

Dancing in the digitalization: a case study on the sociomaterial platformization of creative organizations

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Abstract

Over the last years, basically due to the Covid pandemic and the related acceleration of digitalization of creative processes, cultural organizations have moved to digital platforms from their traditional physical premises. This shift has modified not only the fruition of cultural services by audiences, but also the production of creative content and the organization of artistic work.

To explore these issues in an empirical setting, we adopt the theoretical framework of sociomateriality and carry out a qualitative case study on the screendance “1 Meter CLOSER”, performed during the 2020 lockdown by the Italian contemporary dance company, Fondazione Nazionale della Danza Aterballetto.

Our findings reveal sociomaterial relationships between three aggregated dimensions (i.e., means of production, practice sites, organizational culture), suggesting that the *platformization* of performances gave performing arts organizations the opportunity to renew reciprocal adaptation between humans, sites/sights of production and digital means, also contributing to revitalize organizational purpose and identity.

Key words: sociomateriality, performing arts, digitalization

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1. Introduction

Over the last years, basically due to the Covid pandemic and the related acceleration of digitalization of creative processes, cultural organizations have moved from their traditional physical premises to digital platforms (ARTER, 2020; Khlystova, Kalyuzhnova, Belitski, 2022; OECD, 2022). In doing so, they have modified not only the fruition of cultural services by audiences, but also the production of creative contents and the organization of artistic and non-artistic work (Hylland, 2022; Massi et al., 2021). Indeed, even though elements such as screens, visuals, software were not new at all in creative productions, the landing on digital platforms imposed by the closure of physical premises during the pandemic forced cultural institutions, and especially performing arts organizations, to redefine their artistic production and internal organizational dynamics, reviewing not only the relationship with the sites where artistic performances are produced and staged, but also humans-technology interactions.

This paper aims at better understanding how these processes – defined as *platform practices* or *platformization* (Duffy et al., 2019) – have deployed in an empirical setting. More specifically, our research question addresses the dynamics involved in the interplay between the technological and social dimensions within an organization forced to platformization by the Covid-19 pandemic. Which material/immaterial, physical/digital, and individual/social components are involved in this humans-technology interplay? How do they interact with each other?

To address these research questions, we adopt the sociomaterial theoretical framework (Boxenbaum et al., 2018; de Moura and Bispo, 2019; Leonardi, 2012; Orlikowski, 2007) and we carry out a qualitative study on a screendance production performed, produced, and distributed at a distance during the 2020 lockdown by the Italian contemporary dance company “Fondazione Nazionale della Danza Aterballetto” (hereafter, FND Aterballetto). The case study is based on data collected by indirect and direct sources, and on the video of the performance available online on FND Aterballetto social media.

Basically, our findings reveal sociomaterial relationships between the following three aggregated dimensions and their components: i) means of production (body, videocamera, platform); ii) practice sites (domestic site, screen, external space); iii) organizational culture (attitudes, believes, conventions).

They also suggest that the lockdown gave FND Aterballetto the opportunity not only to renew the reciprocal adaptation between humans, sites/sights of production and digital means of communication, but also to revitalize its organizational purpose and identity. Such results provide useful insights to improve our understanding on how performing art institutions have fruitfully managed the artistic and organizational digital transformation triggered by the pandemic, but also to frame how they can face most recent challenges, such as the increase of energy costs which may threaten the (re)opening and maintenance of traditional physical premises, thus undermining the survival and development of cultural organizations.

2. Theoretical background

The wide range of activities that are generically grouped under the umbrella concepts of digitization or digitalization had been progressively embedded into creative and cultural industries already before the pandemic, affecting daily experiences of all the people (from the creator to the audience) involved in the production, distribution and consumption of cultural services. Indeed, along with the emergence of a participative culture – where producers, users and consumers collide revealing the social meaning of creativity (Gauntlett, 2011; Jenkins, 2006), the development of screen technology and digital environments oriented scholars to address the role of digital technologies in creative and cultural fields, thus proposing concepts like *platformization of cultural production* (Nieborg and Poell, 2018) and *platform practices*, intended as “strategies, routines, experiences, and expressions of creativity, labor, and citizenship that shape cultural production through platforms” (Duffy et al., 2019: 2).

Platform practices have not been developed in contrast with the traditional physical/material-based processes, but in symbiosis with these latter, to the point that it had been no longer easy to distinguish boundaries between ones and the others. Before the pandemic, concepts like *software culture* (Manovich 2013) and *onlife experiences* (Floridi 2014) had already emerged to describe processes where cultural production and sharing were influenced by screens and technologies and digital environments were not only functional to but integrated in physical/material-based processes. Consistently, a significant cultural implication has been put forward (Simondon 2014): technology should not be merely conceived as an instrumental tool, but a significant player in the sociomaterial process that shapes our society.

Indeed, as the sociomaterial approach highlights (Orlikowski 2007; Leonardi, 2012), technological materiality intervenes in the sociorelational dynamics that structure social systems, and vice versa sociorelational dynamics affect the transformative trajectories of technology itself in an inextricable reciprocity that defines the evolutionary characteristics of contemporaneity. In this relationship the clear separation between physical/digital and real/virtual is set to become blurred, even more if one dimension of these dichotomies – i.e., the physical proximity – is suspended, as happened during the pandemic.

