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Dossier Anthropen

- 5 *Anthropen, un projet de dictionnaire en ligne*

Ragionare

- 25 Shahram Khosravi, *Writing Iranian Culture*

- 33 Paolo Favero, *Liquid Visions.*

Digital images between anthropology, consumer technologies and contemporary art

- 49 Donatella Schmidt, *Femen e la sua protesta. Alla ricerca di chiavi interpretative*

Divagare

- 57 Bernd Jürgen Warneken, *Impegno politico e civile di Edgar Kurz: da Tubinga a Firenze*

Documentare

- 69 Giuseppe Giordano, *Apparatura. Una forma di artigianato "festivo" a Palermo*

89 Abstracts

In copertina: foto di Davide Porporato

Paolo Favero

Liquid Visions. Digital images between anthropology, consumer technologies and contemporary art

A long way into the digital era we can today easily observe how images have taken a new place in our lives¹. Due in particular to their entanglements with new electronic tools (such as cheaper cameras, mobile phones etc.) and with the Web 2.0, images have today become really ubiquitous. They have moved from the drawers of our desks and the archives of the professional studios to the most interstitial spaces of our lives, literally creeping into our pockets and our bodies. The invention of Google Glasses, the spread of life logging cameras (that is the cameras that hold a visual diary of your entire day), the growing centrality of visual communication in social networking sites such as Facebook, all testify to how images (and in particular digital images) have penetrated the texture of our every day practices. They have become, for those of us living in the parts of the world touched upon by such technologies, part of our «being in the world» (Merleau Ponty 2012). The figures regarding this change are quite impressive. To mention but a few, it is estimated that every day 6.7 billion people view the world, in one or the other way, through their own lens. Facebook, a medium originally based on textual exchanges, grows today by one to two billion images per week. On a daily basis five million pictures are uploaded on Flickr and two billion videos screened on YouTube. You tube alone has produced in the past 6 months more than what the first 3 main national channels in the US have been able to do in their entire 60 years of history.

Such figures are indeed impressive yet what is their cultural significance? Are images today, as the truism would have it, really more than ever central to our experiences of the world surrounding us? To what extent are the above-mentioned figures really changing our understanding of what images mean to us? With this paper I aim to offer an exploration of these issues. To do this I will have to enter a terrain where anthropology, contemporary visual digital technologies and (video/interactive) art meet. By letting anthropological theory converse with examples gathered from these worlds, I will try to reflect of images' changing relation to reality and lo-

cality, on their immersiveness, their sensoriality/materiality and their relation to the frame. Each of these topics (propositions) will be addressed in a devoted section. The paper will open up with a short prelude on the role of (digital) images in contemporary industrialized societies.

Prelude - The "Visual Field" Today

It is today a truism to state that more than ever before, vision and visual technologies are today central in our experiences of the world that surrounds us. "Our"² attention and consciousness are today constantly awakened through, and stimulated by, the continuous visualization of various phenomena. "We" are today accustomed to visualize a variety of items and events that were until not so long ago invisible to us. From the micro to the macro we can today see our bodies from the inside (resembling glimpses of outer space) as well as satellite images able to show planet earth from afar. With Google Earth and Google Street View we are offered the opportunity to move between these poles. We zoom from the outside to the inside hence indulging in the power not only to "picture the world", as Heidegger (1977), suggested but also to symbolically dominate it, twisting and turning the world at our pleasure with the help of a cursor.

In parallel to this we have also developed the awareness of constantly being visually represented. CCTVs, satellite imaging and weather prognoses constantly localize us in the space in which we live, stimulating our capacity to experience the world and ourselves bifocally (Peters 1997). The growing awareness of being perpetually "represented" visually has led to the growing awareness of being able to represent (cf. McQuire 1998)³ and that we live, as Ito (2005) has suggested, in "visual co-presence". Transformed into creative consumers of the visual we have however also become skilled producers of images. With our mobile phones we have gotten accustomed to take snapshots of the largest variety of items and events. The fact, as I mentioned

before, that Facebook has today emerged as the largest archive of images in world history testifies to how the conversations enacted on online social networks are today increasingly visual (cf. Van House 2011). To speak about «visual hypertrophy» (Taylor 1994) does today indeed make sense.

The changing ways in which human beings filter their everyday lives through images runs in parallel with a number of broader changes. In recent years we have for instance witnessed to the blurring of the boundary between the public and the private, something that has wide ideological and political implications. We have in fact witnessed to how politicians such as Arnold Schwarzenegger (in California, US) and Silvio Berlusconi (in Italy) have constructed their campaigns around a mastery of the means of communication, creeping into people's homes in seemingly un-political and non-ideological ways. Camouflaging politics with entertainment, bringing the public into the private, they have opened the space to our understanding of the new potentialities for breaking conventional assumptions about vision and digital media. It is perhaps echoing such attempts that Pope John Paul II's summoned the Church to learn «how to make itself visible» (Virilio 2007). Images are also the privileged carriers of knowledge and experiences of the dramas unfolding on earth. Think of the images of migrants reaching or dying outside the shores of Sicily and Malta, and think of the number of people in Italy or Malta who are actually having a personal relation to one of these people. For most of "us" it is primarily visually that "we" get in touch with this side of the world. It is "only" through such images and such "spectacles" that most members of the middle classes all over the globe see how the world turns into a space of war and sufferance and the Mediterranean, to mention a more specific example, into a red sea of death (Chambers 2008)⁴. And think of the wars. As Sharon Sliwinski (2006) has recently suggested one can no longer talk about war without talking about the presentation of war. As Sontag (2003) and John Berger (1972) pointed out, the power of visual culture in transmitting knowledge about such events resides in the affective impact that images have on the audiences. Perhaps as Jean Luc Nancy's (2002) suggested the image is violence. Fusing «pleasure in seeing the previously unseen» with «power in the form of a knowledge with normalizing aspirations» (McQuire 1998: 192) images do in fact "affect" us (Massumi 2002).

