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# ***YOU FIGHT!* DIGITAL SWARMS, GAZE AND PRESENCE IN KOKOSCHKA REVIVAL'S MULTIMEDIA THEATER PERFORMANCE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*You Fight!* Is a performance co-created by the author and the Kokoschka Revival experimental theatre's collective. In this work, we call into question the ways in which current marketing gimmicks (e.g. the emergence of professional youtubers, influencers, camgirls, etc.) modifies common notions of presence and reality. In this paper, we discuss the technological and dramaturgical issues raised by the multimedia performance. In particular we stress how a critical use of highly-pervasive technological environments can elicit a transformative experience for audience members and performers alike. The paper is divided into four parts. The first presents the context of labour and entertainment digitalisation thereby introducing the general topics of the pièce. The second section illustrates the plot and the dramaturgical intentions and introduces the question of the gaze in relation to the technological mediation. The third part describes the technological environments developed for this work. In the conclusion, we discuss how a theatrical use of technology can provide a form of sensible resistance to the increasing mediatisation of our daily life. To this regard, this study proposes an original contribution to the field of research-creation by providing a critical perspective on digital media and the ways in which they inform major transformations in the construction of subjectivity and in human social behaviours.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The recent digitalisation of labour is characterised by a growing individualism often associated with entrepreneurship and commodification of the self [9]. In such a framework, individuals internalise ideas that were designed for the marketing of commodities – efficiency, competition, self-branding – thereby embedding neoliberal statements in the construction of subjectivity. The rising importance of such values in both digital entrepreneurship and social media entertainment asks the individual to view social relationships as transactional and instrumental by blurring therefore the frontiers between working and free time.

The consequences of both digital mediation and auto-promotion of the self goes far beyond the working context. Saturated by every day informational overloads and regularly involved with online activities for social relations and entertainment, we are constantly exposed to the ubiquitous presence of screens that continually grab our attention while affecting both our individuality and our socio-affective development [6].

Theatre is, on the contrary, the place of gaze and presence [12]. As artists, we questioned ourselves about the nature of the gaze today. In particular, we sought to examine our relationship with technological mediation, by analysing the way in which screens affect the empathic relations between ourselves, the others and the world.

In this paper we discuss theoretical, dramaturgical and technological issues raised by a multimedia performance created by the author and Kokoschka Revival<sup>1</sup> experimental theatre's collective. In particular, the performance focuses on the new forms of online entertainment and the relation between self-branding and labour digitalisation. The question of the gaze is presented as a practice of resistance allowing the characters of the pièce to experience a real empowerment face to the mediatisation of life. Both our perspective and our practice do not seek to propose an anti-technological statement. On the contrary, our artistic research demonstrates how a critical use of highly pervasive technological environments can elicit a transformative experience for audience members and performers alike. The paper is divided into four parts. The first presents the context of labour and entertainment digitalisation thereby introducing the general topics of the pièce. The second illustrates the plot and the dramaturgical intentions and introduces the question of the gaze in relation to the technological mediation. The third describes in detail the technological environments we have developed for this work that can be divided in three main categories: wearable sensors for live interaction, smartphones-mounted-displays and an application for audience interactivity. In the conclusion, we discuss

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.kokoschka revival.com/en>

how a theatrical use of technology can provide a form of sensible resistance to the increasing mediatisation of our daily life. To this regard, this study proposes an original contribution to the field of research-creation by providing a critical perspective on digital media and the way in which they inform major transformations in the construction of subjectivity and in human social behaviours.

## 2. IN THE DIGITAL SWARM

The digital space can be described as an anonymous swarm in which users "can be" by means of self-representation image over production and instantaneous communication. According to Byung-Chul Han [7], in the digital swarm users renounce to their individuality in order to be present and recognisable within the worldwide community attracted by the increasing efficiency of communication technologies. The swarm is indeed characterised by the immediacy of the present, e.g. the possibility of sharing contents in real time thereby allowing users to instantaneously create their own representation and to consume the representation produced by the anonymous-other. Within this content-exchange dynamics, the way in which users promote the contents they share reflects the marketing strategies embedded in the infrastructure of the digital platform. Moreover, the shared content is often the representation of self, which is both the subject and the object of the transaction. Not surprisingly, a key aspect of social media development today is the increasing importance of the prosumer, a notion denoting the internet user as at the same time consumer and producer of digital contents [14].

