

**BETWEEN
THE
DEFERRED
ACTION
AND THE
SPATIAL
PARADOX
OF THE
WEB.**

written by

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THIS ESSAY PROPOSES AN ANALYSIS OF HOW THE CONCEPTS OF TIME AND SPACE ARE DEEPLY CHANGED WITH THE ADVENT OF THE IMAGE CONVEYED THROUGH THE INTERNET. TO BETTER EXPLAIN THE RELATIONSHIP OF SPACE / TIME WITH THE NEW REALITY BASED ON THE ONLINE IMAGE, I HAVE PERSONALLY CREATED TWO NEW CONCEPTS: FIRST 'THE DEFERRED ACTION' WHICH EXPLAINS THE READING OF TIME, AND SECOND 'THE PARADOXY OF THE WEB' WHICH EXPLAINS THE READING OF SPACE.

COMPARING THE THOUGHTS OF THE GREATEST PHILOSOPHERS OF OUR TIME WITH THE WORK OF ARTISTS WHO USE PHOTOGRAPHY AS A FAVORITE MEDIUM, I TRIED TO EXPLAIN HOW THE MAIN DYNAMICS OF OUR TIME ARE INFLUENCED BY THE EXCESSIVE AND OFTEN UNAWARE USE OF THE IMAGE.

DEFERRED ACTION IN TIME

The art of reading the images results different from the reading of a written text: if in the text the reading flows consequentially, in the image it appears more chaotic and fragmentary. We can say that the reading of the image is multi-instantaneous: in the moment in which we watch the image, in its primary entirety, we begin to quickly discover all the other secondary, more hidden information. The reading of an image is always an *“instant intersection of imaginations, while we are moving the eyes on the surface, they attack us both consciously and unconsciously. It is a synthesis among collective memory, memory personal and technological unconscious”*¹. An image is always in unstable balance among an actuality of a new glance that captures our attention and a simultaneous reminder of the iconography: this reminder is as an atlas of memories in which the personal memory and social memory merge.

Luigi Ghirri was one of the first to use the photographic medium as a sort of new language investigating the places of everyday life in order to unveil the variety of icons that inhabit the contemporary world. *“Showcases, advertising, images, postcards and pictures that interact with reality, as well as the skies and people in moments of leisure, are images that investigate the processes of seeing but at the same time involve, with their evocative ability, icons of a collective memory”*². Ghirri’s work is affected by the conceptual influences of deconstruction of reality: Ghirri photographs the provincial world, a slow and stereotyped world, denoting that as early as 1970-1978 (period in which he collected the pics of the *Kodacrome* series) this world was also impregnated by a co-presence. The images began to invade the real world, and automatically dialogued with it in a relationship where the difference between true and false decreased day by day, photo by photo (Fig. 2.4 and Fig. 2.5).

So Ghirri himself spoke about it:

The attention to the destruction of direct experience arises in this work; which does not want to tell us of the intrusiveness of images in the environments of life, but rather as an analysis between the true and the false [...] Photography of photography becomes a moment of specular coincidence, and the two images eliminate

*each other, thus recalling the physicality of the starting world.*³

The moment of specular coincidence between the photo and the images it contains becomes an access to the real world. Ghirri follows the images and reveals how these are changing the experience of reality from the physical to the virtual: it explains how the world of the image works and allows us to look beyond, as the edges of real experience stand out in some parts of its photos compared to the image's invasion.

In other photos, this 'ghirriana' technique of unveiling the real, also makes us understand how these images, through totally random combinations, sometimes create an iconographic short-circuit (figs 2.6 and 2.7). In the world of the image the unconscious mind dialogues with the collective memory (in the case of the photos in question two opposing cultural clichés) creating a new meaning that is never completely controllable but can only be reconstructed through a deferred action: the moment of vision is always an instant comparison of the image with the personal imagination, and the latter is the result of a collection of personal experiences and images conditioned by a collective imagination codified over time.

