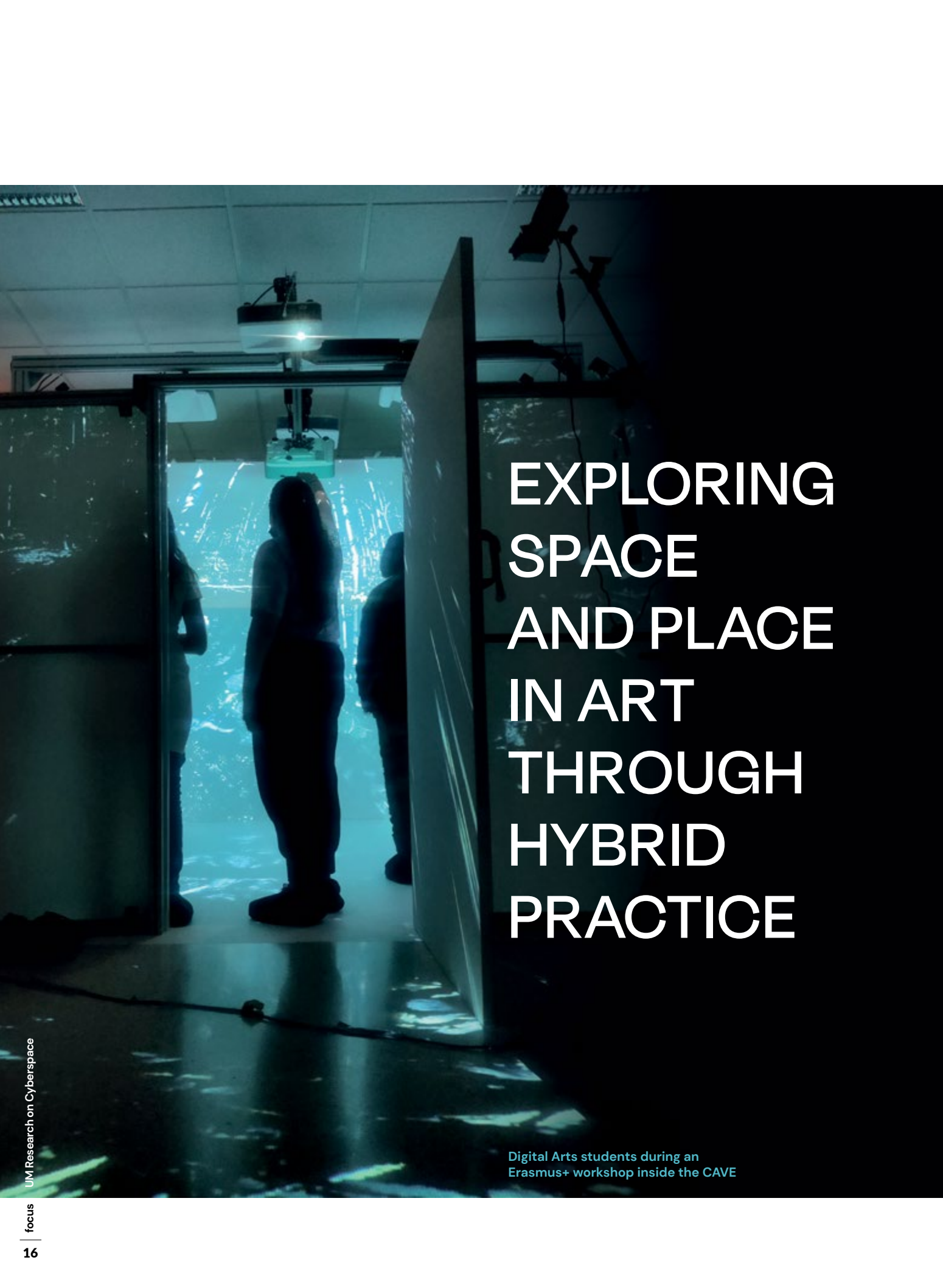


A photograph of three people standing inside a CAVE (Cave Automatic Virtual Environment) setup. The room is dark, and the walls, floor, and ceiling are covered in large, bright blue and white projections of abstract, fluid, and organic shapes, creating a sense of being immersed in a digital space. The people are silhouetted against the bright projections. Technical equipment like cameras and projectors is visible on the ceiling and walls.

EXPLORING SPACE AND PLACE IN ART THROUGH HYBRID PRACTICE

Digital Arts students during an
Erasmus+ workshop inside the CAVE

Author: **Elena Said**

*In the ever-evolving realm of art, boundaries are constantly being pushed, including the frontiers of spatial dynamics. **THINK** speaks with **Dr Trevor Borg** about the evolution of spatial exploration in the arts and how the technical intricacies of the Department of Digital Arts' hybrid practice are contributing to this.*

From Renaissance attempts to capture 3D spaces on 2D surfaces to the virtual challenges of traditional boundaries, the exploration of space and place in art persists. 'The concepts of "Space" and "Place", which are inherently connected, have undergone an evolution over time. While there was a period when the two were interchangeable, contemporary theories now acknowledge a distinction between them, however, still recognising their close proximity,' declares Dr Trevor Borg, Head of the Department of Digital Arts at UM.