More specifically, the social distancing imposed by the pandemic have forced creative and cultural organizations, especially those in performing arts, to find paths for producing performances at a distance, for example experimenting screendance. Screendance is a contemporary dance genre characterized by a hybrid content created at the intersection between dance choreography and video arts, adopting a wide range of technological equipments (Dixon 2007; Dodds, 2004). Thus, screendance may be conceived both as a platform practice and the result of platform practices. For this reason, the sociomaterial perspective seems particularly appropriate to explore not only the objective technological characteristics of screendance or the associated aesthetics, stylistics, social relationships alone, but the way in which humans and artifacts (both physical and digital) reciprocally relate

to each other in a mutual *constitutive entanglement* (e.g., Boxenbaum et al., 2018; Orlikowski, 2007). This recursive and tuning process has been conceived also as a mangling of human and material agencies - the *dance of the agencies* (Pickering, 1995) - where material boundaries are socially formed by *agential cuts* (Barad, 2003). *Constitutive entanglement*, *dance of the agencies*, *agential cuts* are concepts aimed at describing how humans make sense of non-human objects, while experiencing their agency, their physical mode of being, and their spatial attributes (Faulkner and Runde, 2012).

Furthermore, conceiving and analysing screendance as a *performed sociomaterial construct*, characterized by a symbiotic bound between bodies, technological devices, and spatial features, may provide a high-potential framework to describe and better understand the relationship between technological transformation and organizational dynamics in performing arts organizations. To this aim, we propose an exploratory case study of a screendance performance produced by a contemporary dance organization during the 2020 lockdown, in answer to the social distancing imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

3. Case study and methodology

The present research is grounded in an exploratory case study (Yin, 2009) of the *screendance* production “1 meter CLOSER”, performed and produced by the contemporary dance company of Fondazione Nazionale della Danza (National Foundation of Dance) Aterballetto (hereafter FND Aterballetto).

3.1 Setting

Contemporary dance, and specifically, FND Aterballetto with its project “1 meter Closer”, represents an interesting case study for different reasons. First, since its genesis in the 1950s contemporary dance has been developing an aesthetic grammar based on the incorporation of different elements coming from other artistic fields, like video art (Atler, 1999), thus placing “combination” at the core of its artistic essence. More specifically, before pandemic, looking upon screendance, contemporary dance had already experienced a symbiotic relation with screens, visuals, and coding both in the production and in the distribution of performances (Dixon, 2007). Indeed, screendance is based on the connection between two distinct sites with different but intertwined codes and conventions related to the reciprocal actions of performing and seeing the performance – i.e., dancing a choreography and screens (monitor video, movie-theatre screen, photo camera side screen, pc monitor, smartphone screen, tv screen, etc.) – which together shape a unique hybrid performance site/sight (Amaducci, 2020; Dodds, 2004; Rosenberg, 2016).

Furthermore, contemporary dance has developed an essential liaison also with space and its materiality, as it is a matter of doing something (a performance) in

relation with a space (see Lussault and Stock, 2009). This feature is relevant also in the case of the screendance, where the setting of the performance and the performance itself is characterized by a limited spatialized audiovisual frame – i.e., the audiovisual shot – but dance choreography is still performed in a practice site defined by a built space with its architectural features and sociomaterial constraints (Dixon, 2007; Crawley and Cisneros, 2020; Latham, 2021). Moreover, contemporary dance is basically based on a bricolage logic, i.e., on the (re)combination and/or reconstruction of techniques, aesthetics, relationships, spatial features, looking for more authenticity and distinctiveness (Montanari et al., 2016; Sagiv et al., 2020). In such a context, potentially relevant issues may come up when different professional figures (choreographer, dancers, costumers, light designer, artistic director, company director, music composer, etc.), involved in the production of the choreographer's ideas, are situated at a distance.

In the contemporary dance field, FND Aterballetto is the Italy's foremost dance company. Founded by the Municipality of Reggio and the Region Emilia-Romagna in 1979, it has contributed to establishing contemporary dance aesthetics in Italy and it has been considering one of the most innovative dance companies by collaborating with outstanding and internationally renowned choreographers (Pedroni, 2011). In 2015 it received the formal title of "Dance centre of national interest" from the Italian Ministry of Culture, being acknowledged as a relevant performing arts institution. Before the pandemic, production, touring and performing live were the main activities of FND Aterballetto, which used to stage live about 100 performances per year in important theatres and festivals around Italy and worldwide. The dance company had also already started to host other companies' performances. Moreover, FND Aterballetto had been providing multidisciplinary educational projects for several years, aimed at promoting the dance culture and arts in collaboration with local and national primary and secondary schools, dance schools, educational services, and other players.