### 2.1. The rise of prosumption

Despite its original optimistic meaning [15], the rise of prosumption in social networking and online platforms point out a process of capitalist externalization of labour costs, offering to the user the illusion of a place to freely express their subjectivity and making profit [13]. Within this context, two main phenomena can be observed: 1. The expansion of the so-called *platform capitalism*, as a novel form of digital economic circulation based on networked exchange relations and replicable business models [16]; 2. The rise of *gamification*, as a set of gaming techniques allowing users to feel more involved in social networking, spending more and more time on platforms thereby informing data analytics processes, profiling methods and online marketing strategies [8]. The way in which interfaces and devices are designed clearly enhances the increasing gamification of digital environments. The rise of both platform capitalism and gamification has important consequences in our daily life.

On the one hand, the borders between work time and leisure time became blurred. Since physical spaces characterising both job and pleasure activities are not differentiated, each moment of our daily life can be hypothetically devoted to work. Our availability to work increases, thereby reinforcing performativity and efficiency demand from the labour market. The rise of smart working during the Covid-19 pandemic dramatically reinforced this trend. On the other hand, we deliberately accept to consider ourselves as a product that can be exchanged, promoted and sold thereby experiencing encounters and social relations as transactional and instrumental. Digital platforms' explicit gamification enhances such a trend pushing individuals to experience the (working/relational) time spent online as more and more attractive and engaging.

### 2.2. The loss of the gaze

Since we spend an increasing amount of time online within digital mediated spaces, which are the consequences for the individual? Digital platforms, theoretically represent a space of boundless freedom in which we can self-express outside of traditional boundaries. Despite the possibilities in constructing a representation of the self, communication in social platforms provides an oversimplification of relationships, reinforcing individualism. In fact, social media operate as a transparent mirror eliciting self-satisfaction and protecting ourselves from the critical encounter with the other (the world of life, another individual). Transparency, as a consequence of immediacy, also erases the critical distance that we need in order to feel our presence and the presence of the other. While offline encounters demand a real engagement to face the alterity (the other), presence on the screens is always dissimulated. In fact, online (virtual) presence has a spectral essence being at the same time real (e.g. real time notification system) and ephemeral (i.e. untouchable, passing by, *unengageable*).

In this context, the gaze of the other is always experienced from the point of view of my own representation. By constructing the other as a reflection of my bubble, the mirroring structure of social media reinforces individualism from two complementary perspectives. On the one hand, the spectacularisation of the self, provided by images overproduction and overconsumption within digital platforms and social networks, typically enhances narcissistic patterns of behaviour [11]. Attractive notification system – in the form of “likes” and comments – and the possibility of sharing self-enhancing content – flattering pictures, boastful statuses – provide an immediate reward mechanism that directly acts on the emotional system of the individual. Feelings like social appreciation, self-image, acceptance, social comparison, and recognition are hereby stimulated eventually entailing different forms of addiction [6].

On the other hand, digital environments often become a tool for escaping the uncertainty of our time, especially in Covid times, by allowing individuals to build temporary comfort zones that protect them from the gaze of the others. To this regard, the intensive engagement with social networks, and complementary online activities, are often related to the will to forget daily offline problems and obligations, particularly for those individuals who receive little social support offline [1].

### 2.3. Self-branding and the marketisation of the self

Digitalisation of labour, entertainment and social relations changed traditional lifestyles and engendered new ways to make profit based on self-branding. According to the prosumption paradigm, users can transform their self-representation into a remunerative product. The rise of social media influencers and vloggers (video bloggers, such as youtubers) during the last decade reflects the growing attractiveness of online platforms as a means for making money and for acquiring success. Influencers promote certain lifestyles or attitudes becoming multipliers for trends in genres including fashion, cooking, music, design and so on. Such an online celebrity is often used as a form of trust allowing influencers to translate their credibility into the products they promote or in the advertisements they provide. The growing popularity acquired by vloggers and influencers led people to change the way in which they previously used social networking for both communication and working. Self-branding became a social and economic value, pushing users to capitalise on their (digital) representation, transforming themselves into a product that can be sold. Within this context, all kinds of individual's daily life activity can be considered as a valuable product allowing people to gain visibility into the swarm, if not to make economic profit. Moreover, the growing technological democratisation (at least in occidental societies) allows nowadays individual users to record videos of their daily lives, and upload them online, or to directly create live streaming in real time. For this reason, virtual spaces are increasingly becoming playgrounds for amateurs, actors and voyeurs within both old and emerging online platforms (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, Twitch, Snapchat).

