

Peaceful Places:

An Immersive, Participatory Performance

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The project *Peaceful Places*, a collaborative performance by Agnese Lanza and myself, explores the concept of physical closeness and virtual interaction. Through a virtual-reality (VR) experience, we aim to reimagine the hug as a symbol of connection and reclaim its significance in a post-pandemic world.

In response to the fear and distance brought about by the global pandemic, we challenge the perception of bodies as threats by presenting them as “peaceful places.” These spaces of peace are not physical locations but inner states of awareness activated through bodily presence. After years of avoidance, we seek to create a safe environment for rediscovering closeness and nurturing human connection.

The hug, a universal gesture of comfort and vulnerability, serves as the focal point of our exploration. By engaging in this simple yet profound action, individuals are invited to slow down, listen to themselves, and connect with others on a deeper level. Our artistic journey, driven by a shared interest in attention, concentration, and body perception, aims to portray humanity in moments of genuine presence and empathy.

Through our VR experience, users are immersed in a 360-degree video shot at Villa Manin near Udine, featuring local couples engaged in the act of hugging. By mimicking these gestures with their own bodies, users participate in a collective dance of intimacy and empathy. The immersive nature of the experience fosters a sense of embodiment and emotional resonance. The experience gains a greater emotional grip on the viewer through movement, without which they would only be a voyeur. From the moment they start moving, it triggers a mechanism of greater empathic recognition that leads them to feel “in the body” of those they are copying. If the video is immersive, movement becomes a new means of immersing oneself in the experience.

Far from being a coercive action, for Agnese Lanza and me, the practice of mimesis instead has to do with the freedom to choose. The user can choose at any time to change couple or person within the couple, thus creating a personal physical journey within the experience.

The installation unfolds in two phases: a preparatory session in which participants engage in physical practice without headsets, followed by the immersive VR experience. While users remain physically separated, they are aware of the collective nature of the experience, enhancing the sense of shared presence.

Since its inception, *Peaceful Places* has been showcased at festivals in Italy and abroad, receiving accolades such as the Auggie Award for Best Art in 2021. Through our innovative approach to VR, we hope to inspire introspection, empathy, and a renewed appreciation for human connection in an increasingly digital world.



One of the VR experience participant



The group of couples from Udine