spent the night with the teddy bear. The dissection and her overnight space were documented and included with her various surgery paraphernalia for her gallery presentation the next day, where the audience were again invited. The work was thus a durational performance but also an installation—an immersion. In effect, Wilson enacted a biotechnological procedure, the ‘organ/innards transplant’ in the transference from one body to another—and a remediation of the performance (via electronic documentation) during her installation (Fig. 2.2).

In both performances, the body/ies were theme/s and as such contributed, to a varying extent, to both artworks. Kummer-Seddon’s installation for the audience presented an intimate, interrogation of her actual

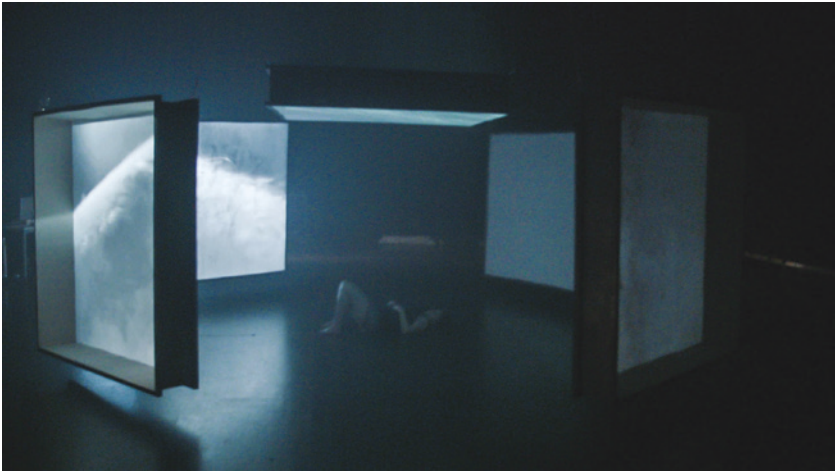


Fig. 2.1 *Landscape*, 2014. Bryony May Kummer-Seddon



Fig. 2.2 *Cuddle* performance excerpt, 2014. Francis Marion Moseley Wilson (fmmw)

physicality, whereas for Wilson, her physicality was only one corporeal focus vying with both the rabbit's and teddy bear's physical transformation. Again, both performances/installations had contrasting effects on



Fig. 2.3 *Cuddle* installation excerpt, 2014. Francis Marion Moseley Wilson (fmmw)

their audiences, with Kummer-Seddon's providing an inviting and comforting space, whilst Wilson's presented a deeply visceral and disturbing experience (Fig. 2.3).

In digital performance, the digital is essential, as is the body. Digital performance artists are trained to use digital technologies as an important creative tool for exploring the body. Both artists were taught on their MA course that technological limits can be creative opportunities. They were also both trained in developing personal discourses grounded in the literature, their practice, their skillset and their goals. Researching technology was pivotal within their practitioners-researchers' agendas. However, artists may use technology differently. For those who are technically skilful, such as Wilson, it allows them to focus on creative practice and conceptual thinking. For those who were initially less so, such as Kummer-Seddon, learning technologies allows them to think differently and take unexpected creative decisions. Some artists use technologies from a critical perspective, others use it from a utilitarian one. There is no common denominator on how or what technology is used, as there

is none about how the body is researched; rather, personal stories are observed.

It is my opinion that digital performances as experimental artworks both serve as critique and have an *indirect* affects on the social and political, in as much as they interrogate the nature of accepted ideas and belief systems regarding new technologies. In this sense, the digital does what all avant-garde art does: it is an experimental extension of the socio-political and cultural tendencies of an era. It is also my belief that in digital performances, instrumentation is mutually implicated with the body in an epistemological sense. The body adapts and extends itself through external instruments, which when appropriated by embodied experience become part of an altered mode of experience of and in the world. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: ‘the body is our general medium for having a world’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 146). This can be seen literally in Kummer-Seddon’s installation which intimately presents in its imagery a personal landscape of the artist. It can also be seen in Wilson’s work where via instrumentation the ‘organs/innards transplant’ allows the dead rabbit to again have a voice.

GESAMTKUNSTWERK/‘TOTAL THEATRE’

As multimedia projects, both *Landscape* and *cuddle* take place within an immersive and durational environment. The possibility of audience response presupposes that an embedded sense of the boundary between ‘self’ and ‘other’ is potentially fluid and may on occasions be suspended completely. Aesthetic writings frequently described such responses as also involving the cross-activation of different senses—a low-level ‘synaesthesia’ (Broadhurst 2012: 234–235). These two states, both noticed by earlier Romantic theorists, were explicitly addressed by writers such as Robert Vischer (Malgrave and Ikonomidou 1994). In the sphere of practice they were incorporated into a creative intention to produce an artwork that ‘consumed’ its audience by leading them into an empathetic surrender, overwhelming them with a simultaneous spectrum of different media. As Karl Trahndorff neologised it in (1827), this was the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the ‘total art-work’, a term then popularised in Wagner’s early writing: *The Artwork of the Future* (1895, first published in 1849, later translated by William Ashton Ellis (2nd edition), 1993). The reference of *Gesamt*-, the ‘total’, in the word can also be taken as referring to the creators and audience alike, thus yielding a reading of the

term as ‘collective work of art’. And indeed in his early writings Wagner stressed that the notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* was not only an aesthetic term but pointed to a communal ideal (Roberts 2011: 75).

