ART AS A SOCIAL PERFORMANCE IN TRANS-MEDIA CITIES

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1. Foreword

The designing of contemporary cultural spaces needs to take into consideration the incessant expansive movement that affects reality due to the multiform and pervasive universe of the web, and the digitalization of social space. The implications of this transformation are numerous and not fully explored because change is underway. We know, however, that the representation of the world, which we experience through the media world, is a whole experience in itself (Lash 1999). This telluric movement also brings with it a more powerful implication highlighted by Žižek (1997)[1]: enriching the perception of the world with electronically grafted digital information, "augmented" reality reveals the phantasm, which serves its own construction. In this chapter we explore how social actors inhabit the excesses and the speed this change brings with it, and the actor's responses in ways of experiencing the trans-media world.

Looking at how social media effects have been interpreted, the aesthetic form of the *simulacrum* (Debord 1967; Baudrillard 1981) predominates. It refers to how actors implode in the simulation of the world, losing themselves as subjects. Here, the logic of the end and the disso-

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1 http://www.filosofia.rai.it/articoli/žižek-il-rapporto-tra-lo-schermo-e-la-realtà/37954/default.aspx

lution of reality prevail. Instead we hypothesize that the way actors inhabit the worlds expanded by media is not *simulacrum* but *performance*. This means that the continuous acting out that we see flowing in trans-media storytelling can no longer be read as a loss of the self but rather as a non-cognitive position, yet affective, relational and sensorial, that ferries to a reflexivity that is mostly aesthetic (Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994). Through performance, meanings are formulated in a social and aesthetic rather than cognitive space, and the participants seem to be engaged through the imaginary in the interactional creation of reality (Korom 2013). We can find dissolution but also critique and resistance. We do not know if coping with the complexity of the world through performance is a desirable process but surely it must be taken into serious consideration in the cultural planning of new social spaces.

2. Life, form and revealed ghosts

Observing the social world in its making and unmaking means facing the Simmellian dynamics between life and form. We produce forms that are goods, technologies, ideologies, artefacts, buildings, paintings, sculptures, performances etc.; in their development these forms become objectified and return to the life that produced them as domination. Simmel speaks of "*verdichtung*" (crystallization) of forms that turn against life (Simmel, 1997: 5). Life, however, does not resign itself and systematically frees itself by returning to its vital flow. In this movement modernity is evolved and devolved.

The place where this movement is accelerated is, according to Simmel, the metropolis: display windows, artificial lighting, universal exhibitions, trams and cars, foreigners, the poor, criminals, objects and people with whom the metropolitan individual enters constantly into contact. The resulting shock causes a real anthropological change toward intellectualization at the expense of sentimentality: the coldness of society, which contrasts with the warmth of community.

Through intellectualization, the metropolitan individual abstracts from the personal dimension and re-establishes subjectivity in terms of calculation, reason and interest (D'Andrea and Federici, 2004). Walter Benjamin acknowledges the profound change of the early twentieth-century technological environment and gives medial substance to the Simmel form. According to Benjamin the experience of modernity is centred on shock, the motor responses of switching, snapping, the jolt of a machine in motion producing new subjectivities (Buck-Morss, 1992).

In radicalized modernity, aesthetically within the post-modern (Lash, 1999), the question of the convergence between media evolution and the processes of individualization intrinsic to modernity remains unchanged and is actualized in understanding how subjects and media are comprehended or given one to the other. If we look at contemporary social experience, it appears condensed in the gesture of stroking and the rapid passage of the fingers on the cold surface of smartphone screens; it appears to us as a hybrid of socio-technical entities and new imaginaries (Latour, 2005).

The assemblage of human and non-human actors engrossed with screens implies a reflection on their interaction and between these screens and the same living organisms. As McLuhan points out: "every invention or technology is an extension or a self-amputation of our body, which imposes new relationships and new balances between the other organs and the other extensions of the body" (McLuhan, 1962: 61). The concept of body extension in the medial environment indicates a real "process of morphing, resulting from the transfer of the flesh, the body of the individual into a larger mediascape" that inevitably dissolves the perimeter of the subject (Canevacci, 2007:17).

The bodyscape then seems to dissolve in the media environment and communication. I do not want to go further into this snapshot of everyday life that would take me directly into the areas of the post-human and its multifaceted implications. Instead, I choose to observe the aesthetic form assumed by the representation of social experience on

the threshold of the changes taking place, in short, the relationship between screens and reality.