Contemporary visual technologies are hence increasingly investing our everyday lives becoming a mundane, commonsensical, and integral part of "our" domesticity. Materializing MacLuhan's

(1967) prophecy about the mass media becoming prolongations of our senses, they are indeed changing "our" notions and experiences of what images (and our bodies) are about. Besides generating impressive figures of increased speed and size of production and distribution such technologies have in fact been accompanied by the emergence of a whole new set of practices. We are still today at the beginning of a critical questioning of such practices but we can however already point out the importance of moving away from talking about technologies (with their deterministic accent) into talking about practices (with their accent's on human use) and new ways in which images are introduced into our lives. We need to move away from preconceived notions regarding the «dissolution of material reality» (Gere 2005) and to the growth of instances of «net-worked individualism» (Wellman 2001) that supposedly characterize life in the digital age. Having depicted this scenario let us now proceed to analyse the key propositions that I anticipated in the introduction.

Proposition 1 – "Reality"

On June 17th 2007, Czech hacker-artist group Ztohoven broke into the national Czech television during a program showing wide angle, slow-pace panoramas of the beautiful local countryside. Taking control of one of the cameras Ztohoven suddenly exposed the television viewers to an unexpected vision. While the camera was slowly moving right to left, suddenly the screen got filled by a bursting white light and then by the vision of an atomic mushroom placed right in the middle of that idyllic scenario. With the camera moving back towards the right hand side, for framing the enlarging mushroom, they inserted a disturbance making the image first flicker, then turn grey and fade out for good⁵.

With this experiment, integral part of their politically informed artistic critique of the media, Ztohoven reached the news of many countries across the world. Inspired by the idea of generating consciousness about the role of the media in contemporary societies and in particular about their capacity to distort perceptions and exercise a subtle political influence upon the viewers, Ztohoven's work is largely focussed on a critical decentring of the notion of reality. With these interventions they want television audiences to ask themselves whether «everything that our media such as newspapers, television, Internet offer on daily basis [is] real truth or reality?» (www.ztohoven.com).

Enamoured with their approach, I have dis-



Picture 1. Screenshot from Ztohoven's intervention (http://www.ztohoven.com/cz/medialni_realita)

cussed Ztohoven's work in several occasions, exposing my students (but also many friends and neighbours) to this clip. The screenings of this clip has provided me with a wonderful opportunity to observe audiences' reactions and comments in front of such virtual/simulatory experiments and hence to start understanding the varying ways in which digital media can be approached today. Common among all the individuals whose reactions I studied, has been, of course, a relaxed and ironic tone. They all seemed to experience the atomic mushroom appearing in the landscape during a television show, as a somewhat commonsensical event. My students in particular generally reacted with a smile of satisfaction indicating, as they verbally commented after the screening, that the clip was "cool" and "very well realized". The questions and/or discussions picking up from this screening would then generally verge around the context in which

this event had taken place, how it had been produced technically, etc. Taking for granted that it was a manipulation, there has never been a questioning of whether what they had seen was "real" or "fake". To most of these viewers Ztohoven's mushroom was obviously an event belonging to the realm of "special effects", of virtuality and digital "fakes". As such it did not need to be real in order to be meaningful (I will further discuss the meaning of this statement this in a while).

While special effects and manipulations of images are indeed nothing new (Barthes 1977: 21-22) the novelty lies today in the amazing spread of the capacity to understand the process of digital manipulation. While once upon a time, the manipulation of images was something that could be done only by a few technically skilled individuals with access to expensive updated technology, today, many more individuals are, so-to-speak, digitally

empowered and aware that, with a simple intervention on Photoshop or even easier imaging software, they can “immerse” themselves into an image and change its content. Such observations trigger off two sets of reflections. On the one hand, my students’ reactions indicate the ongoing overcoming of binary and Platonic notions of representation that have informed earlier approaches to images. Also, they force us to better understand the geopolitics of digital literacy, i.e. of the spread (and consequences) of competence (and access) in digital technologies at a global level (a topic that has been the object of several research projects, cf. Bakardjewa, Feenberg 2002; Dickin et al. 2002; Barbatis, Camacho, Jackson 2004).

Let me briefly reflect upon these questions beginning from the former. The reactions described above, i.e. the high degree of socialization into contemporary visual technologies shown by my students, may perhaps bear witness to the fact that the difference between image and reality has, as Baudrillard anticipated long ago, today (in certain pockets of the world I must add) really imploded (cf. Baudrillard 1994, 1996; Der Derian 1994). Already in the 1980s Baudrillard started moving away from “representation” and suggested the need to avoid opposing the image to the real: «the secret of the image... must be sought...in its ‘telescoping’ into reality, its short-circuit with reality, and finally the implosion of image and reality» (Baudrillard 1984: 25-26). Indeed Baudrillard’s was just one of the many approaches to representation that characterized the writings of the 1960s, 70s and 80s. In his analysis of the simulacrum (1997) Deleuze, for instance, suggested the need to move away from epistemological notions of objective re-production, i.e. of a dichotomic relationship between a model (by definition authentic/real) and a copy (the fake) for the understanding of the contemporary social world. Denying the priority of the original upon the copy, Deleuze opened a new space for understanding representation away from fixed, reified categories (cf. also Massumi 1987). Mention could also be made here of Guy Debord who, in a more political fashion, suggested that the last phase of capitalism was one characterized by an immense accumulation of spectacles, in which all which was once lived directly now has distanced itself in a representation (1967, ch. 1, par. 2). After having falsified production capital manipulates now collective perception transforming it into a spectacular commodity. As the final alienation of humanity the spectacle was for Debord «capital to such a high degree of accumulation that it becomes image» (1967, ch. 1 par. 34). While highlighting different aspects, all these scholars highlighted the need to re-think the mean-

ing of “reality” at the light of new technologies, and also to consider the political implications of such changes.