The paradigm of this is the tetralogy: *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (‘The Ring of the Nibelungen’) a ‘cycle of music-dramas’ of which the first complete performance, which inaugurated the Bayreuth Festival, was presented in 1876 at the specially constructed Festspielhaus. It relates to the fall of the Gods (led by Wotan) from Walhalla and their eventual transformation into mortals. For Wagner, the main ingredients of his total art work were ‘dance, music and poetry’. However, other plastic arts were also drawn into it, to provide a further intermingling. As he put it: ‘Not a single richly developed capacity of the individual arts will remain unused in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the future’ (Roberts 2011: 75). This was not only a blending together of art forms but implied a certain rejection of industrial modernity. Wotan’s dying and Siegfried’s and Brunhilde’s sacrificial deaths point to the merging of individuation with the collective (Roberts 2011: 74). For Wagner, art and the social were indivisible and pointed to a very real belief in the wholeness and ‘organic synthesis’ of the Greek state which had been replaced by the fragmentation of industrialisation and mechanisation in the modern order. Regardless of these positions, his music-dramas could not be staged without industrial technology. He had no option but to utilise various mechanisms such as a smoke machine, developed from an old locomotive boiler, which masked the various scene transitions by bellowing out coloured steam (causing problems for performers and musicians alike) (Smith 2007: 30).

Of course, it might appear a long stretch of association to compare an epic enterprise like *The Ring* to the individual performances discussed, but my contention is that the artistic paradigm instantiated by Wagner has percolated into performance practice even when practitioners are unaware of any such discernible influence. What seemed to be the epiphenomenon of late Romanticism has, paradoxically, informed the contemporary avant-garde. Firstly, the MIDAS performances manifest an ambition to let the audience maximally empathise through the co-ordinated employment of a range of media. Both of them include intermingled elements of design, sound, image and poetry. Various features from Wilson’s performance/exhibition were included in her resulting ‘gallery’ exhibition. The whole process was screened as part of the gallery installation providing an immersive environment and indicating an assimilation

of art works. Secondly, they exemplify a certain negation of individuation, as seen in Kummer-Seddon's performance/installation where there is no protagonist for the audience to identify with, and in Wilson's project, where there is implied a synthesis in her bodily transplantations between the organic rabbit and artificially constructed teddy bear.

There is also another theoretical locus which, I consider, informs the two works, namely Artaud's concept of a 'Total Theatre'. As he wrote:

The substitution, for poetry or language, of a poetry in space ... the possibilities for realization in the theatre relate entirely to the *mise en scène* considered as a language in space and in movement. (1958: 35–38)

At the heart of Artaud's attempt to re-totalise theatre was his 'theatre of cruelty' which was, in keeping with Wagner, directed towards de-individuation. Artaud's significance lies not so much in his practice (which was mostly unrealisable) but in his writings published in 1938 as *The Theatre and its Double*. Underpinning this work was 'a radical critique and rejection of Western civilisation and its arts' together with a belief that 'decadence and regeneration' exist together (Roberts 2011: 181).

For Artaud, the stage had to be cleansed of psychologisms and social critique. The plastic and the physical were the true domain of the theatre. Certain affinities exist between his concept of a 'total theatre' and both of these projects. His stage was a theatre of dreams crowded with objects and bodies seen as signs, open to interpretation and without a narrative. The same could be said for the MIDAS performances which reminded spectators of some of the bizarre combinations that occur in dreams.

In his notion of the 'theatre of cruelty' Artaud believed that a certain 'essentialism' could be realised through performance. His actors were 'animated hieroglyphs', bodies that moved about like living ciphers in a type of choreographed cryptography (1958: 51–90). As Jacques Derrida writes, Artaud's theatrical writing is a 'writing of the body itself' (1978: 191) and also a critique of the logocentrism of Western society. Both MIDAS performances too, were literally a writing of the body.

A further similarity is Artaud's refusal to work with a dramatic text: 'We shall not act a written play, but we shall make attempts at direct staging around themes, facts, or known works' (1958: 90). This clearly resonates with both performances which are so devised. In keeping with this, Wilson's performance in particular includes actions of 'terror'

and ‘cruelty’ such as the vivisection of both rabbit and teddy bear, thus realising Artaud’s belief that: ‘we are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theatre has been created to teach us this first of all’ (1958: 79).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the MIDAS project realised its intention of garnering support for multimodal research methodology. In the process of doing this innovative and at times spectacular ‘total’ artworks were created, as demonstrated by the ‘Digital Performance Case Study’ (but also presented within other of its case studies). At the same time methodological synergies were explored, opening up fields of study to different perspectives. The project, I would contend, provided a valuable demonstration as to how ‘research’ questions can stimulate creative imagination in ways which could not have been anticipated by other non-multi-modal methods.

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Digital Bodies

Creativity and Technology in the Arts and Humanities

Broadhurst, S.; Price, S. (Eds.)

2017, XXII, 270 p. 29 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-349-95240-3

A product of Palgrave Macmillan UK