Screening the world is embedded in a fundamentally ideal path that challenges the representation of experience. Whereas modernism had differentiated the roles of meaning, signifier and referent, post-modernization triggers a process of de-differentiation among these elements, making them interchangeable. An increasing proportion of signification is in fact relegated to images; these, as Scott Lash (1999) writes, are more similar to referents than words. Likewise, a growing proportion of referents is made up of signifiers. It follows that everyday life is pervaded by a reality that increasingly includes representations and in which a reciprocal invasion of signifiers and referents is established. What we witness is an irreversible crumbling of the regime of representation.

There is also a further implication on which I would like to reflect: we think of ideologies as pre-digital devices mediating the relationship with reality, but as Žižek (2017)[2] underlines, especially in the most recent technologies the screen filter has a different quality. What does this mean? Žižek remarks that grafting data on reality and making it immediately available – as google glasses do – reveals the cultural construction of reality. In other words, it reveals how the construction underlies reality. It is not only a process of delegation to the machine but also a revelation of the phantasm through which reality can be interpreted (Žižek 1997).

The problem is then not technological change but the augmented reality or the enrichment of human sensory perception through information manipulated and conveyed electronically; what we see through the glasses is not just reality but reality with the addition of the phantasm which allows it to function (*ibid*.). Žižek exemplifies: "I see a beautiful woman but I also process her erotic fantasies" (see footnote 1). The evolution of digitalization makes the construction behind the perceived reality explicit.

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2 See footnote 1.

Following the contribution of the authors considered, we are faced with a profoundly changed experience of reality with respect to the past. Is it possible to interpret this experience using the binarisms which define modernity: real/virtual, reality/representation, public/ private, cultural/ social, real/imaginary, etc.?

We certainly cannot answer these questions here but in exploring the possibility that these dichotomies are no longer pertinent to understand contemporary experience, we then ask ourselves how the social actors' response to change is being formulated. The hypothetical answer, for the moment more descriptive than interpretative, is that the responses of actors are a continuous performance (Gemini, 2003; St. John, 2008; Boccia Artieri, 2012) where Giddens' cognitive reflexivity (in Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994) takes on another form transfigured into reflexive acting-out.

It may seem paradoxical but if we recall the status of performance in contemporary art we can understand that it is a "practice of movement" of subjects expressing languages and consuming at the same time. Performance is a strategy of positioning in the uninterrupted flow of communication in which objects, representations and symbols interchange. However this is not a closing in on themselves, because as we will see performance is always connected. As Duchamp would have said, it is the spectators who complete the work when they experience it.

3. Mimesis as aesthetic reflexivity

Modernity defines itself as reflexive when it begins to reflect on itself; reflexive modernization is a realization of one's own excesses and of the vicious spiral of destructive risks. While for Giddens (1994) this kind of reflexivity finds form and substance in the continuous implementation of processes of monitoring and processing of an essentially cognitive type, Lash (*ibid*.) expounds a critique of this one-sidedness and recalls the aesthetic dimension to support this reflexivity. In it a

significant role is played by the particular and the contingent with respect to universals, to which cognitive reflexivity applies. Lash, among others, refers to the contributions of Adorno and Benjamin, or the tension to understand life in its symbolic, imaginative and irrational dimensions.

The way in which one enters the medial environment recalls the mimetic form of the relationship with the associated world and often above the cognitive one; following Tavani's take on Adorno, the aesthetic dimension produces relationships, builds connections and establishes instable grammars, without planning or predictability (Tavani, 2013: 47). The peculiar role played by mimesis refers to a new ecology of thought. Mimesis abstracts form, concept, from exclusive attention to unity and synthesis; it "deflects the technique in the direction of the removed, the widespread and the unstable" (*ibid.*: 139); mimesis introduces an element of otherness, openness, able to counteract the tendency of form to be closed.

Tavani shows us a less "apocalyptic" Adorno, equipped with a particular technological sensitivity (*ibid.*: 152). This sort of identification of the technique with the spirituality of the work, in fact, leads the philosopher to glimpse a margin of transformation even for art in the era of reproducibility. He admits the possibility that art works can move with "technological talent, in technology itself" (*ibid.*: 174). Mimesis, however, cannot be restricted to art, poetry, aesthetics but, according to Wulf (1995), mimetic sense plays a key role in acting, representing, speaking and thinking of human beings as significant conditions of social life.