Indeed Ztohoven’s work bears evident traces of this debate and in particular of Debord’s political visions (as well as of the rhetorical stratagems deployed by the Situationist Movement). However, the young viewers that I am referring to in this section (my students and friends) seem to epitomize the entry into the age of “spectacle” and have internalized, in a deleuzian fashion, the idea that images do not need be opposed to more conventional notions of reality. The capacity to enter this realm of knowledge and to manipulate (through the use of digital technologies) the liquid border between reality and representation must be understood as the result of a process of socialization, a proper acquisition of a modality of literacy where “form” and “content” meet and merge. I suggest that this is as a process of socialization that, as MacQuire suggested (1998) started with cinema (which trained audiences in acknowledging the possibility to represent the external world in a two-dimensional form) moved on to television (which added a new time dimension to the viewing experience generating a hypertextual feeling of simultaneity) and that today witnesses its new stage in the world of digital immersive and interactive imaging. This process can therefore be seen as one of the many ways in which, as Umberto Eco (1988) suggested, social actors develop a capacity to use instruments of representation. Explaining how human beings learn to use a mirror by teaching themselves to accept the rules of that particular instrument, Eco states, «once we understand that what we perceive is a mirror image, we start with the principle that the mirror tells the truth» (Eco 1988: 15).

The individuals that I am referring to here do indeed seem to have embodied such principles. Perhaps they constitute an example of what McLuhan (1967) had anticipated when he wrote about the ways in which various electronic media could become proper prolongations of our bodies. Digital editing appears here to be one in the array of possibilities that they have embodied in order to understand “reality” and their own social world. Indeed such considerations highlight the extent to which today we can no longer easily rely upon objectifying notions of representation (and of photography and filming, see Grimshaw 2001, Pinney 1992). What Fabian (1983) called “visualism”, i.e. the notion suggesting that in modernity seeing is believing and knowing, reached its final destination some time ago. Such conclusions, however, need to be further contextualized geo-politically. After all, what are the subjects that we are talking about?

We are immediately faced here with the need of further understanding the geopolitics of digital literacy, i.e. the spread of contemporary visual technologies (and the attached literacy in how to use and interpret them). A generalizing and universalising tone is indeed the common denominator in most writings on these issues, and proofs of this can be found for instance in the generic use of “we” forms that do not seem to further problematize the actors in question. Indeed, I am aware that all authors involved in this field must be aware of the varying extents to which such technologies are distributed globally, but nonetheless, I suggest that such political aspect needs to be made explicit and raised in all our considerations about digital culture. What we are addressing here is evidently far from a universal/global phenomenon. Rather it bears witness to the gaps of the contemporary world and to the formation of what could be called the «new transnational middle classes» (Aufheben 2004). However, this is not neither something belonging exclusively to the West. We should in fact also be careful in not labelling the primacy of visual culture and the spread of digital literacy as “Western” phenomena⁶. We must rather try to address such issues with attention to the specific contexts in which we conduct our research avoiding sweeping generalizations about the digital age as a monolith. Such a mapping of the distribution and use of digital technologies and hence of the consequent socialization into their language is a fundamental step in our understanding of the role and consequences of digital imaging technologies at a global level and probably a step towards a new way of envisioning the (geopolitical) map of the world. This is, evidently, an arena in which anthropology and ethnography can constitute marvellous resources for gaining a deeper and situated understanding of the consequences of digital literacy in a globalizing world.

Our need here is, therefore, to transform visual anthropology into a visual anthro-po-politics, one indeed able to insert all such considerations about technology and aesthetics into a wider web of power relations. These considerations urge us also to work towards a new terminology and language, one that is up to date with the changing approaches to reality and representation (as exemplified in the discussion with which I opened this section) and hence more liquid and capable of capturing and rendering back the distinctions characterizing the contemporary world.

Proposition 2 –Locality

One popular notion conventionally coupled with the spread of digital technologies is, as anticipated by Charlie Gere above, that such technologies somehow contribute to generate a sense of, to paraphrase Augé’s popular notions, non-placeness, of delocalization, of detachment from locality and its intimacies (cf. Augé 1996). At the beginning of the popularity of sites such as Flickr, scholars and laymen alike all complained, about the fact that we would suddenly get more in tune with what is happening on the other side of the globe than with our neighbours. A decade into the life of Flickr such arguments need to be reversed. Most contemporary technologies and arts project do in fact show us quite the opposite trend, i.e. the ongoing production of locality made possible by digital technologies. Let me address this discussion by offering a couple of examples gathered from the world of arts.

SARAI (an Urdu term defining the rest house for travellers and caravans) is an experimental arts group born in Delhi, India, in 1998 out of the collaboration between a group of academics and an artist collective, Raqs (a term playing with the Persian and Urdu word for “whirling dervishes” and with the web acronym, ‘rarely asked questions’). With their project *Cybermohalla*⁷ (meaning cyber neighbourhood and born in 2001 in collaboration with Ankur: Society for Alternatives in Education) SARAI explored the possibility of shaping material localities and communities through the creation and use of virtual environments. A web-based project, *Cybermohalla* plays with imagination as a force, materializing itself through digital technologies and capable of shaping communities (I will address this specific point regarding materialization in a few sections). Creating self-administered media labs and studios in various neighbourhoods of Delhi the project aims at drawing resources from the intellectual life of these various localities. In their words: «Through gathering multiple narratives, [*Cybermohalla*] produces the possibility of a dense and unstable archive of biographies, events and ordinary life, re-imagining and re-enacting forms of revisiting the locality and the city». A project involving today 450 young people, all involved in sharing practices for producing materials, memories and other signs representing life in the urban world, *Cybermohalla* is today a collection of books, broadsheets, installations, radio programmes, blogs about the city widely distributed in India as well as abroad.