In 2019, FND Aterballetto launched the project "Micro Dances", searching for a meaningful dialogue and interaction between dance and urban, natural, and historical spaces. Then, in the wake of this project and in response to the lockdown, FND Aterballetto continued to work on issues which had already emerged as relevant before the pandemic, i.e., redefining the creation and distribution of dance performances drawing on a site-specific logic. In the meantime, as all in-presence activities had been suspended for the pandemic, the company started a digital (re)organization of the dance production, thus deciding to experiment screendance. The result was the project "1 meter CLOSER", premiered on the Italian public tv channel Rai 5 in April 2020. This first experiment of screendance has sound for FND Aterballetto as a key turning point. Indeed, after that, two other innovative projects – "An Ideal City" and "In/Finito", were launched, respectively in 2021 and 2022, both characterized by a mix of dance, urban, natural, historical spaces, visual arts, and screen technology.

To perform and produce "1 meter CLOSER", FND Aterballetto team worked fully remote, adopting digital platforms, devices, and screens to carry out the final output.

More specifically, choreographies were performed, auto-shooted, edited and produced at home by all the creative professionals involved in the production.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The case study is based on the analysis of qualitative data collected by indirect and direct sources, such as 15 semi-structured interviews to choreographers, producers and dancers, and the video of the performance available online on FND Aterballetto social media. We interviewed 5 members of the organizational team (the general and artistic director, the general secretary, two communication officers, the artistic director assistant) and 10 professionals directly involved in the artistic performance production (the resident choreographer, the music composer, the videomaker, and 7 dancers). Interviews had been carried out between October and November 2020; they lasted about 50 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. They were based on two different lists of questions – one for the members of the organizational team, one for the artistic members – aimed at collecting respondents' description and reflection on their personal experience with the screendance production.

We also gathered data from FND Aterballetto website, official documents, and press archives, focusing on articles published from the beginning of the lockdown until December 2021. Also, we used visual data (i.e., the screendance video file as uploaded and available on FND Aterballetto social media), integrating the analysis of audiovisual images within our qualitative analytical approach, to connect coherently visuals to the transcripts of interviews (Lister and Wells, 2004; Pink, 2013).

Interviews aimed at enabling respondents to construct with their own words the narrative (i.e., Clandinin, 2016) of the screendance performance. More specifically, data was analysed using an iterative, part-to-whole reading strategy for qualitative data analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). We independently read the data and then discussed our interpretations and the emerging codes until we reached a common understanding and agreement to ensure consistency. Multiple data collection allowed us to triangulate data and thus to provide stronger substantiation of our constructs (Eisenhardt, 1989). Furthermore, we travelled back and forth between empirical data and extant theory on sociomateriality. On one side, this theoretical perspective was deemed useful to capture the process through which the social and material dimensions were intertwined in a web of relationships between humans and non-human objects. On the other side, since prior studies in this field had mainly focused on showing that these two dimensions are intertwined (Leonardi, 2012), we searched for empirical data useful to detail how this intertwining may deploy and which components may be involved in a sociomaterial construct (Boxenbaum et al., 2018). Accordingly, starting from the recurring elements we had identified in the respondents' narratives, we inductively coded the specific material/immaterial, physical/digital, and individual/social components of the dynamic entanglement between the human and non-human objects forming the heterogenous assemblage (de Moura and Bispo, 2019) characterizing the analyzed screendance. For instance,

we identified “space occupation”, “affective embedding”, and “expressive effect” as the elements of the component “body”. Then, in the second round of coding, we aggregated the components into three overarching dimensions involved in sociomaterial relationships through a mechanism of reciprocal, intertwined adaptation. Drawing on concepts already present in the extant literature (De Vaujany and Mitev, 2013; Leonardi, 2012; Orlikowski, 1999; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008; Strati, 2007, we labelled these intertwined dimensions as: i) means of production (which aggregates the components: body, videocamera, platform), ii) practice sites (components: domestic site, screen, external space), iii) organizational culture (i.e., the aggregation of attitudes, beliefs, conventions). The data structure is summarized here below in Table 1.

Table 1. Data structure

| <u>Dimensions</u> | <u>Components</u> | <u>Elements</u> | <u>Quotations</u> |
|---|-------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Means of production Utilities and facilities (i.e., human or technological artifacts mutually imbricated) are at the core of the sociomaterial assemblage, as technological performativity emerges in social practices (Orlikowski, 1999; Leonardi, 2012; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008) | Body | • <i>Space occupation</i> | <i>“Dancing is about moving the body in a determined spatial setting” (dancer, #11)</i> |
| | | • <i>Affective embedding</i> | <i>“Dancing makes me feel in line with my body” (dancer, #14)</i> |
| | | • <i>Expressive effect</i> | <i>“It was the dancer’s body the only way to give a visual shape to the moods we wanted to communicate” (choreographer, #5)</i> |
| | Videocamera | • <i>Simulation of otherness</i> | <i>“The relationship with the videocamera became the relationship we try to establish with our audience” (choreographer, #5)</i> |
| | | • <i>Artistic relationship</i> | <i>“We had to adapt ourselves to the videocamera; the optics was the centre, not the dancer anymore” (dancer, #11)</i> |
| | | • <i>Technological accordance</i> | <i>“We simplified the technical features by setting the camera functionalities on basic and automatic mode” (choreographer, #5)</i> |
| | Platform | • <i>Conversation</i> | <i>“Choreographers and dancers communicated not only through instant messaging platforms or video calls, but also through e-mails”</i> |