The deferred action is a visual action that brings the past to an instantaneous dialogue with the present, but in the case of the photographs this happens randomly and in a fragmented way (though often codified). The photographic image always carries within itself a slippage of sense, having hidden behind its meek and controllable character the seed of the mad and uncontrollable randomness.

As Benjamin said in *Little History of Photography*: "*despite the photographer's ability, despite the carefully calculated pose of the subjects, the observer feels the irresistible impulse to look for a slight spark of randomness, the 'here and now' with which reality has inflamed the character of the image*"⁴. It is like when in the sea of continuously moving, the image stops for an instant to return it still; the photograph shows us the dust in a static state, making us understand that the nature of things is different from what we see in its temporal flow. We come to know of this "*optical unconscious*"⁵ only through

the photographic medium, and when this is used in the sense of Ghirri, we understand how the image is always based on an iconographic panorama dilated and extended over time.

The deferred action that takes place within the images is the result of a casual comparison between the present of the 'here and now' and the past of a historicized iconography. Given that post-modern reality is studded with images, we can define it as a historical period in which a regime of historical consequentiality is lacking: "*a historian who considers this as a starting point stops telling the sequence of events like the grains of a rosary, rather, he catches the previous era's constellations of events that his era was formed through.*"⁶ In postmodern reality dominated by images, time expands and contracts simultaneously. It is a continuous overlap between present and past, and near and far, that destroys every linearity and historical certainty: in art it often corresponds to the process of quotation and destruction.

A good example of this process of deferred action, citation and deconstruction, is the artwork of Canadian artist Jeff Wall, who manages to narrate post-modernity in a manner similar to its own substance. In fact, Wall's images act on many levels: they echo a very precise iconography and at the same time they destroy the attitude in modernity towards the photographic medium. Let's take as an example the photo of 1979 entitled *Picture for Women* (Fig. 2.8): the work, given the clear reference to a famous painting by Manet *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère*, is an iconographic reference, but at the same time it is also a game, a mockery of documentary photography. Wall, in fact, tends to reconstruct situations that seem entirely random but that are instead prepared to its smallest details (fig 2.9), reconstructed in a maniacal way with actors and real film sets: in this way it undermines the reliability of photography, the document status that late modernism had raised to truth by proxy. Wall recalls the Henry-Cartier Bresson imagery of the Decisive Moment to destroy it with a planned construction of reality. What has always been considered credible is pure fiction because the deception of the photography is based precisely on the perfect mimesis that it has with the real: in deferred action the quote is a remembrance

of the past, which in the present of the photo in the photo is deconstructed and emptied of its meaning. If Ghirri was still close to the logic of conceptual art that provided for a certain acceptance of the unexpected (which for Ghirri was a sort of predisposition to the acceptance of the images), in Wall the unpredictability itself becomes a quotation, in the logic of a fake planned reality, in some ways similar to advertising logic. In fact, Wall presents his photographs as large-format backlit prints with huge light boxes, the same technique of advertising billboards, so as to tell us that the intrusive reality of the image shines with a fake light.

THE PARADOX OF DISTANCE IN THE NETWORKS

In temporal terms the postmodern art tends to unveil, through the process of deferred action, that the reality of the image is a fiction considered true thanks to the recall of a shared historical imagination. On the other hand, in spatial terms, the advent of the Web and digital technologies leads the image within the paradox of remote presence.

Already in 1947, Martin Heidegger argued that within the society of the image, distance and closeness were shrouded in “*a uniformity in which everything is neither near nor far*”⁷. It was in the sixties that real debates on technology developed, and in particular I refer to two authors who revolutionized the vision of multi-media society: Guy Debord and Marshall McLuhan.