This kind of work, emphasizing and producing locality, fits indeed into a new trend that character-



Picture 2. Screenshot from Sarai's homepage (www.sarai.net)

izes the use of the digital in India and many other parts of the world. In an altogether different field of digital culture mention could be made for instance of the recently launched Traditional Knowledge Digital Library⁸ an archive of traditional systems of medicine (including traditionally identified substances, herbal remedies as well as Yoga postures) belonging to Indian traditions. A project that in paper form would correspond to 30 millions pages, the Library aims at subverting the monopoly of chemical multinationals and it urges us to consider the way in which the new spaces opened by the digital become a resource for claiming copyrights upon traditions and knowledge.

Despite their intrinsic differences, these projects force us to consider the consequences of the use of digital technologies in the production and shaping of locality, memory and belonging and to acknowledge the extent to which such practices can also function as empowering agents (as is intended in SARAI's project). The use of new digital media is adopted here, in fact, for creating a bounce back onto locality rather than for generating a bare open-

ing to the outer world (and potentially a distancing from locality).

As I anticipated above, Flickr constitutes another example of this movement⁹. A provider belonging to the (user-based) Web 2.0 generation, that was created for allowing users to store and share digital photographs, Flickr itself was created in 2004 by a Canadian company (Ludicorp). Growing at the speed of 1.4 million images per day, Flickr makes it possible for individuals to share images across borders. However, offering a platform for access to self-representation, Flickr seems actually to push its users away from the supposedly delocalized (and immaterial) world of the web and out into the streets and in the lives of their neighbours. In my encounters with the world of Flickr I have noticed how users have, over the years, progressively become active producers of their own representations rather than consumers of the images of others. They have started portraying their own homes, streets and neighbours, generating a move to intimate local details rather than to overarching global issues. Empowering, through the new generation of

Proposition 3 - Immersiveness

web design, the viewers/users to become active producers of their own representations of the world surrounding them, Flickr pushes, in my view, the users towards the production of locality rather than towards its fading. The same phenomenon is visible indeed also in Instagram that today presents itself as a gallery of coffee mugs, feet and half eaten dinner plates, etc. As Murray (2008) has suggested photography has started dealing with «an immediate, rather fleeting display of one's discovery of the small and mundane (such as bottles, cupcakes, trees, debris, and architectural elements» (p. 151). By allowing users to select details and tag comments (inscribing them into the photos themselves) Flickr, Instagram etc. promote also the notion of the image as a living and fluid item whose meaning gets renewed through the a number of reciprocal comments and enhancements (a kind of living matrix).

A similar shift can also be observed in the boost of mobile phone devices focussing on locality. Applications such as "AroundMe", "Vicinity", "WhosHere", "Yelp" etc., which, combine the interactive functionality of the smartphone with GPS technology (the Global Positioning System, which localizes the position of the user through satellites), insert individuals even further into their own locality designing for them new possibilities for community making. "WhosHere" in particular, was one of the first application locating not only so-to-speak fixed attractions, utilities and services in the neighbourhood in which the phone is located. It also allowed for "geosocial" functioning, hence connecting users of the app with each other. By allowing users to trace each other up in space, "WhosHere" constituted one early example where virtual/digital networking potentially materializes itself in real-time into physical encounters. Similar kind of processes take also place on the net. Internet based homepage Zero¹⁰ for instance allows you to find events and people in the locality in which one lives. Similarly, instant image sharing softwares (from the nowadays almost dead MMS's to Instagram, cf. Koskinen 2004, Murray 2008) while generating what Ito (2005) has labelled, as I mentioned before, an "intimate visual co-presence", do also produce a sense of locality to be shared among users. In a recent publication (see Favero 2014) I have addressed this shift towards increasing localization and contextualization in the world of interactive documentaries, ethnography and contemporary art.

Through the last examples I have already started addressing the sensoriality and materiality of the digital image. Anthropology (and visual anthropology in particular) has recently been urging scholars to devote increasing attention to the sensorial side of human experience (Pink 2006 and 2007, MacDougall 2005, Pinney and Thomas 2001, Pinney 2004, etc.). Several scholars have shown the importance of addressing photographs not only as visible items but also as things, objects, sensory things that exist in time and space and that circulate in particular concrete networks of people. In her essay *Photographs And the Sound of History* (2005) Edward explores, for instance, the role of photographs among Australian Aborigines suggesting that, in this context, such items constitute "relational objects". Central in articulating histories that have been suppressed, photographs do not only articulate something visual but constitute part of a much broader performance. They are held, caressed, stroked, sung. They become hence sound, the sounds of voices, of songs of memories becoming verbalized as stories; an oral history materializing the relationships between specific individuals who engage each other through such images. Edwards suggest hence that anthropology has to go «beyond the visual, and to explore the ways in which visual practices, such as the use of photographs, are integrally related to other sensory forms through which the past is articulated" (p. 41). Indeed according to her «digital pseudo-photography» (p. 42) does not allow for the creation of that depth which characterizes analog photography¹¹. I suggest, however, that her invitation should be taken on board also in the context of digital imaging too. The world of contemporary art and of smart phones constitutes an interesting platform on which to test such ideas. I will start with the latter.