The daily flow of the trans-media experience seems to be closer to this mimetic kind of "critique". Reflexivity is daily, experimental and above all it is the reflexivity of an aesthetic, emotional kind, transported by images, by their editing, by grafts of words and fiction, by a weaving that does not refer to cognition but to mimesis as a form of knowledge of the world. We are always within a process of appropriation of the image of the world (Abruzzese, 2001) and a retreat from the trust that others can represent the unique and singularized expe-

rience. The trans-media flow seems to testify to the continuous appeal for individualized stories. The hero's journey is not that of building a famous life of success but of a struggle to assert one's own singularity. This is not an epic but a performative struggle. The autobiographical, medial performance gives rise to monologues, the documentation of an individual life as research, a personal life that recounts its own conflicts and victories, and that the flow returns as a collective narrative but not collectively oriented. It is affirmed as testimonial logic and as a very personal position.

Performance as more mimetic than cognitive reflexivity is aligned as a response to the transformation of the world into image, first of all because it refers to the limits of theorization. Adorno considers mimesis a movement with which man gets lost in the "environment" (Adorno, 1975: 83; Wulf, 1995). According to Adorno the privileged environment in which mimesis rushes is art, but what we witness is the slipping of art into the social. In order to escape from ordinariness, anonymity, normality, individuals attempt to take artistic forms, using them to navigate the sea of communication (*ibid*.). Whether these are symbolic or simulacrum is not the subject of this essay. In any case it is a *connected* performance (Boccia Artieri, 2012), which is never solitary. In such a respect we welcome Wellemer's critique of Adorno, which considers aesthetic experience only in "ecstatic" terms as though the happiness he promises were not of this world (Wellmer, in Lara, 2003).

Considering this as a weak point in Adorno, Wellmer's attempt, on the contrary, is to place the aesthetic experience within the parameters of the world and does so through Habermas' theory of communicative action. The link that the paradigm of language and communication provides for the relations between one subject and another is a necessity. Mimesis, for Wellmer, is a kind of expressive rationality. Communication and intersubjectivity are therefore conditions for repositioning the role of aesthetics, not outside but within the world (*ibid*.: 82).

4. From simulacrum to performance

In recalling Hartog's regime of historicity, Perniola (2009) tells us that the present can be understood as a regime centred on communication. What characterizes this regime is that events escape rational explanation and have more the characteristics of "miracle and trauma". The space of multiple, elusive and contradictory events produces effects without historical actions, it exaggerates, falsifies, manipulates and mystifies reality. Communication then creates a product that occupies an intermediate space between the true and the false (*ibid*.).

To read contemporary communication in miraculous and traumatic terms leads Perniola to re-actualize simulacrum, as the aesthetic form chosen by individuals to survive in a media world. In the re-release, after thirty years, of the "society of simulacra" (2011), Perniola interprets simulacrum as a survival therapy, a mimesis to oppose the precariousness of existence, a way to transform demoralization into "an intoxication close to trance" (*ibid*: 8). He writes that simulacra are images and copies without the original "that impose their own effectiveness on the subject dissolving their reality" (Perniola 1980: 65). Simulacrum thus becomes the prevailing aesthetic for interpreting the way in which social actors, especially the youngest, inhabit the media environment.

Simulacrum is a paradoxical form of knowledge because, as Baudrillard (1981) tells us, through the mediation operated by the simulacrum, as the world is known, it is dissolved. Considering how media are inhabited, the reference to simulacrum is a *leitmotif*: not only in terms of common sense but, as the major literature recalls, a vertiginous dimension and hypnotic possession of the network. Simulacrum in its various meanings is a very seductive perspective full of charisma that has exercised a real interpretative dominion.

Why could performance, and not simulacrum, represent the aesthetic form pertinent to grasping the way in which subjects enter the

contemporary trans-media stream? Following Fry (2009)[3], simulacrum is indeed an acting out and therefore, to some extent, it introduces performance. Baudrillard's insistence that the crime of reality is never "perfect" also means accepting the idea that between copy and original, between reality and representation, there is still a gap (Baudrillard 1994; Savoldi 2016). A more in-depth reading of Baudrillard shows how he absorbed the simulacrum of Klossowski, a version that claims to have no nostalgia for the original.