According to Debord “*the show is not a collection of images, but a social relationship between individuals mediated by images*”⁸, and this relationship is now conditioned by the centralization of data that reaches the audience in a peripheral and serial manner: it divides them from the reality that the image simulates, but also it divides them from each other. The image is enjoyed in a personal and solitary way, and the viewer is left alone in front of a “spectacular fantasy”. The wall of the reality of ‘the show’ stands majestic and dominant in front of an army of lonely and dispersed individuals. From this point of view the critical distance of the spectator is annulled: it can not escape the force of gravity of the image and consequently assumes a passive role.

According to McLuhan in the 'global village' this distance, both critical and spatial, is canceled: "*we have prolonged our central nervous system outside of us in electrical technology*"⁹, but this hybrid, even if it allows us to move in a virtual way in the network by changing the physicality of times and distances, can sometimes be compared to self-amputation: "*it is a self-suicidal amputation, as if the central nervous system could no longer depend on the physical organs, intended as protective pads against slings and arrows of the outrageous mechanism*"¹⁰. Basically in the modern man-machine subject, the machine takes over the man who, deprived of a real physicality, has no more protections with which to defend himself; the medium becomes the message, which is consumed passively and with subordination: doubts about the real authenticity of the information that it gives us are distracted and addicted to the spectacularity of the broadcast. In the era in which information becomes spectacularized "*who does nothing but looks to know the sequel will never act: he must be the spectator*"¹¹. To find a synthesis between Debord and McLuhan we could say that: the medium is the message that always tends to spectacularization.

The images conveyed by the internet, more than a 'deus ex machina' are a sort of 'deus in machina', in which the medium-divinity controls and conditions our actions-reactions: it is true that the Web, compared to television, gives us the capacity for interaction, but this interaction is only managed within pre-established ad hoc borders. This is phagocytized by the medium and becomes itself a spectacle: if we take Facebook as an example, we understand that it is a platform where you can exchange information and images with people geographically distant, but this becomes a sort of spectacularization of the private, where everybody can enjoy the vision of our shared intimacy. In reality 2.0 we are at the same time spectators and actors of a show where the medium dictates the rules.

The show and its privileged medium, the image, now form the rules of society to become its substance, the connective tissue. The risk is that one learns to manage intersubjectivity (personal, political, economic) only according to the prearranged path. It is useful to say that this intersubjectivity is totally fake: proof of this is that society has never been so atomized, without a real desire for aggregation and a real confidence

*in the possibility of having a common battle.*¹²

From these words of Sergio Giusti we can see how society takes on a role of passivity and resignation before the spectacle of the image. Probably this resignation is also linked to a sort of self-defense that the shock of the image constantly provokes in the viewer: the shock is both emotional (for the transmitted scenes) and accumulative (for the amount of information emitted). In fact, the mechanism of the spectacle in its abundance of spectacularity, has dried us up from the receptive point of view. In contrast to a plural and multiple reality, which must be accepted for how it is served, we have developed the antibodies of passive resignation.

The artistic duo 0100101110101101.org (Eva and Franco Mattes) through the opera *No Fun* reflect precisely on the consequences of the “resigned” fruition of the online image. The two artists staged a fake suicide on the site ChatRoulette.com (a video-chat site that connects two random users) filming the reactions of users who connect with the room where Franco Mattes dangles with the noose around his neck (fig 2.10, 2.11, 2.12). The video that constitutes the final work is “*an alarming fact from the social point of view, becomes interesting when analyzed by an artistic observation*”¹³. In fact, only one user for the entire duration of the video believes the image in front of him and calls the police: the majority of the other users remain surprised, and even amused, in face of the presumed suicide. In fact, even in a place where interaction is possible, the artwork shows us how much the spectacle of the image prevails over any possible cooperation between individuals. What should make us reflect is the fact that every interaction that takes place in the Web, is not considered really real but always credible as entertainment. The distance that separates us from the monitor is affected by the involvement of the real distance between us and others that, thanks to the experiment of 0100101110101101.org, and seems to expand more and more: the medium that approaches us technologically distances us humanly, as we are increasingly close to and attracted by the image, but far away and disinterested in the actual reality behind it.