Conventional mobile phones today allow their users to engage with the images presented on the screen in a number of creative ways. Images can be interacted with by changing the position of the phone or by touching the screen. With one finger we can move from one photo to the other pulling them away from the screen and inviting another image to enter it. With two fingers the image can be altered as to fill the whole screen with one single detail (the eye of a subject, etc.). When viewed through iPhoto or similar softwares images also contain (GPS produced) metadata regarding when and where they were taken. And if viewed through applications such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram they end up containing a wide array of relational data (conveyed through "@" and "#") re-



Picture 3. Screenshot of http://www.studioazzurro.com/opere/ambienti_sensibili/sensibile_ma

garding the context in which they have been produced and previously viewed. The interactive qualities of smartphones combined with those of the apps used for viewing them hence seem to allow images to be imaginatively re-edited by every user when being viewed. Suddenly a picture containing a boy standing in front of a mountain may become a close-up of the mountain etc. When screening such images, viewers can interact with them zooming into details, removing details from the attention of the viewer and generating hence an ongoing re-interpretation of their content. The metadata contained by the picture also end up becoming part of the act of viewing leading to comments and memories being shared. Far from a passive moments of image-viewing this too is a performance through which viewers can generate a series of new perspectives and interpretations of the images viewed. From this point of view such practices of viewing images are not too dissimilar from those suggested by Edwards. These too are, in fact, characterized by sound, agency, emotions and the re-elaboration of memory. This is an interactive performance involving, several “actants” (cf. Weibel and Latour 2007; Basu and Macdonald 2007), one of them being the smartphone itself.

Let me contrast this with another example gathered from the world of contemporary art, where the use of interactive and immersive technologies has today become widespread.

Studio Azzurro is a company experimenting

since the 1990s with interactive technologies and with the construction of sensible environments. In “Sensible Map”¹² they display, through two projectors and an eight meters long sensible wall, a flow of individuals walking by and constructing with their movements a kind of human landscape surrounding the audience. The visitors will eventually discover that, by imposing their hands on the wall, they can stop one selected individual and start interacting with her/him. The character stops and starts sharing a story, an object, a song or a memory and then deposits such item (in their words a little “gift” to the viewer) on a virtual carpet projected on the ground. The result of this performance is an interesting decentering of the experience of viewing where the sensible gap between viewer and image is filled. Every visitor will, on the basis of her/his interactive immersion with the screen, in fact grasp one small but very particular entry into the world depicted by the installation (in this case a village in Morocco). Rupturing the sense of linear narrative the viewers will feel empowered to build up their own, subjectively constructed, story.

These examples reveal therefore the way in which new immersive technologies contain elements of tactility and sensoriality. Borrowing from Rancière (2008) we could suggest that digital images display here varying modalities of “imageness” incorporating not only the visible but also sound, touch and imagination. Digital images too can be interacted with, even though through a different set

of technological mediations. They hence appear to be not more nor less sensorial (and material, see below) than analog images.

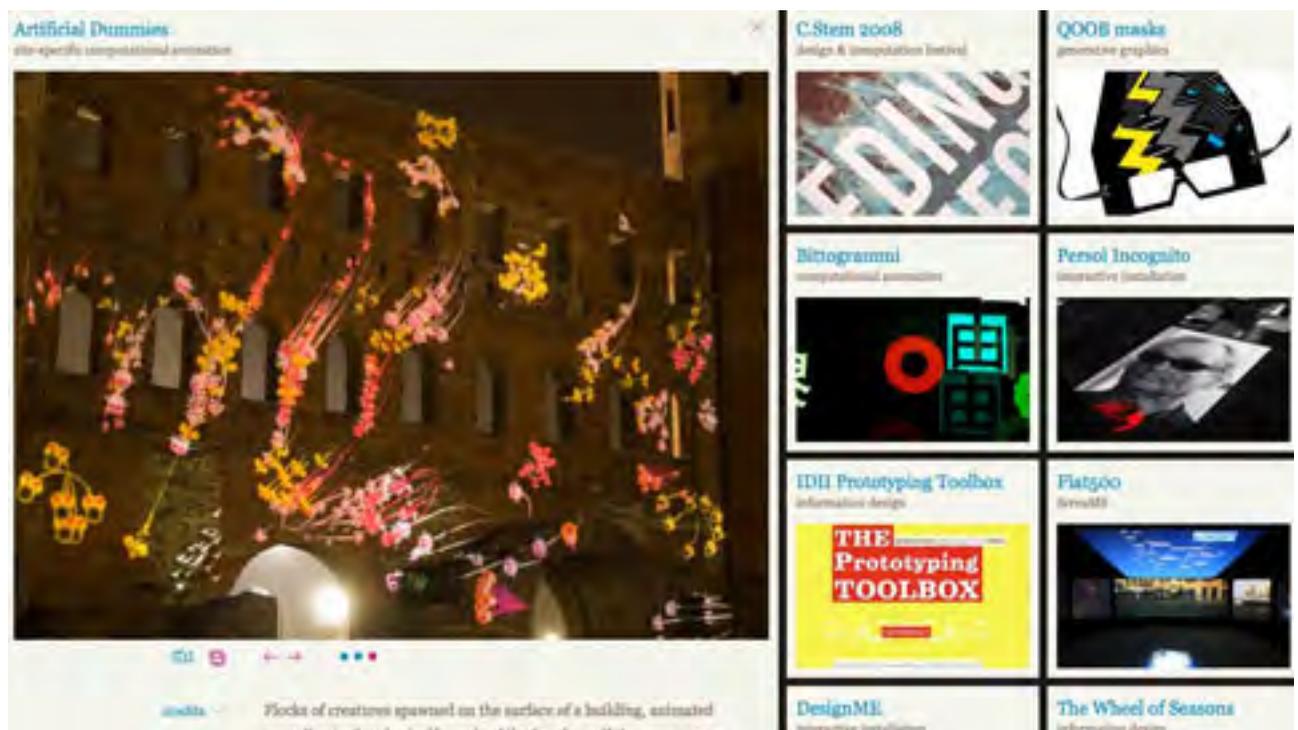
Proposition 4 - Materiality

Tapping on to the reflections above in this section I wish to further expand my reflections on the relation between digital images and materiality. I suggest here that certain new digital technologies, while acting on the boundary between virtuality and simulation, do also contribute in blurring the distinction between the material and the immaterial.