Klossowsky writes that the driving depth cannot be expressed in words, but in an instant of excitement: it is unintelligible (Klossowsky 1969). Emotion is by its nature unspeakable and incommunicable, therefore the only relation with the real is made possible through resemblance; Klossowsky accepts the "end of representation" with enthusiasm and frees himself from feeling nostalgic (Cantarano, 1998: 181). Klossowsky's is a criticism of the institutional language that is the supremacy of the word over experience. Simulacrum here is antagonistic to the language that imposes a fictitious identity.

In this version of Klossowsky's simulacrum, we find an anticipation of Butler's performance (2007) as a form of knowledge and as a language of action on the world. For Butler, sexuality refers to a psychic excess evoked by the reference to the unconscious that cannot be performed. Fry (2009)[4] says that for Butler "We perform identity, we perform our subjectivity, we perform gender in all the ways but beyond what we can perform, there is sexuality". Here performance, as something mysterious, surrounds sexuality as well as being, which cannot be resolved or dissolved in the social.

Performative reflexivity could be characterized as an ambivalent and 'situationist' response - in the sense of considering rationality as a reactionary response - to the demand for high-performance in neoliberal societies. On one hand, it is consistent with the prescription to be more and more innovative, creative and brilliant as required

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3 https://oyc.yale.edu/english/engl-300/lecture-23
4 See footnote 3.

by the historical statement of the new spirit of capitalism (Boltansky and Chiappello 1999). On the other hand, it could mean the demand to legitimize psychic excess that can never be grasped or reduced by a prescription for performativity required by the labour market. Performance can represent a sort of acting-out to go beyond the paralysis of the contemporary moment.

5. Performance connectedness or performative connectivity?

Turner introduced the concept of performance in the social sciences in 1969. Alexander clarifies its meaning by explaining how performance is the way in which social actors "unfold in the eyes of others the meaning of their social action" (Alexander 2006: 32). In this definition Alexander delineates the preconditions for performance to succeed in some degree. It must convince an audience and succeed when all the elements are fused, when staging is credible and shareable and is able to conceal artifices. A successful performance has the same character as the collective ritual in traditional societies. It represents the social bond typical of the tribe founded on myth. Myth introduces the individual into a collective narrative that transcends him. Rather, medial performance more than community recalls connectedness.

In "Stati di connessione. Pubblici, cittadini, consumatori", Boccia Artieri (2012) writes about the reflexive practice exercised on the nature of relationships themselves. It is not content that determines communication but connection (*ibid*.: 55). What we observe is a state of potential and current connection that tends to naturalize, which cannot be simplified with the tautological reference to narcissism as a social pathology. We connect to share, participate, exhibit, differentiate, position ourselves in symbolic fields, etc., but the great number of connections changes the experience, because what changes is the "sense of position" in the world of communication (*ibid*.: 65).

Moreover, the experience changes because the criteria for reflection become connected; sharing becomes the value of social experience. What Boccia Artieri shows us is the connected process of hybridization between real and imagined lives, between mass media languages, advertising narratives and emotional experiences. What characterizes being in this hybrid and connected world? It is mainly and above all seen as tactile and bodily language; the staging of one's emotions is naturally channelled into an increasingly sensory reality. Here the media territory becomes an expressive space; people mix real and media territories, and narrate experiences recalling the body.

Whether "being connected" coincides with life in the pulsing of relationships, in the perspective of Simmel, here again we find the deep contradiction between life in its restless rhythm and the fixed duration of any particular form. Similarly to other publications[5], in "The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media", Van Dijck (2013) helps to understand the ambivalence of the contemporary digital–media scenario. Social media are online facilitators or enhancers of human networks, webs of people who promote connectedness as social value, individual ideas. Values and tastes are contagious and spread through human networks, but these networks also influence what individuals do and think (Christakis/Fowler 2009).

At the same time social media are automated systems that engineer and manipulate connections; for example, in order to recognize what people want and what they like, Facebook and other platforms track the source through coding relationships among people, things and ideas within algorithms. The meaning of social seems to encompass both human connectedness and automatic connectivity and its deliberate ambiguity. The technology-codified social network makes people's activities manageable and manipulable, engineering people's social life in daily routines.

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5 Such as Mirko Schäfer's *Bastard culture! How user participation transforms cultural production* (2011) and Mark Deuze's *Media life* (2014).