Hal Foster states that “*we are constantly connected to spectacular events. This link connects us and disconnects simultaneously, making us psycho-technologically in direct connection with events and geo-politically distant from them*”¹⁴. We can verify this affirmation every time we find ourselves before images of war scenarios, ‘regarding’, to put it with the words of Susan Sontag, ‘to the pain of others’.

Interesting in this regard is the work entitled “*The Arab Revolt*” by the young artist Giorgio Di Noto. The author has made a photographic reportage on the revolts that spread through all of North Africa and the Middle East from the end of 2010 to 2014, better known as the “Arab Spring”: this movement, and the series of revolts that ensued, found their point of strength in sharing online. For the first time in history, a protest was fueled and spread thanks to the sharing of photos and videos that the same protagonists published daily online. If the Gulf War was the first war we witnessed live on television, the Arab Spring was the first war documented through an active interconnection in the web space.

Returning to the artwork in question, the first interesting thing to note is that the artist used an obsolete camera like the Polaroid to capture the war scenarios, moreover with black and white films; the second interesting thing, the real fulcrum of the work, is that Di Noto made his photographic documentation in the safety of his room, simply by photographing the images of the riots that passed from day to day on his PC screen. Through the Polaroid, which from a technical point of view it is a non-manipulable photography, the artist leads us to trust the authenticity of the medium, and through the use of black and white and a good compositional technique evokes the glories of documentary photography of war, like Robert Capa, a type of photography that brought us back to the same war atmosphere in which the old photo-reporters immersed themselves. When we discover that the report is the result of a monitor shot, we feel doubly teased: we feel betrayed by the means that we trusted, and feel betrayed by the photographer who instead of “be there being close” has chosen to “be there staying away”. We fell into his trap, we confused the operator with the viewer, we confused the bare and raw reportage with a reportage based on the spectacularization of the reportage: “*Is it possible that The Arab Revolt is not so much*

a report on the revolts in North Africa but on their adhesion to the entertainment society in an interconnected version, and on our position as passive and clicking spectators?”¹⁵.

To this last question, I would like to add another: is it possible that the position of passive viewers is the same in front of any kind of image-mediated reportage? And has the reportage not always been a show watched without risk from a passive but secure position?

Watching has always been a matter of distance, even today that this distance seems to be canceled by the speed and interconnection of the technological means: watching has always been a passive act that leads us to be chained inside the Platonic cave, a cave made of shadows. The works of the duo 0100101110101101.org and Giorgio Di Noto do not aspire to take us out of the cave, but manage to give us the right distance from the wall of shadows. They manage to shake us from the passive apathy that today makes us lonely and blind. They are images that, among the other thousands that run incessantly in the intensity of the post-modern period, manage to make us stop and reflect.



Fig. 2.4 – Luigi Ghirri, *Egmond am Zee* (dalla serie *Kodachrome*), 1973.



Fig. 2.5 – Luigi Ghirri, *Egmond am Zee* (dalla serie *Kodachrome*), 1973.



Fig. 2.6 – Luigi Ghirri, *Modena* (dalla serie *Kodachrome*), 1973.



Fig. 2.7 – Luigi Ghirri, *Modena* (dalla serie *Kodachrome*), 1973.



Fig. 2.8 – Jeff Wall, *Picture for Women*, 1979.



Fig. 2.9 – Jeff Wall, *Mimic*, 1982.