## 3. *YOU FIGHT!* TOWARDS A BRAVE NEW WORLD

*You Fight!*<sup>2</sup> is a theatrical performance dealing with online entertainment and digital workers. In this work, we call into question the ways in which current marketing gimmicks (e.g. the emergence of professional youtubers, influencers, camgirls, etc.) modifies common

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.kokoschkarevival.com/en/project/you-fight>

notions of presence and reality. The central tenant of our work is the role of the body in this new environment, a body that stands in conflict between virtual encounters and physical contact.

We imagined a world where online workers are connected day and night in a constant streaming of data, both during working and leisure time. A dystopian life shaped in a permanent game structure: you must sell your representation, working and fighting to reach more audience, more consensus, more money. In this context, the creation of virtual identities is a necessary step in order to produce work and income. In this world, a radical gamification of reality is at play: everybody lives inside a game that allows them to build virtual identities and to produce value online, a platform capitalism based on the live transmission and consumption of audio-visual data. Every player has indeed to pay the Platform for its services, and has a debt to pay off in case of audience erosion.

### 3.1. A digital dramaturgy

Two girls spend most of their time inside the virtual space. Their names are Kasparov and Deep Blue. These two names evoke a famous historical event. Between 1996 and 1997 world chess champion Garry Kasparov challenged the Deep Blue supercomputer, developed by a team of IBM engineers, during several chess matches. In the last match, won by the computer, Kasparov was disturbed by a chess move done by the machine which he considered too creative to be the product of an artificial intelligence. The Russian champion thus supposed that such a move was suggested by a great human master. It later turned out that this unpredictable chess move was indeed a bug generated by Deep Blue's algorithm. Likewise, the character in our story, Deep Blue, makes a mistake. Not a miscalculation but rather a human error. The resolution of this error will cause the two characters to radically question the framework of the Game.

Our characters work in a virtual platform called *YouFight!*, receiving money for their performances online. At the beginning of the piece, they're performing a match of chess-boxing<sup>3</sup>, a sport in which performers alternate a round of boxing and a round of chess. It's a streaming show, in which they need to take into consideration the reaction of their audiences. Every day they wake up, enter the platform, and physically play chess-boxing, trying to obtain a higher level of consensus from their audience. More likes equal more money and more income. When they're not working, they spend their "free time" in other virtual spaces, thereby avoiding offline interactions.

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<sup>3</sup> Chess-boxing is a sport imagined by the comic strip artist Enki Bilal at the end of the '90s in his famous comic book *Froid Équateur*, in which players alternate a round of boxing and a round of chess.

*YouFight!* platform is a way of living, a box designed to be funny, fancy and fashionable, hiding underground alienation and work exploitation through the addiction of its players. Time is a matter to consume, a currency called Energy Coin: each second spent in the "Free-time Area" is an Energy coin lost. In this world it is important to not overthink or talk, and above all, avoid the risk of suffering by any contact with another human: the characters don't speak to each other, and the only way in which they communicate is through the multimedia environment (both live sound and visual contents). Kasparov and Deep Blue live in the same space on stage, working and playing together, however, they never look into each other's eyes.

Mutual gaze is the human basic form of connection, often very emotional, and is lived by both characters as a risky form of exposure that they must avoid. Every day the two players wear a sort of VR (Virtual Reality) headsets, with a rule set by the Platform. What they see through the headsets is the real time camera streaming of their smartphones. During the show, the curiosity of transgressing the rules slowly emerges: Deep Blue starts to desire to look into Kasparov's eyes, and this brings a lot of trouble for both of them. Indeed, in this automated daily life, unpredictable events allow the characters to approach and meet. The final scene is a sort of concert-dance that celebrates the desire for humanity, and the need for a real exchange of looks, of feelings, which leads to a hijacking of the machine itself.



**Figure 1.** One of the "boxing scene"

### **3.2. Bringing the (online) digital into the (in live) theatrical**

The performative space (the assemblage of scenography, costumes and multimedia environment) is designed in order to grab some key features of the online platforms and to bring them into the theatrical space. In particular, we sought to investigate what happens if online devices are put into an offline living environment such as the theatrical context. Our main questions were therefore: Which is the theatrical potential of this digital machinery? How can these technologies inform both the behaviour of the

performers and the reception of the audience? How can we enact a radical *détournement* of the digital medium in order to generate a real feeling of presence?