A SENSE OF PLACE

Artists, architects, and philosophers have always been keen to explore and delve further into the intricacies of space and place, trying to understand how both can be depicted, defined, and perceived, and how they might converge and spill into one another. Place-oriented contemporary practice in Fine Arts draws on the work of important thinkers

to make meaning of the spatial elements that constitute our surroundings.

During the Early Renaissance, artists experimented with linear perspective, unlocking the ability to create optical depth on 2D surfaces. Artists created a sense of depth by having all parallel lines converge on a single point, known as the vanishing point. 'The idea of depth was often created through a vanishing point, with items at the back appearing smaller. Artists also played with colour to create perspective, emphasising details in the foreground while objects in the background became paler and lacked definition,' explains Borg.

Over the years, artists became interested in exploring other aspects of place by reconfiguring traditional aesthetic methods and incorporating diverse, thematic considerations. A contemporary artistic exploration of place embraces social, cultural, political, and ecological aspects alongside the more aesthetic ones to capture deeper underlying meanings that penetrate beyond the visible (or not so visible) surface layers. ➤



A digital projection inside the CAVE



A student project carried out by Renata Stoyanovska, Marie Christin Pieper, and Maria Mihailescu

Walking as an art practice (an art practice in which walking is a central part of the process or experience), popular with Dadaists and psychogeographers among others, has continued to gain momentum over time. It has now evolved into an important component of place-oriented practice. Such walks often allow 'slow-looking' and thorough mapping of place, which encourages viewers to deliberate and reflect to gain deeper insights or appreciation. At times, walking as an art practice involves groups of people and even communities in a bid to explore what constitutes place through deeper engagement.

Experimental approaches involving space-time juxtapositions in film and moving-image representations allow movement in space complemented by audio that contributes further layers to our perception of place. Furthermore, computer-generated imagery can recreate environments and visual content that are either modelled on existing places or imaginary environments that have no physical reference point or association with a physical place. Video games have introduced further intricacies as they allow players to experience virtual environments online, where they can meet and compete with their peers without having to leave their homes. In some cases, they can redesign the environments they inhabit online according to their preferences.

Borg notes, 'Some artists adopt a phenomenological approach, becoming part of the place and space in a practice known as "dwelling". Sensory experiences gained through direct engagement complement the artistic aspect and the

possibilities technology offers. Similarly, contemporary art installations that allow visitors to walk through and immerse themselves in the work introduce complex spatial dynamics that encourage engagement through movement. The visitor may walk either physically or virtually through the space created by the work and sometimes also be able to engage with it. Emerging technologies have given rise to hybrid practices that entwine the physicality of materials with digital and virtual realms coupled with artificial intelligence. Contemporary art practice considers all the elements discussed here to present a more immersive encounter.

CONTEMPORARY REDEFINITION OF SPACE AND PLACE

Space and place are themes that regularly emerge in contemporary Fine Art practice. The work of art may depict an object in space, a particular place, and it can also open a space through which we may experience 'other' places. Borg explains how Edward S. Casey employs the term 're-implication', which can be juxtaposed with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of 'deterritorialization', both terms considering the relocation of one context into another.

Technology, such as augmented and virtual reality (VR), allows artists to push the boundaries of space even further. With such technologies, one is not only able to perceive something in 3D but can also position oneself within that surrounding space and move within it. Similarly, even a simple camera that is connected to the internet is capable



SIntegraM cave

of transporting us to other places around the world across different time zones. 'This is when the relation between space and time gets more blurred, as you can be in a different place at a different time but in the same virtual meeting space, such as with online meetings,' clarifies Borg. You can also project yourself into a place where you are not.

To allow students to engage with research that develops around notions of space and place and to create and utilise such an experience, the Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences in collaboration with the Department of Criminology has set up an 'Immersion Lab', funded by the ERDF SIntegraM project and the University of Malta. This lab includes different technologies relating to virtual and augmented reality, including a CAVE (cave automatic virtual environment). In the CAVE, lifelike visual displays are created on its sides by projectors positioned outside it, allowing students to experiment with space for their art research projects. 'It's an immersive lab that offers the ability to create and experience virtually any type of desired space,' remarks Borg. The way it works, in simple terms, is that you can create or import any type of environment within this immersive space which viewers can experience through VR technology. The computer-generated place can be an existing one, such as a historic site, or an imaginary one, and the viewer may interact with it in different ways.

The Department of Digital Arts is dedicated to fostering contemporary Fine Arts research in both traditional subjects and emerging technologies. It offers a variety of focuses,

including but not limited to studio practice, immersive technology, interactive art, and moving images from video to animation. Borg emphasises the importance of hybrid practice, which combines physical as well as digital media to investigate a wide range of issues.

In pursuit of encouraging students to explore diverse themes, the department consistently invests in new equipment and collaborations with other departments and entities outside the University. The Department of Digital Arts emphasises the importance of practice-based research through the various art courses it offers. Borg explains, 'theory emerges from the practice as we engage in artistic research to further our knowledge of the subject being investigated'. By integrating studio practice with emerging technology, the department gives students creative opportunities to enrich their learning journey. Borg describes this as a journey that opens up new creative spaces for practice-based investigation. **T**

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