ALESSANDRO DE FRANCESCO: Augmented Writing
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...that they were waiting for us in the car... that we couldn't stay home. If it's...
By dint of writing on screens, the art of writing has been split into two opposed vocations, the digital and the material. The first one is defined by its immateriality, which over the years of the avant-gardes has been called virtual, asemic, polysemic, chain of signifiers, et cetera. After losing their task to carry listeners or readers into the world as its main representatives, and after accomplishing their successive task of defending their autonomy from representation, words, like conductors of energy, carry readers and listeners into themselves, that is, into the images of themselves, be they painted, photographed, in motion, or, as sounds do, entering bodies and fading into them. Fluctuating in the reticular continuum of the web, every temporal sequence becomes a spatial display. Any sense of “before” and “after” is reduced to the quick selections of a pointer, and their power to change the scene on the screen. Due to the habit of sensing multiple superimposed pages, we instinctively feel that the screen “contains” all the images conjured up by the pointer, and that it displays a non-linear temporality, in which events do not occur after one another but emerge from a net of overlapping micro-causes and contingencies (but isn’t this also true of the world?).
The other vocation is its materiality: writing, being independent of meaning, is its visual and tactile appearance on paper. The spatial display of time here is itself a visual semantic source: whereas the screen “contains” an infinite stack of layers, the paper shows only one. The sheet of paper reveals a simultaneity that was neglected before, when it was a mere tool for “transparent” words to be placed in ordered sequences. The more redundant the paper book (waste of paper, of time, of money), the more the act of writing becomes a matter of impressing the paper support and of testing its resistance, and the possibilities to play with it.

In the osmosis of video and paper pages, we discover in hindsight, how pleasant it has always been to touch them, to handle them, to move them and to turn them in our hands. A paper book does not need now to contain meanings, or store cultural patrimonies, but it simply survives within the technological horizon of artifacts: it unties that knot (renounces the rebinding), quite disregarded before digital culture, between page and meaning. The book releases its pages, lets them free from those fetters, in order to morph into a video, to be handled, or watched, as one’s eyes move on its surface.

In this convergence—or rather in this feedback loop—between digital and material, what gets lost is the totality of sense. In fact, if reading is just one of the possibilities given by the page, we browse and skim over it, well aware that what we are doing is allowed by its material left-over: the page is a relic holding back its ancient time in the space of the paper. It is not a matter of respecting an order of premises and conclusions. Touching the paper lets us enjoy the revelation of the non-necessity of that logic. Our eyes can have solace from that effort. It was Friedrich Nietzsche who in *The Gay Science* said that

*The course of logical ideas and inferences in our brains today corresponds to a process and a struggle between impulses that are, taken singly, very illogical and unjust; we generally experience only the result of this struggle: this primeval mechanism now runs its course so quickly and is so well concealed.*

Now our aged logic—making sense of the world through the transparency of language, namely writing and reading—has come to the point of its illogicality. The times are ripe to confirm Nietzsche’s suspicions; it is about time that an utter materiality preserves a surface where all that is necessary is out there, because what is necessary is always at hand. However, now that we know it, it is only just at hand; there is nowhere else, or if another place ever existed, it would be but a nuisance, a redundancy—of information, of non requested knowledge—unless that nuisance becomes itself part of the game, as sound waves (like glitch music which uses electronic errors as musical score). Like myths told on Etruscan vases, screens expand the reading to a tactile visual question and whatever is written appears as already read beforehand,
it does not need to be read again, as what the text refers to arises from the
text itself, endlessly read by the self-generating virtual surface. It is there
to be shown, rehearsed, tested, forgotten, and protected by the invisible layers
of the screen. Exactly as it happened in mythologies, in most cases we know
what it’s all about, and the text asks the spectator to be only another witness
to its autonomous existence, or pre-existence (to facts).

And to the material sheet of paper an opportunity is given: to present and show
in the empirical world what escapes control in the flowing world of the screens.
So who's the writer in Alessandro De Francesco's work?