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| | | | <i>(company director, #4)</i> |
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Sharing</i> | <i>"To work on choreographies, we used WhatsApp a lot: the dancers sent us photos and videos of their choreography. We checked the files and then we sent back some corrections and suggestions" (choreographer, #5)</i> |
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Connection</i> | <i>"We used all the channels already available that allowed us to stay connected and to make the content" (interviewee #7, composer)</i> |
| <p>Practice sites</p> <p>Spatiality suggests how the coexistence of physical and virtual spaces, and their sociomaterial assemblage, plays an influential role in the performance (Moura and Bispo, 2019; De Vaujany and Mitev, 2013).</p> | Domestic site | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Stage and scenic background</i> | <i>"We thought the house as a place of constraint or liberation which could help us to represent the different phases of the lockdown" (videomaker, #6)</i> |
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Interiors and furniture</i> | <i>"It was so weird moving a sofa or a table to set a videocamera in the room, and then dancing; this was so unusual for us" (dancer, #11)</i> |
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Spatial roles and functions</i> | <i>"It is not easy to think of one's home as an artistic space, because my home was very small and simple; it is not a working environment" (dancer, #12)</i> |
| | Screen | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Operational space</i> | <i>"We had ideas not only of the choice of locations within the dancers' houses, but also on how framing the dancing bodies through the screen" (choreographer, #5)</i> |
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Visual affordances</i> | <i>"Frames and shots were literally a nightmare for dancers [...] sometimes we had to reshoot [...] because we saw body parts cut by the frame while reviewing the shooting" (videomaker, #6)</i> |
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Spatial intermediary</i> | <i>"I had to match my dancing to the location where I was and to the screen of the videocamera recording the performance" (dancer, #10)</i> |
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| | External space | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Instrumental role</i> | <p>"After designing the concept, we identified some practical tricks to implement the project, such as [...] how sharing technological devices outdoor" (general manager, #8)</p> |
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Physical encounter</i> | <p>"Dancers arranged a meeting at the supermarket; while waiting in a queue, they could get in touch quickly to exchange the videocamera in a physical encounter" (communication officer, #1)</p> |
| <p>Organizational culture</p> <p>Norms on the use of technology and the knowledge of technology and its technical and aesthetical features, along with conventions of the organizational context where these norms and knowledge are applied, enable to structure and understand the sociomaterial construct (Orlikowski 1999; Strati 2007)</p> | Attitudes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Approach to challenges</i> | <p>"A screendance was already in our book of dreams" (general director, #8), but "we were waiting for the best time, wondering how to make it and in what context" (director assistant, #3).</p> |
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Response in time of crisis</i> | <p>"At that time, the chance to break the isolation was very fascinating; the idea of creating something original was very motivating" (dancer, #15)</p> |
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Adaptative capacity</i> | <p>"It is an original creation, born from situational needs which required a high capacity to adapt; in my opinion, it is the most spontaneous creation of all" (company director, #4)</p> |
| | Beliefs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Standing perception of the organization</i> | <p>"Aterballetto [...] represents Italian contemporary dance worldwide [...] producing a screendance has been something unique to us, that is marking not only our dancing but our history" (choreographer, #5)</p> |
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Legacy perception of the organization</i> | <p>"Since its foundation, FND Aterballetto has been challenging itself through a constant creative experimentation in contemporary performative arts" (general director, #8)</p> |

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| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Organization's spirit</i> | <p><i>"We all gave our best because we shared a spirit of attachment towards this dance company as it always challenged itself to create something beautiful" (dancer, #14)</i></p> |
| | Conventions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Aesthetic/stylistic codes</i> | <p><i>"The doubt was that our video could look like other videos produced at home [...] and released on social media; this is the kind of result we really wanted to avoid" (videomaker, #6)</i></p> |
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Professional codes</i> | <p><i>"Dancers produced their own contribution individually; they didn't need to know what others were doing and this was a completely new thing compared to the work we usually did at the rehearsal hall" (company director, #4)</i></p> |
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Editing process codes</i> | <p><i>"The main challenge of this project was both at the choreographic level and at the level of editing, too: it was not just about creating 15 solo performances, but also editing each video with the other ones trying to give continuity to different performances, cutting and uniting the sequences on the basis of moods, scenography, and movements" (videomaker, #6)</i></p> |

Source: Our elaboration.

4. Findings

As already mentioned, the creation of "1 Meter CLOSER" was strongly stimulated and influenced by the pandemic, as interviews explain: "The idea came from the lockdown situation, as we asked ourselves what we can do to keep creating, but

above all to demonstrate how creativity does not stop in front of any obstacle, like distancing, different spaces, and forced closures” (interview #4, company director).

The adoption of a sociomaterial perspective allowed us to identify three dimensions – means of production, practice sites, organizational culture – which were at play and reciprocally intertwined during each phase of the creation of “1 Meter CLOSER”. We also identified a mechanism – recombination – which captures the sociomaterial relationships among all the above-mentioned dimensions and describes the approach that FND Aterballetto adopted during the lockdown, as interviews reveal.

In the following sections, we illustrate the main characteristics of dimensions, their components, and the mechanism through which sociomateriality was enacted in the creation and production process that led to the screendance performance “1 meter CLOSER”.