ToDo born in Italy in 2007 is a “next-gen design studio” whose work aims at playing, among other things, with notions of immateriality. “Artificial Dummies”¹³, an installation designed for interacting in particular with monuments and cultural heritage structures, appears to the viewer as a bombardment of colourful virtual bodies. Looking like, as in the words of its creators, “flocks of creatures”, these bodies invade the surfaces of the monuments selected, moving and bouncing around the physical boundaries encountered as if they were capable of sensing the design and appearance of the structure. They fly around the surfaces (always renewing their movements) exploring the new territory, flying through potential openings (such as windows,

arches etc.) but bouncing back when they encounter a solid surface («As if they had just migrated to a new habitat, our creatures would explore and try to adapt to the new environment»). Result of a meticulous mapping of the selected surface (and hence not building upon physically interactive bodies) “Artificial Dummies” leaves the viewer with the experience of having encountered a living, intelligent and sensorially gifted virtual body.

If we were to follow a definition of virtuality as «more than an electronic, externalized representation of our minds, but rather another reality that does neither simulate the real nor actualize the virtual but “whose reality is at best virtual”» (Grosz 2001: 81) or as, to put it in De Kerchove’s (1999) words, as externalization of our imagination, ToDo’s work is indeed a borderline case. Not properly an example of a “virtual” world this is perhaps more a matter of “simulation”, i.e. of a world constructed to be experienced as real. Nonetheless, this is exactly what may be relevant here, i.e. that spectators involved in such performances experience the virtual flying bodies, through their movements, as real and react in awe to their capacity of interacting with the material structure of the monument. From the perspective of the viewer, such immaterial bodies, in their interaction with the material surroundings on which they are projected, become therefore, contextually, material ones. Another example gathered from Studio Azzurro will



Picture 4. Screenshot from ToDo’s homepage (<http://www.todo.to.it/#projects/ad>)



Picture 5. Screenshot from Stduoo Azzurro's homepage (http://www.studioazzurro.com/opere/video_installazioni/il_giardino_delle_cose)

help in making this point even more evident while adding yet another sensorial perspective to the notion of the image.

In “The Garden of Things”¹⁴, a video-installation built with eighteen monitors and one long interactive table, Studio Azzurro explicitly addresses the idea of materiality within a digital environment. On the videos the viewers see hands, filmed in infrared technology, shaping up a variety of objects. At the beginning the objects cannot be seen. What the viewer sees is only hands moving around an invisible surface. Through the labour of the hands, however, heat is passed on to the objects (a pot, a sculpture) that suddenly come to life and become, because of the infrared rays, visible to the audience. In an interesting inversion, a sense of materiality is generated here not by the clay or flesh of the objects themselves, but by what Studio Azzurro’s homepage calls the “electronic magma”. When the hands release the pressure the objects change again shape, revealing (with the fading of the heat) a new set of textures and landscapes. Heat becomes here another coordinate in the definitions of the “image-ness” of the image (cf. Rancière 2008), one made available to the audience through the use of digital technology. Such installations do indeed point out digital images’ intrinsic material character.

Proposition 5 - The Frame

Lastly, let me address a central notion in most classical approaches to the image. The “frame” (and its attached notion of “enframing”, cf. Heidegger 1977) has constituted the pillar on which our understanding of, and approaches to, images have been built upon. A physical margin/limit (the border of the paper, or the boundaries of the optic frame) the frame has stood, in particular through the work of Heidegger (1977), for a metaphor of (epistemological and political) power. For Heidegger, in fact, technology involves a particular relation to the world and enframing is part of the task to be performed by that technology, one that highlights the relation between power and representation. Heidegger suggested that technologies of representation are far from neutral but they rather engender particular enframings of the world and hence particular world-views (highlighting certain details, while hiding others). Now, I wonder, what if frames were no longer to be central to our approaches to the image? How could we then “re-frame” our understanding of the relation between the act of visually depicting the world and the power exercised therein in a world where images are no longer contained by frames?

This possibility is indeed already a reality. The examples offered so far do in fact already point in

that direction, making visible (in a very literal and material way indeed) the fading significance of the frame in contemporary imaging technologies. Smartphones, as I described above, do so by allowing the user to enlarge the image with the push and pull of two fingers. The imaginative capacity of the viewer contributes in making the frame of the image a transient and highly fluid notion. As I discussed above the viewer/user can in fact select to re-frame the frame by shifting the highlighted parts. Furthermore, the incorporation of metadata (of positional and relation nature) in the images that we conventionally use and produce today also indicate this need to expand the frame and to move “beyond” it (see Favero 2014). The world of contemporary arts, is indeed replete of such examples. GPS technologies have, for instance, been widely exploited by artists from all over the world. In the 2000 exhibition entitled “Amsterdam Real Time” Waag Society in collaboration with Esther Polak and Jeroen Kee produced an alternative map of Amsterdam generated by the movements of real people¹⁵. Handing out during a period of two months a tracer-unit to selected citizens of Amsterdam this group of artists was able to gather data which once visualized against a black background offered lines showing a city not registered through streets or blocks of houses, but exclusively through human use. Expanding upon a similar approach the 2012 Sideways Festival¹⁶ in Belgium hosted a

whole series of GPS drawing workshops. Aimed at experimenting with such technologies these workshops lead to the creation of original material that was later on hosted in an exhibition.

Christian Nold’s “Bio Mapping project” constitutes another example. Combining the use of GPS-tracking with Galvanic Skin Response (GSR, a biometric indicator of emotional arousal based upon the measuring of changes in sweat) this project aimed at studying the intensity of emotions in relation to the locations in which they take place. On the basis of such measurements, Nold generated proper emotional cartographies, a number of different visualization that can be explored in the form of 2D maps or also, through the use of Google Earth, in 3D. Photo 9 for instance shows such a point of intense emotional arousal mapped by the combined used of GPS and GRS at a busy traffic crossing.