These questions allowed us to design a mixed reality environment in which live performance actions and digital mediated spaces coexist. The physical space of the performance is delimited by a bright boxing ring made of led strips and metaphorically evoking the Platform's cage. The stage is illuminated by a top-down projection that changes the graphical scenario, either a boxing ring floor or a human scale chessboard, according to the different scenes. The digital hyperrealism of the scenography and the costumes of the performers, which wear real boxer equipment, are inspired by the cosplaying world, where real people dress up with costumes in order to look like cult fantasy characters issued from video-gaming, anime, manga, etc. In fact, the performers look like characters of a 90's video-game which are fighting to reach the next level.

Another important element of the scenography is represented by performer's seats. On one side there is Kasparov's red seat, on the other Deep Blue's seat. The seats are illuminated by led lights underlining players' names that stand out in bold. These features refer to the idea of self-branding, which leads characters' actions during both working and leisure time. Moreover, the shape of the seat, embedding a large-scale mirror, represents a big smartphone in which the performers can see their image reflected.

The most relevant aspect of the scenography is the central screen displaying the output of the Platform. The contents shown on the screen change according to the situation. As mentioned before, during the show the two performers wear special VR headsets, equipped with smartphones, through which they perceive the reality around them. During the working time, the screen displays a live streaming from performers' cameras thereby showing the subjective point of view of each actor. As such, the screen functions as an info-graphic environment that allows audience members to follow the live notifications generated by the Platform. Throughout the show the public votes and pays the two players. The characters are constantly exposed to this mechanism during both working and free time, never being able to leave the "Game".

During the leisure time scenes another type of scenario is displayed. "The Freedom Time Area" represents another function of the Platform: an immersive world where players spend the money earned. In this world it is possible to choose how to design the landscape and what appears in it, how best to entertain yourself and how to reach any of your bizarre desires. Indeed, players enter this world alone. In order to create the background of Kasparov's character and portray her free time desires, we studied several human profiles of "virtual space addicts" and diving inside the post-internet world in terms of aesthetics and practices. Ondina Quadri (one of the two performers with Alice

Raffaelli) built her own "free time landscape" after a visual research on the internet, collecting GIFY, memes and other motion pictures from the web, very close to the post-internet aesthetics. Like the working time, the free time is conceived as a space for the live streaming of your private moments. In this context, the smartphone is not used to perceive the other and the space around, but it functions as a mirror in which the character can see her image while she is interacting with her followers. Even though this function of *You Fight!* is conceived as a space for expressing themselves, little expression is indeed enabled outside the matrix of the Platform.

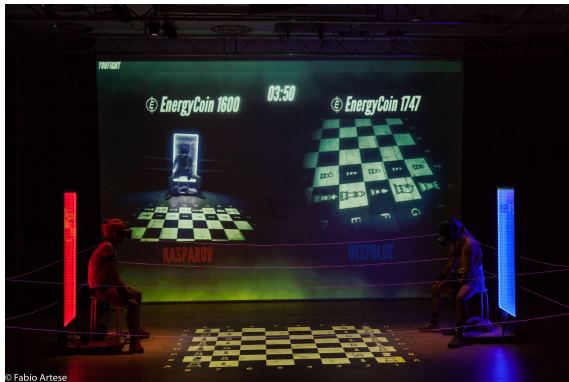


Figure 2. The "chess scene"

#### 4. DESIGNING CRITICAL TECHNOLOGIES

The use of technologies is the central tenant of the play. Our goal was to investigate the ways in which technological devices embed specific perceptive and ideological patterns, affecting performers and audience members' behaviours. To this regard, we conceived our technologies as *digital ecosystems*; i.e. environments involving their own lifestyles and narratives rather than mere tools for achieving a certain task. Three main technological layers have been implemented for this purpose: a real-time interaction between performers and live audio generation; a real-time streaming software exploiting the two smartphones used by the performers on stage; an application that allows the audience to interact with the performance.

##### 4.1. Real-time interaction and gesture sonification

###### 4.1.1. Movement sensing

Different motion sensing technologies are employed in order to generate sound through the movement of performers. From a technical point of view, the performers wear two MYO armbands (that provide data generated by the performers' neuromuscular activity via EMG electrodes) and two BITalino R-IoT units (that embed 9DOF IMU-Marg systems, i.e. triaxial accelerometers, gyroscopes and magnetometers).