4.1. Means of production

The first dimension regards the devices involved in all the creative phases of the dance performance, that we define as means of production as interviewees constantly mention them while they explain how the production process has been deployed. More specifically, the most relevant features emerged by the interviews are the centrality of body, the interaction with the videocamera, the use of platforms, and the sociomaterial relationships among these three elements.

As far as the first element is concerned, the body which performs a choreography is at the heart of contemporary dance. The dancing body can be conceived as a living body, which occupies a spatial setting through its movement (“Dancing is about moving the body in a determined spatial setting”; interviewee #11, dancer) and embeds actions and feeling in a productive way: “Dancing makes me feel in line with by body, I don’t care of dancing in my dining-room or on a theatre stage, to me it’s important dancing, full stop” (interviewee #13, dancer). Motion dynamics also produce by themselves expressive effects. This seems particularly true for “1 Meter CLOSER” where dancers performed without following a provided specific soundtrack. “We had only some notes about three moods that we had to represent through the dancing body, we were free to improvise the choreography” (interviewee #15). Another dancer added that “we had not any music to follow or to listen, but we could make the music through our dancing body” (interviewee #14). In this case, the body and its details received a higher focus in the choreography performed by dancers. As one of the respondents said, “since we came out with the original idea of this video creation, it was the dancer’s body the only way to give a visual shape to the moods we wanted to communicate” (interview #5, choreographer).

As the body was dancing alone, without sharing the scene with other bodies, the videocamera played a central role in the production process. Indeed, the videocamera represented the presence of others. “The relationship with the videocamera became the relationship we try to establish with our audience”

(interviewee #5, choreographer). Moreover, dancers established an artistic relationship with the camera (“I really tried to be truly myself and authentic in front of the camera as I was dancing live”; interviewee #14, dancer) also in place of the relationship with other dancers: “In this work I did not need to get in touch with other dancers, as it was all based on free improvisation and there was no physical coordination at the choreographic level, but at the conceptual and audiovisual ones” (interviewee #11, dancer). The connection between the dancer’s body and the recording device reveals a sociotechnical issue related to the proper use of the video camera: “Creating with devices means focusing on body details, like gestures and expressions, because the goal is to provide a sense of proximity through visual simulacres” (interviewee #8, general director). Consistently, dancers had to change perspective: “We had to adapt ourselves to the videocamera; the optics was the centre, not the dancer anymore” (interviewee #11). Moreover, the videomaker could not shot the dancing scene; dancers personally had to take on the task. In this direction, it had been useful to look for a technological accordance. “We simplified the technical features by setting the camera functionalities on basic and automatic mode” (interviewee #5, choreographer). Nevertheless, some dancers had troubles with this emerging multitasking role: “I would have preferred to have someone else shooting for me; not only I had to dance without any audience losing the very same reason I dance, but I had to think of shots and choreography together rather than just choreography” (interviewee #9). Others were fascinated by this artistic challenge: “When we were asked to make a screendance from home, any artistic input that came in was so welcome to me that camera settings were the last of my thinking... I had no problems to shoot myself” (interviewee #10). The videocamera was also the only reason of physical contact between dancers, as the company needed to find solutions to collect video shootings with the same technical settings: “To provide consistency of the dancers’ technological settings, we decided to use only one videocamera, that dancers had to share each other. Thus, the only physical and proximal way dancers kept in touch with the others was not a choreographic one, but the transfer of a technical device hand by hand” (interviewee #8, general director).

Once the shootings were ready, dancers had to upload and send the videos to the choreographer and the videomaker using digital platforms. Similarly, informal conversations related to shooting settings and choreographies were carried out on digital platforms, specifically apps for smartphone and all the digital resources that everyone was using during lockdown (“We used all the channels already available that allowed us to stay connected and to make the content”; interviewee #7, composer). FND Aterballetto did not made any specific investment on technological equipment, as this interviewee explains: “With the videomaker I worked a lot on Zoom. We had many video calls with the dancers too. To work on choreographies, we used WhatsApp a lot: the dancers sent us photos and videos of their choreography. We checked the files and then we sent back some corrections and suggestions” (interviewee #5, choreographer).

Moreover, also the computer had been useful to share audiovisual files. The production team used platforms like Wetransfer or Google Drive to upload the

shootings of choreographies, while “choreographers and dancers communicated also through e-mails” (interviewee #4, company director). As a result, digital platforms played an important role in facilitating the interaction and communication that the production of the screendance required. More specifically, in a context of forced social distancing organizing and managing different technological tools had been fundamental to produce “1 meter CLOSER”.

4.2. Practice sites

Since interviewees constantly mentioned the spatial settings where choreographies were performed, we identified practice sites as the second dimension of our analysis. Specifically, the screendance “1meter CLOSER” was based on three different practice sites: 1) the domestic site of dancers’ houses; 2) the digital and operational space of the screen; 3) the external functional space of the supermarket. These three spaces played a specific role within the production process and are characterized by an inextricable sociomaterial bound with the means of production illustrated in the previous section.