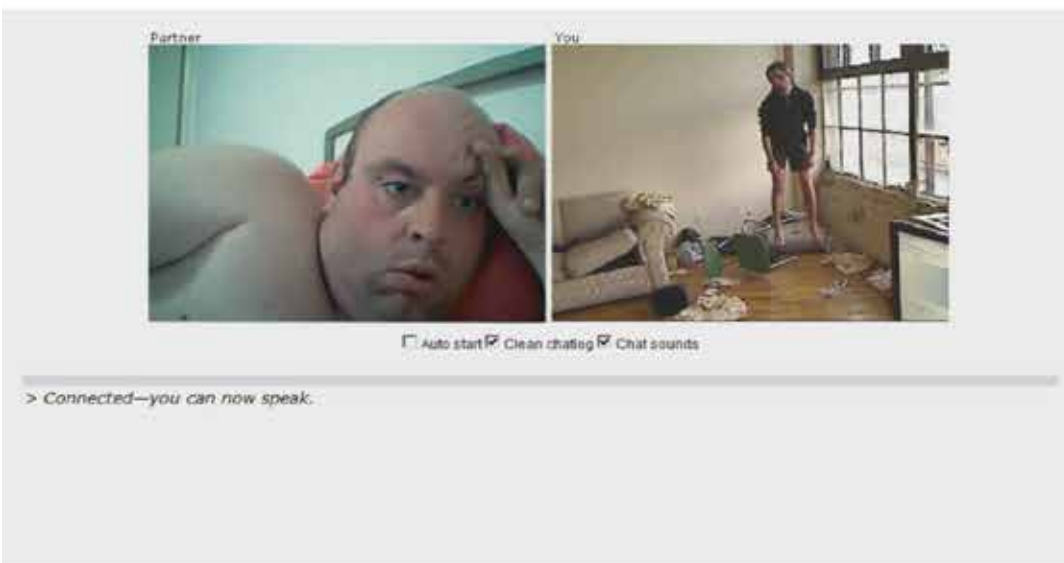
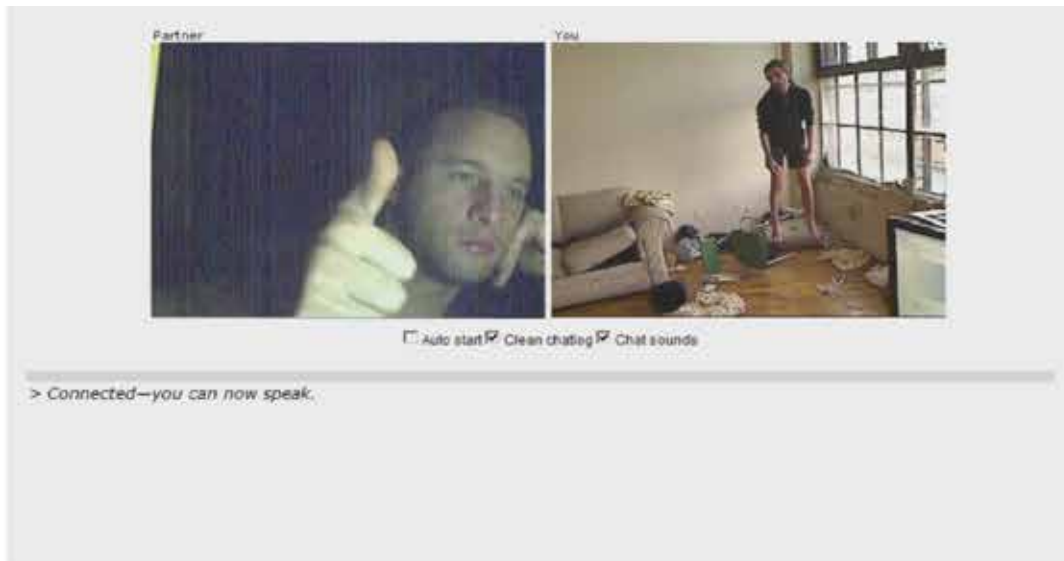


Fig. 2.10 - 2.11 - 2.12 – 0100101110101101.org, *No Fun*, 2010.



Fig. 2.13 - 2.14 - 2.15 - 2.16 - Giorgio Di Noto, *The Arab Revolt*, 2012.

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