Additionally, a Microsoft Kinect v2 is used to calculate the quantity of motion [2] expressed by the performers' movement. For each scene we developed a specific mapping and sonification setting. The majority of the interactions are based on a combination of direct mapping strategies (one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one [17]) while in the Ondina "free time" scene more sophisticated machine learning techniques are employed. To this purpose a customized algorithm based on Ircam's Mubu library [5] is designed within the Max/MSP environment. Through the machine learning algorithms, some gestures can be learned and codified, therefore allowing the performer to trigger specific auditory and visual icons. Machine learning techniques have been developed to deepen the idea of self-branding. During the creation of the performance, Ondina created her personal set of gestures that have been learned by the machine. Similarly, she decided the type of audio and visual contents associated with her gestures. As such, the performer created her personal "brand" that can be recognisable by the Platform audience.



Figure 3. Kasparov "free time scene"

###### 4.1.2. Dramaturgy of sound

Such a technological environment enables the capture of three main features from the performers movements: different idiomatic gestures, the bodies position in space as well as some relevant motion features, the internal physiological states connected to the muscular activity. These elements allowed to create a virtual body and a virtual habitat with a precise sound identity. Since there is no dialogue in the piece, the digital sound has a central role during the performance. The dramaturgy of sound is articulated around three main narrative needs. At the beginning the sound is used as an echo of the movement, a diegetic sign that makes the performers' gestures audible. From this perspective, we took inspiration from classic fighting video games (e.g. Tekken, Street Fighter, Mortal Kombat, etc.) where sound is used to amplify movements or to underline "special attacks". During the performance, the sound

acquires a more expressive function by manifesting the internal emotions and psychological tensions expressed by the characters according to the Opera's tradition. In the musical parts (e.g. the last two scenes) the interactive environment becomes a musical open score, in which performers become aware of the sound production. In this case the gestures are no longer diegetic. The previous theatrical and narrative conventions are abandoned in order to create an entanglement with the sound habitat generated on stage. In this context, ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) audio samples are used. For a core scene of the show, when Deep Blue has to "Pay off her debt" after her human transgression, we decided to take inspiration from ASMR practitioners, professional vloggers who perform, generally online, by creating several audio stimuli (whispering, tapping, non-vocal ambient noises, etc.) called "triggers" with the help of binaural microphones which enhance the tridimensionality of sound. These performances typically involve a certain sensuality and are supposed to produce relaxing effects on the listener. In this sense, online video sharing platforms are used to create an immersive faux-interactive context based on what can be called "digital intimacy" [18]. The use of this kind of sound during the "pay off" scene has an empowering effect on Deep Blue allowing her to acquire agency into the Platform. The final scene of the piece is presented as a concert-form in which performers develop a creative relationship between space, bodies and sound environment.

#### 4.2. Head Mounted Smartphone and the mediated gaze

During the working scenes, the performers wear a modified VR headset that we called HMS (Head Mounted Smartphone) by analogy with classic HMD (Head Mounted Display). The HMSs show the images provided by a smartphone that is positioned over the headset lens. A customized software has been developed for this purpose. The smartphone captures the images from the performer's point of view. The video is sent to a computer that streams back the information on both HMSs and stage screen.

From the theatrical point of view, the smartphone mediated view is an interesting limitation. When performers wear headsets they are watching the space while filming it, and this mediated view makes them feel in discomfort. In this condition, in fact, they don't have the peripheral view, thereby are not able to perceive the real distances as well as the position of their body in the space. In this unusual perceptual context, the brain has to create different strategies to reach simple tasks, i.e. boxing and winning against the other player. In this situation the actions are almost impossible to choreograph and have to be more improvised, unpredictable. Another trick that was

experimented during the creation process is the exchange of the view, a feature that gives fruitful insights from both physical and metaphorical perspectives. Concretely, it means that at a certain moment, Kasparov is watching from the point of view of Deep Blue, and vice versa. It's like another level of the game, which is harder, and is called "Switch View". If Kasparov has to find Deep Blue's body and hit her, she has to look for the picture of herself, therefore she can locate the body of the rival in space. That means that she has to fight against her own image. Actors don't use VR during the entire show, just for chess-boxing, which we consider the "work" scenes.

The practice with this technology allowed us to experience how a digital medium can shape the way in which we perceive reality at a very sensorial level. We experienced how human embodied cognition is flexible and enactive allowing performers to reorganise their sensorimotor patterns in order to adapt themselves to the new digital and sensorial environment. Within this framework, the digital medium appears to be a "perceptual imperative" that informs, affects and designs our own reality.