The first practice site refers to the physical setting where the dancer’s body resides (i.e., the dancer’s house), which became the scenic place of the performance, replacing the traditional stage. More in detail, domestic spaces such as a kitchen, a courtyard, a garage, a garden, a balcony or a terrace, a staircase, a wall, a floor, were carefully chosen and organized as stages by dancers in collaboration with the choreographer and the videomaker. At the beginning, the choreographer and the videomaker were focusing on the house as an intimate and personal place (someone’s home); then, they conceived the house as the symbolical space of the inspiring moods of the project: “We thought the house as a place of constraint or liberation which could help us to represent the different phases of the lockdown” (interviewee #6, videomaker). Therefore, they decided to avoid any space that reflected too much a traditional and personal idea of home, “choosing specific corners, coloured floors, spaces that could transform the intimate space into an original and unusual scenography, as if the dancers’ house became the setting that we would have used in a theatre” (interviewee #5, choreographer).

The interiors were kept as much minimal as possible, enhancing the visual attention on the body dancing in lockdown in a given space, rather than the space of the lockdown itself: “The choreographer wanted to see shots with only the floor and the body” (interviewee #13, dancer). Another dancer added: “It was so weird moving a sofa or a table to set a videocamera in the room, and then dancing; this was so unusual for us, but we had to do it” (interviewee #11, dancer).

Thus, performing dance in a domestic space met a little resistance but contributed also to affect the individual perception on home functions and uses (“Actually, I really rediscovered my home environment”; interviewee #10, dancer). For example, dancing at home led to overcome the idea of home as a place that separates artistic work from personal life (“It is not easy to think of one’s home as an artistic space, because my home was very small and simple; it is not a working

environment”; interviewee #12, dancer), changing the perception of what an intimate space can be (“It’s your private home, and letting millions of people in had been a huge artistic act of trust”; interviewee #11, dancer).

Furthermore, in such a situation the domestic site had been changing its functionalities in relation to the choreographic requirements. For instance, dancers selected the specific setting inside their house based on their dancing approach (“Being a virtuous dancer, I needed a large space to allow fluid shapes of movement. Selecting my garage as choreographic setting gave me the opportunity to express myself”; interviewee #14), or to accommodate both the choreographer requirements and the presence of the recording device, as the following quotes suggest: “I choose the space that could suit the colours of the outfit that the choreographer had chosen for me, but also the distance from the video camera” (interviewee #11). As a result, the selection of the spatial setting relied on a negotiation among the dancer, the choreographer, the videomaker, and the screen, sharing the pics of the dancers’ house spaces on a digital platform: “They asked us to take pictures of potential locations which could be consistent with their choreographic ideas on shooting angles and cuts” (interviewee #10, dancer).

This latter quote illustrates also the second practice site that emerged by interviewees, i.e., the screen. While performing a screendance, dancers should dance coordinating the physical setting where the body is situated and the screen that records the performance. As the physical space offers both affordances and constraints, so does the screen, which frames the setting, defines boundaries, and places limitations to movements. In this sense, the screen is an operational digital space which enable the organization of a cultural content. “We had ideas not only on the choice of locations within the dancers’ houses, but also on how framing the dancing bodies through the screen” (interviewee #5, choreographer).

Frames and shots were visual affordances that contributed to the enactment of dancing performance. For instance, “frames and shots were literally a nightmare for dancers; they have the habit of dancing freely in a large space framed only by the physical stage and a pre-defined choreography: sometimes we had to reshoot all the scene because we saw body parts cut by the frame while reviewing the shooting” (interviewee #6, videomaker).

The choreographer and the videomaker created and choose from a set of different frames together with the dancers, basically frontal shots, heightened shots, body close-ups, and shots of empty spaces able to capture the three moods that the choreographer and the videomaker wanted to represent by the choreography. As a dancer pointed out: “I had to match my dancing to the location where I was and to the screen of the videocamera recording the performance. I made ten attempts to align together the physical space, the choreography, and the screen” (interviewee #10).

The first mood – isolation and restriction – was captured by choosing shots of narrow spaces with monochromatic floors, surrounded by well-defined and closed walls, where the dancer's body was acting in intimate corners without looking at the camera (image A). The second mood – looking outwards – was captured by shots that focus on the dancer’s gaze looking at the videocamera little by little (camera-

look), searching for an encounter, i.e., trying to rediscover the relationships with the audience (image B). The third mood – the hope for the future – was captured by choosing shots of open spaces in locations that expressed the desire for a new vision, throwing a glance on the opportunity of exiting beyond the lockdown (image C).

Figure 1. Frames from “1MeterCloser” that represent the moods of the choreography



Source: Our elaboration.

Finally, interviews show that also outdoor external spaces represent a relevant practice site of the screendance “1 Meter CLOSER”. As the general director pointed out: “After designing the concept of the screendance project, we identified some practical tricks to implement the project, such as how interacting at a distance and how sharing technological devices outdoor between the dancers, like the videocamera” (interviewee #8). The only external space that could play this instrumental role in line with the rules imposed by the lockdown was a supermarket: “Dancers arranged a meeting at the supermarket; there, while waiting in a queue, they had the only moment to get in touch quickly and exchange the videocamera in a physical encounter” (interviewee #1, communication officer). This process was affected by the production timetable. “Every dancer had the camera only for one day; during this time, they had to record the performance and send it right away to the choreographer and the videomaker; then, the dancers had to arrange the exchange at the supermarket with another dancer the day after, at least in the early afternoon. It was like a one-shot opportunity” (interviewee #6, videomaker).