Platforms based on detailed and intimate knowledge of people's desires and likes develop tools to create and manage specific needs, a button that shows what your friends watch, listen to and read, and the marketing recorders look at the tastes of your peers while at the same time configuring them. Users tend to emphasize human connection when they explain a value of the platform in their lives. Facebook helps its members to maintain contacts but there is an incontestable aspect of opacity: it is difficult to recognize how Facebook actively manages connections.

As Terranova explains (2016)[6], the Open Graph operating system underlying Facebook permits statistical data but also allows the re-construction of maps of relationships. These dashboard data are kept well hidden in their database. Probably the administrator has access to these, but for example the researchers do not. Only once did they give permission to the social psychologists of Cornell University, who made an experiment of emotional contagion, an experiment to influ-ence the emotions of 600,000 people that consisted of manipulating feeds, to see if emotional states could be transferred to others through emotional contagion.

This experiment remained little known because it would have opened a window on the total opacity of these platforms. Facebook or other platforms use their data for marketing purposes, and connect-edness is often invoked for generated connectivity. So social, partici-pation and collaboration, according to Van Dijck and Terranova, take on a new meaning. The ambivalence inherent in the dual concept of connectedness and connectivity remains unresolved and to some ex-tent irreducible, proposing the Simmellian alternation between life and form in contemporary terms.

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6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWnVLT7asUM

6. Life as art slips into the social

Paradoxical as it may appear, in observing trans-media collective storytelling, we witness the recovery of sensitivity or in other words the direct presence of the body on the scene. The performative language is a response to the discomfort of "being unseen", which is satisfied with the visual (Abruzzese 2012). We are no longer just viewers but performers. In media performance, the subject appropriates something that formerly adhered to art, which now moves into the social. There seems to be a continuum between art and social. It is the social actors who grasp the performer's gaze.

Performance as aesthetic reflexivity is intended to give potential to action, underlines it, traces it and emphasizes it with the body. Performance in art anticipates and offers itself as a model in the evolution of media languages. In the horizontal and uninterrupted flow of connections we find experiences of body art, happenings, experimentation. The entire paradigm of art has shifted and the thinning of boundaries and the confluences between art, technology and pop-media has widened the range of social performance.

With Duchamp we witness the passage from "representation to presentation" (Di Giacomo, 2016: 73). This trend, from Duchamp through pop art to minimalism, marks the possibility of giving form to any objective content and finds the objective consistency of things outside of every form. *Ready made* contains a self-reflexive dimension because the object is used differently from everyday use and placed to evoke an aesthetic contemplation. Can we also find this passage in the social? *Have we all become a bit like Duchamp's readymades?* Perhaps the attempt of individuals is not to form imaginary or utopian realities that act as a stimulus to transformation but to constitute modes of existence or models of action within reality.

It is an art of life whose theoretical horizon is the sphere of human relations. Perniola (2015) tries to grasp the dark side of this process: the idea of expanding the field of art has become an imperative from which it has proved impossible to escape. Indistinction between art and life

comes from the early twentieth century avant-gardes, which come to the point of presenting their self-denial and self-destruction as a qualitative leap compared to the conservation and repetition of the past. Since the 1960s all this has been exaggerated and radicalized beyond all limits, by the trend towards innovation and creativity amplified by mass media and subsequently digital communication. Assuming in itself the logic of journalism, fashion, advertising, marketing, technology and financial speculation, communication has created a global horizon in which becoming famous is worth much more than any other 'value'.

7.   Exploration (not a conclusion)

In this chapter we have introduced how the social actor uses media grammars, imagining this reflection as a necessary premise for the cultural planning of innovative spaces. The artwork enters the space through social actors. What we refer to is not a matter of *art* but of a tension that makes one's life a work of art, a radicalization of the spirit of aesthetics and Oscar Wilde at the beginning of last century. The new territories are above all playgrounds in which virtual and real, control and loss of control, fiction and contingency communicate and overlap.

Social performers today combine communication strategies: pieces of poetry, songs, body performances, moments of everyday life, improvisations putting within their own story the words of others or friends or family, imaginary scenes or even pieces of literary work. With all these artefacts they build the self, create a storytelling where there is an affirmation, a claim to affirm that particular lives are important.

If the explorations of this chapter are plausible then social space becomes a dynamic installation to provide social actors with the possibility to interject something that seems to them relevant or legitimate. The intervention by a user is integrated into a hypertext that is not only more extensive but substantially unpredictable in its future develop-

ments and in its overall configuration. Social space rises even more from this interactive and deeply shared process.

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