Indeed Studio Azzurro anticipated this shift beyond the frame already in 1984. In the video installation “Il Nuotatore” (“The Swimmer”) twenty-four monitors expose the viewer to a suspension in the notion of the television frame. The monitors placed one after the other (and projecting images obtained by filming with twelve cameras a swimmer from the border of the water), are transversed by a swimmer moving from one monitor to another in a continuous flow. Blurring the physicality of the frames of the monitors, the swimmer decentres the



Picture 6. Image of a GPS installation (<http://www.gpsdrawing.com/workshops/extra/sideways.html>)

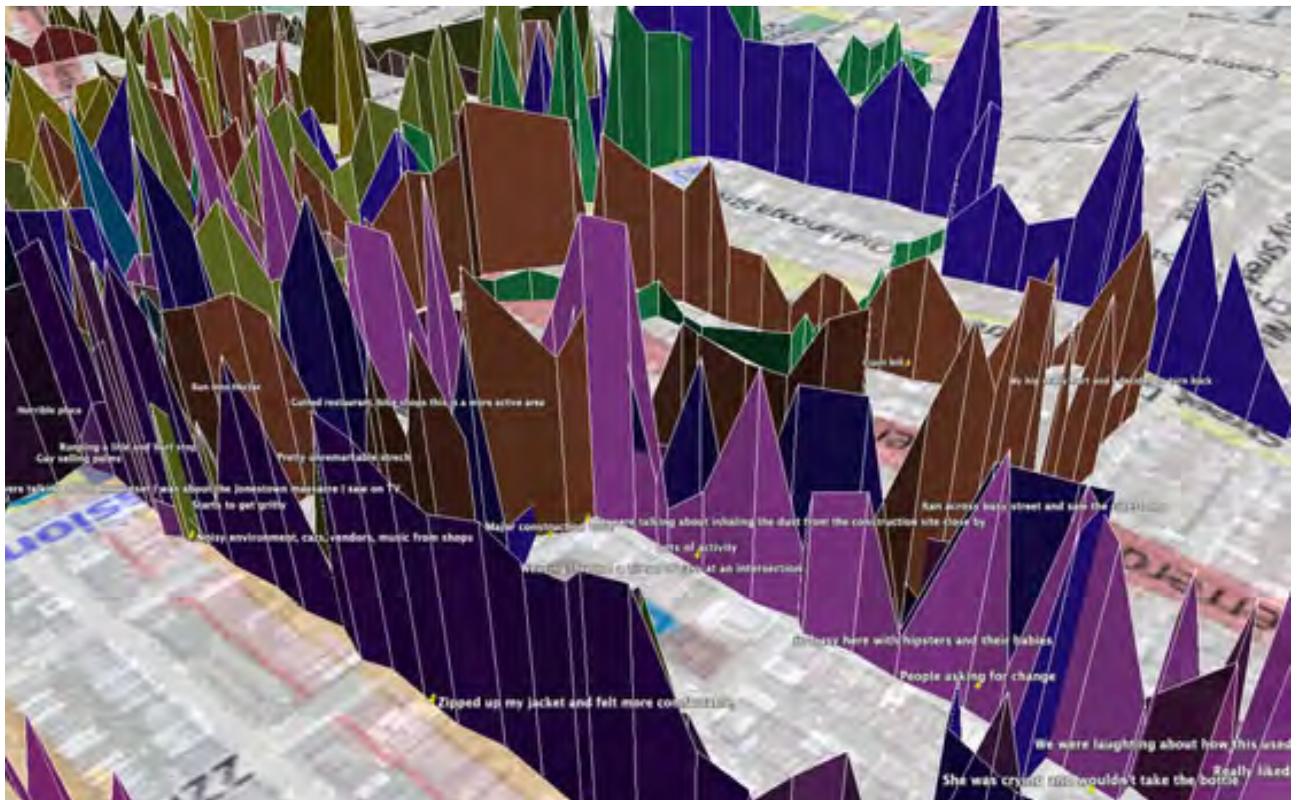
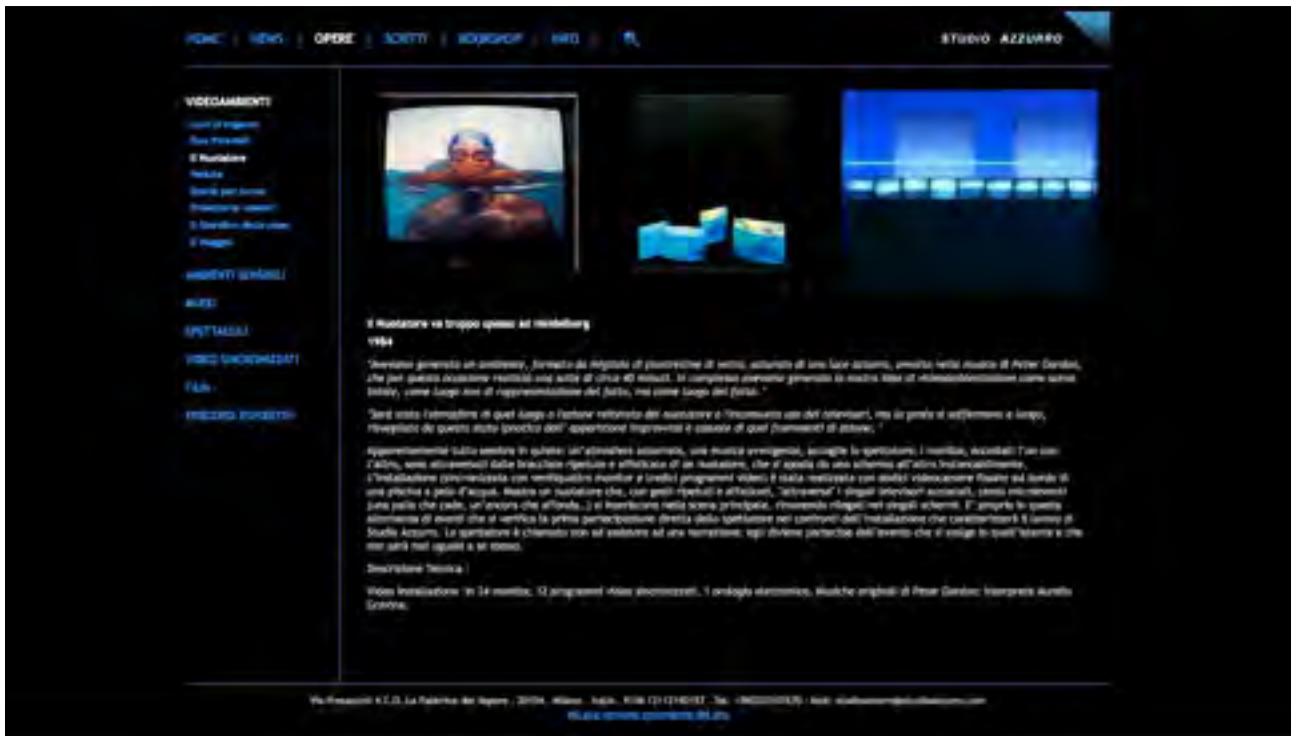