Figure 4. Deep Blue's with her HMS

#### 4.3. Live interactions with the audience through smartphones

The most relevant technology we developed for this show is a software that allows audience members to interact with the performance using their smartphones. The audience has to download and install an application before the show. The interaction provided by the software is designed according to the notion of "natural interface", a concept developed by Italian digital arts collective "Studio Azzurro"[2], pointing out devices, which react without the use of technological extensions, using modes of communication that are very common and encouraging spontaneous relationships based on touching and sound emission. In our application there are no buttons, no animations that explain what to do. People interact with phones in an intuitive way. Basically, the interaction is a rating process. Audience members are giving their likes (e.g.

Energy coins for the characters) to each player during every scene. The output of their interaction is viewed in overlay on the big screen. In order to vote for one player or for the other, people need to shake their device in one direction or another (to this purpose we get the data from the smartphone's internal accelerometer). By moving their smartphones the audience can choose for one player or for the other. By changing their choice, their screen changes colour. The colour blue is assigned to the character Deep Blue, the red one to Kasparov. The more the audience shakes the more coins they give, conditioning the actions on the stage. During the rating process, audience members trigger some pre-recorded audio files while they are voting. In each scene the audio samples that smartphones emit change. Therefore, the sounds become part of the dramaturgy, creating a chorus of "comments" with different groups of sound patterns (whisperings, laughs, but also abstract sounds). This murmur of "sound notifications" metaphorically represents the "digital swarm" in which we are immersed.

During the final scene, Deep Blue starts a sensual dance playing different audio samples and creating her own concert. Kasparov is magnetically following her, still scared of emotions, wearing her VR headset and filming her in a sort of voyeuristic scene. During this moment, Deep Blue starts to interact with the audience's smartphones overturning the power structure of the game: an action on stage is triggering video / audio / lighting outputs on the audience's smartphones. A hit produced on stage could, for example, turn on all the cameras of the audience. During the final scene, the actors on stage can control all the audience's smartphones, calling into question the role of the gaze.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

According to Lev Manovich [10] digital media are rarely a neutral mechanism of information transmission. A "code" embeds its own model of the world, its own logical system, or ideology, affecting the content delivered in digital communication. The design of technology thus reflects a certain ontological mode of existence informing individual behaviours, social interactions, communication, thereby involving political consequences. To this regard, the exclusion of the vast majority of individuals from the participation in technological development (at least in terms of deontological decision-making) is profoundly undemocratic. According to Andrew Feenberg's critical approach [4] the values embodied in technology are socially specific and are not adequately represented by neoliberal values such as efficiency, competition and self-branding. A participative control on how technological developments take place and affect our social relations seems to be necessary.

Moreover, as we observed in this paper, technologies can't be solely considered as instruments or tools. Since

they embed frameworks for ways of life, digital technologies have to be challenged about how people relate to each other and to the physical world. To this regard, through *You Fight!* we questioned our relationship with technologies, the way in which we experience them and how they affect lifestyles and narrative discourses.

The ending of the show radically questions the theatrical circumstance of being present in the same space both with bodies and smartphones. This conflict generates something new in the relationship between the two characters, the beginning of a real encounter, an exchange of gazes and human feelings that was largely hidden. As such, we address the following open question: Can we escape from the tasks of selling our representation to survive? In this self-branding era, characterized by growing individualism, in which smartphones are becoming both control devices and affective objects, where it is always necessary to fight to move forward...but for what? Meanwhile as we're asking ourselves these questions, Narcissus is still loving himself falling into his brand-new black mirror...

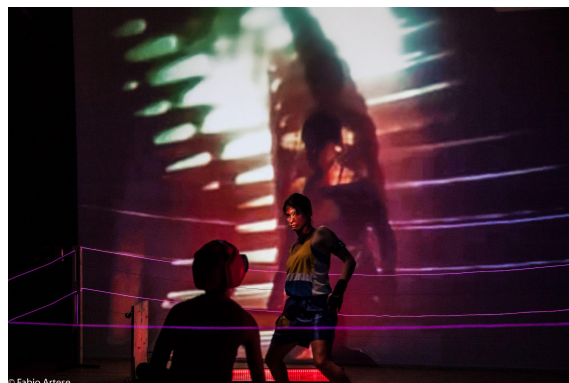


Figure 5. The dance of Deep Blue

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