4.3. Organizational culture

The third dimension includes all the immaterial features that sustained the creative process and production of “1 meter CLOSER”. We intend features such as attitudes, beliefs, and conventions, i.e., all those elements that constitute the shared cognitive and affective background of FND Aterballetto or, in other words, its organizational culture. Interviews reveal that this background/culture helped to overcome the social and technological constraints faced by the screendance project, favoring the sociomaterial relationship among bodies, technologies, and spaces.

More specifically, attitudes refer to the approach followed by FND Aterballetto and its members in front of new challenges, i.e., the openness towards artistic experimentation and the exploitation of organizational resources to match artistic goals. Interviewees stated: “A screendance was already in our book of dreams” (interviewee #8, general director), but “we were waiting for the best time, wondering how to make it and in what context” (interviewee #3, director assistant). Attitudes refers also to the proactive reaction that the organization had during the lockdown: “As the pandemic set new constraints to cultural institutions, to me, as the Director, it was normal to set demanding goals, and I think Aterballetto has been changing since then. We engaged ourselves to overcome difficulties, and we did: I can tell that everyone responded positively, they were ready and available although it was an unusual process for a dance company” (interviewee #8, general director). One of the main issues was to make the contingent situation acceptable and sustainable, motivating the dancers to be part of a new artistic agenda: “At that time, the chance to break the isolation was very fascinating; the idea of creating something original was very motivating” (interviewee #15, dancer). Motivation was useful to face some troubles emerged during the production process: “It was hard for me, the creative idea changed along the way; what I had done at the beginning was no longer good and it was hard to figure out what would come out. However, I believe new situations require a certain amount of flexibility and openness (interviewee #12, dancer). All in all, attitudes refer to the capacity of FND Aterballetto to apply a sort of a genuine adaptation to a new challenging social and artistic context, as this quote reveals: “At the end, I think about the beauty of this project, about its truth and spontaneity. This is what we achieved: it is an original creation, born from situational needs which required a high capacity to adapt; in my opinion, it is the most spontaneous creation of all” (interviewee #4, company director).

The second immaterial feature emerged by interviews refers to the way people perceive the standing of the cultural institution they belong to. We define this feature as beliefs since it captures perceptions of what FND Aterballetto represents in the contemporary dance field and how FND Aterballetto creates and produces performative art: “Aterballetto is an outstanding company that represents Italian contemporary dance worldwide; it was born in theatres, performing live shows, thus producing a screendance has been something unique to us, that is marking not only our dancing but our history” (interviewee #5, choreographer). Beliefs also include the perception of the legacy of FND Aterballetto: “Since its foundation, FND Aterballetto has been challenging itself through a constant creative experimentation in contemporary performative arts, trying to push borders a little bit further. The lockdown has allowed us to deepen the artistic research on dancing location and its relationship with spacing: we can dance in isolation mixing domestic spaces and screens, as we can dance in micro urban spaces, which are hybrid locations alternative to theatrical stages” (interviewee #8, general director). Consistently, beliefs concern the spirit of the organization, which positively affects the dancers’ organizational attachment: “We all gave our best because we shared a spirit of

attachment towards this dance company as it always challenged itself to create something beautiful (interviewee#14, dancer).

Interviewees also pointed out that styles and coded professional habits played an important role during the production process of “1 Meter CLOSER”. Thus, we identified conventions as the third immaterial feature of the dimension organizational culture. This feature encompasses aesthetics and organizational conventions established and shared by the organizational members that participated in the artistic project. More specifically, a convention that guided the production was the search for quality, balancing the need of exploration, the professionalism of the dancers, and the authentic originality of the audiovisual output: “We wanted to do a good job, searching for a recognizable quality, applying the rules of professional editing”, said the choreographer (interviewee #5). This search for quality was motivated by FND Aterballetto interest to distinguish itself not only from other dance companies, but also from the overall audiovisual production released during the lockdown. The search for distinctiveness is rooted in the history of Aterballetto, that has been increasingly deviating from existing conventions of Italian choreography: “The doubt was that our video could look like other videos produced at home during the lockdown and released on social media; this is the kind of result we really wanted to avoid” (interviewee #6, videomaker).

Another relevant convention was the set of codes, professional boundaries, protected performative spaces, creative mechanisms and artistic roles which define “the codified world of dancers, which is very distant from what we experienced in the unusual time of lockdown” (interviewee #8, general director). Indeed, the screendance “1 Meter CLOSER” required a reconstruction and reprogramming of the codes established so far. For instance, “dancers produced their own contribution individually; they didn’t need to know what others were doing and this was a completely new thing compared to the work we usually did at the rehearsal hall” (interviewee #4, company director). Consistently, the creative process was based on habits, codes, and ties that had to be recombined to elicit authenticity and distinctives. Dancers revealed their engagement to challenge established conventions: “I was the author of my own steps, and therefore I had fewer mental blocks” (interviewee #11, dancer). Dancers’ artistic freedom had been previously designed and then put at the heart of the project: “We were only given ideas – they called them moods –, then what came out was all ours; the choreographer trusted us completely” (interviewee #10, dancer).