Photo 7. Image from Christian Nold's work (<http://mobileinterfacetheory.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Figure2-3.jpg>)



Picture 8. Screenshot from http://www.studioazzurro.com/index.php?com_works=&view=detail&cat_id=1&work_id=15&option=com_works&Itemid=7&lang=it

notion of wholeness and control generally connected to the experience of viewing moving images from within a television frame (cf. McQuire 1998).

Evidently highlighting the mobility and liquidity of contemporary frames, smartphones and many contemporary art installations urge us to acknowledge the changing meaning of visibility and invisibility in the context of image-making. This is a topic that has been addressed by scholars in the field of visual culture since long. In his seminal approach to the reading of images Roland Barthes suggested that the meaning(s) of a photograph is «invisible. It is not it that we see» (1993:77). Characterized by a double dialectic photographs are between the here and now and the there and then. As Garlic (2002) has phrased it, when we look at a photograph we reopen a particular space of experience. There is a relation existing through both time and space to the moment encapsulated in the picture. This moment is at once eternal, and at the same time ephemeral, it has passed and yet it continues to exist in the present. Moving away from notions of photography as something able to “capture” and “render back” reality such scholars have worked on the power that photographs have in decentering the principles of representation. What the experiences and devices described here seem to do is exactly to make evident, “visible” and tangible such invisibility. Such projects push us into a new direction, one where invisibility is not only a metaphor for grasping an ideological (in Barthes terms “connotative”) dimension but is also actually something quite literally “within our sight”. How do we cope with images whose content can never fit into a frame and whose consumers (viewers) are increasingly socialized into these various forms of imagining what is left out (quite literally again) of the images?

Conclusions

Far from ready-made objects waiting to be interpreted, images constitute today a complex, liquid reality (see Bauman 2000) made up of components that integrate the visual field with what goes beyond it. As Rokeby (1995) has suggested, aesthetics in a digital context is about the creation of relationships rather than about a finished visible artwork (cf. also Bourriaud 1998). Digital images seem however to bring back to our attention insights that have characterized the study of images at large, hence asking us to reinsert the past in our present. I am convinced that a greater exposure to, and a critical experimentation with, digital technologies can lead scholars at large (and anthropologists in particular) to open up this terrain even fur-

ther. As I have attempted at showing with this paper, the exposure to new technologies and new artistic practices can lead, paraphrasing MacDougall (1997) to the discovery not only of «different ways of understanding, but also [of] different things to understand» (1997: 287).

Notes

¹ For this paper I am gratefully indebted to Nicola Ciancio for his precious suggestions and insights into the world of digital art.

² I am putting the pronouns “we”, “us” and “our” within brackets in this section of the text in order to demarcate my critical stance towards universalistic notions that surround many writings on digital technology. “We”, “us” and “our” are here therefore only convenient forms referring to the context within which “we”, as academics working in industrialized countries, work and live rather than claiming any ideas of universality (I will discuss this in greater detail further down in this article).

³ As McQuire (1998) suggest when we photograph from afar we get socialized into the idea that not only we can take possession of that far away view but also that someone else from a far away position can view us and take possession of us through their own view.

⁴ I will not here develop this point any further but suffice it to say that the presence of migrants in Italy, for example, is, by most Italian citizens, primarily acknowledged as something they can literally see (as a spectacle, by walking on the street or watching photographs) while seldom being part of the daily emotional life. In a constant play of visibility and invisibility migrant in Italy become visible objects of entertainment and threat (in films, reportages etc.) while being invisible in everyday life.

⁵ The video can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANCWMHWIFhQ>

⁶ Chris Pinney (1997, 1992) among others has shown the importance of addressing questions of visual culture outside the West and shown the way in which, for instance, the aesthetics of Indian photography and Hindi films reproduce key notions of the Hindu social system and notions of the person.

⁷ <http://www.sarai.net/practices/cybermohalla>

⁸ <http://www.tkd.l.res.in/tkd.l/langdefault/common/home.asp?GL=Eng>

⁹ I have in fact been able to explore modalities of using Flickr in particular through my work with Italian net-

based VisualArtsContest, an association holding photographic competitions through Flickr.

¹⁰ <http://www.zero.eu/>

¹¹ In Edwards' words, "[t]he social act of gathering around a computer screen to look at images is markedly different from that of handling photographs, touching them, stroking them and handing them to kin and to friends, or sitting alone in quiet contemplation of an image held in the hand" (Edwards 2003: 90-91)

¹² http://www.studioazzurro.com/opere/ambienti_sensibili/sensibile_map

¹³ <http://www.todo.to.it/#projects/ad>

¹⁴ http://www.studioazzurro.com/opere/video_instalazioni/il_giardino_delle_cose

¹⁵ <http://realtime.waag.org>

¹⁶ <http://www.gpsdrawing.com/workshops/extra/sideways.html>

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