Even though dancers worked alone, in isolation, the final choreography came out from an editing process whose codes represent another example of what we have labelled conventions: “This choreography would not exist without editing, because it cannot be performed live” (interviewee #6, videomaker). Specifically, the commitment and goal of the editing phase was to understand how the different performances, produced individually or in pairs by the dancers, could relate with each other shaping a rhythmic structure narrating the three inspiring moods: “The main challenge of this project was both at the choreographic level and at the level of editing, too: it was not just about creating 15 solo performances, but also editing each video with the other ones trying to give continuity to different performances,

cutting and uniting the sequences on the basis of moods, scenography, and movements” (interviewee #6, videomaker).

5. Discussion and conclusion

The global Covid-19 pandemic required performing arts organizations the ability to produce new "dialogues", which means to renew the relationships between the performance, the organization, and the audience, basically using the potentialities offered by digital devices and interfaces. Extant literature has addressed the issue of digitization and digitalization in performing arts, discussing both the digital transformation of cultural production and consumption, and the disruptive impact of the most recent technological innovation on creative and cultural organizations. However, empirical research on how performing arts organizations have faced the challenges posed by digital technologies and accelerated by the pandemic is lacking.

Our paper tries to fill this gap proposing a case study on the screendance “1 Meter CLOSER” produced and performed by FND Aterballetto in isolation and at a distance, i.e., by professionals (dancers, choreographer, video maker, etc.) working at home with the mediation of screens, devices, and software.

Basically, our study offers an empirical contribution to the field of sociomateriality by detailing how the social and the material realms are intertwined in a performed *sociomaterial construct* such as screendance. Specifically, it reveals that screendance is based on complex relationships which involve different material/immaterial, physical/digital, and individual/social components, specifically: i) human and technological means of production; ii) physical and digital practice sites; iii) organizational culture. Also, our findings show how the investigated dance company (re)combined these domains and their constitutive elements through all the creative process. This latter differs considerably from the usual creative processes of FND Aterballetto, where choreographer provides instructions to dancers, through a top-down relationship. On the contrary, the *screendance* production “1 Meter CLOSER” has been conceived as a collaborative work-in-progress process characterized by a continuous exchange of ideas and contents between the choreographer, the videomaker, the composer, and the dancers, which transformed and (re)created continuously the process itself until the final video was released.

In such a process a relevant role was played by the screen, which emerges as the framework of a new form of performing, but also organizing and narrating contemporary dance. Indeed, as our findings show, the screen was used to set the spatial setting of the performance and the choreography, to organize and coordinate the different production stages (i.e., as a communication tool for content delivery between dancers, videomaker and choreographer, or for informal exchanges related to the production phases), to edit performance shots, and finally to distribute and watch the final video.

All in all, our study suggests that FND Aterballetto faced the challenges posed by the interruption of cultural services and professional collaboration in presence due

to the Covid-19 pandemic, basically leveraging on the reciprocal adaptation between dancers and other professionals, sites/sights of production and means of digital communication, thus (re)affirming the well-established organizational purpose and identity. As a result, we propose to conceive the response of FND Aterballetto to the pandemic as an approach consistent with the idea of onlife dynamics characterized by the symbiotic interaction between real/physical and virtual/digital premises (Floridi 2014). Accordingly, and contrary to any deterministic approach, our study reveals that screendance, and more generally *platform practices*, can be better comprehended as a processual, *constitutive entanglement* (Orlikowski, 2007) between the human and the technology, the social and the material, inextricably connected to each other.

This article offers theoretical and managerial contributions. First, our study provides empirical evidence of how a performing arts organization could keep doing its own work basically leveraging on digitalization and how, at the same time, it could preserve the very core of the organization when the usual and traditional conditions are questioned or turned upside down by external factors like the pandemic or other ones, such as war and higher energy costs. However, the paper suggests also that the deployment of *platform practices* in creative and cultural organizations requires not only the mere implementation of digital technologies, but also the adoption and the management of a flexible and adaptive approach where humans, physical and digital spaces, and technological tools are mutually combined, in a process that is at least partially emergent and spontaneous. Finally, as the study outlined, the sociomaterial combination and adaptability favoured by the digital turn may represent an opportunity for revitalizing the orientation of performing arts organizations towards artistic experimentation and organizational innovation.

Our paper presents some limitations. First, it is based on a single case study, specifically a single screendance production carried out by a specific dance company. While this reduces the generalizability of the results, it also suggests replicating the study in other empirical settings, such as platform practices different from screendance and different kinds of performing arts organizations and cultural institutions.

Another limitation is that we did not address specifically the critical issues concerning humans-technology interactions in a context of *platformization*. As we mentioned, the screendance we investigated required dancers to adopt a multitasking attitude, which resulted in a more stressing albeit engaging approach to dance performance. Even though this issue did not hamper the success of the analysed dance performance, it might have produced negative consequences in the long run. This call for future studies aimed at exploring the most challenging issues of the humans-technology interaction in digitalized organizations, included affective sides of sociomaterial processes.

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