The writer takes ready-made words and inserts them in a space to construe self-organized texts that, whether they are interrupted narratives, or Facebook-like self-descriptions and self-promotions, or reminders of cultural fossils like Kurosawa, Alma Mahler, Dickinson or Joyce, are displayed on the paper surface, swirling in rotatory portholes, to be lost and retrieved at the next cyclical return. They sound like old myths, confirming what Walter Benjamin called the mere exhibition value of the arts. Using words like brushstrokes, placing them upside down or right-side left, or in a spherical perspective, the writer paints and types and handwrites, following in any case the visual rules of concave-convex space, and accompanying the surface’s own swelling and fading away. If there is no order, there is not even a broken order (as it happened in the avant-gardes), as continuity is granted by the perspectival and tactile qualities of the text.

And Alessandro De Francesco’s videos confirm and reinforce the idea of the double direction taken by writing: the text is literally set in motion, swollen first by the image, then by the fisheye lens, and lastly by the increasing invasion by the text-image of the whole screen, which overcomes its flatness and runs into the spectators like the arrival of the train by the Lumière brothers.

AW1_4, a paper work of digitally printed augmented writing, is turned into a fisheye digital video in which the invasion of the visual scope triggers in our minds that “imaginary museum” that images contain and unleash on occasion (if we follow Aby Warburg’s pathos formulae or Henri Focillon’s inner life of forms), recalling and reinterpreting paintings such as those by Robert Motherwell, Cy Twombly, and Emilio Vedova—further “augmented” by the pervasive noise in the background, made up of both fragmented voices from YouTube videos and sounds recorded from real life. By occupying all space in quasi-anamorphic multiplication of its visual structure, the text-image claims for itself a total attention, and even becomes a kind of threatening entity for a few seconds, just black ink and white paper, hinting at the mirrored presence of the camera. After the avant-gardes, the writer takes a further step: instead of deconstructing meaning, or revealing its processes, challenging and frustrating the reader, he plays with the infinite possibilities of its self-organization and superimposition. He turns backward to the Renaissance representation of space and plunges forward to catch digital suggestions.

Now, who is the reader of these texts? Having been previously challenged by the avant-gardes, the reader is ready to indefinitely flow within spatial words, ready to survive the lack of those references that the previous generations of writers had already subtracted from him, a readiness enhanced on the web. He is more and more skilled in mastering the screen with pointers and touchpads, in finding unpredictable connections and in jumping from
one site to another, superimposing times and places. His multitasking ability allows him to be absorbed by the spinning whirls. He does not worry about his own vulnerability. But after all, when beforehand was he ever the master of his own reading or watching? A Renaissance painting was meant to invite a multitasking spectator to be absorbed by the simulated 3D, contemplating a world that he did not contribute to make or to make meaningful. According to the Renaissance canon, straight and curved lines form a closed totality, an isomorphic space in which nothing moves. The viewer of Renaissance art was treated as a mere witness of meaning, upon which he was requested, at best, to meditate.

Here we have a similar relationship between the reader-spectator and the curves, geometric figures and frames of this ‘augmented’ 3D simulation, and we are similarly asked only to witness and respect what appears on the surface. However, in Alessandro De Francesco’s work any possible totality or centripetal vanishing point is blurred: the sense of what we detect is exactly that swelling, waving and fading away of communication as such. Now the reader-spectator is in charge of becoming himself a user who actively decides to be turned into a used (passive) witness. This is a reader who finds plenty of languages on the web and breaks through the wall of incomprehension through images, music, and automatic translators. The reading elicits a distance, both semantic and physical (the rounded and swollen 3D text becomes unreadable in the convex sides and seems to continue in the back of the swollen form, betraying the “new line” rule).

And conversely, from that extreme detachment some emotion is triggered, some tenderness for those half-sentences and extrapolated words that used to mean much and were the building blocks of a civilization, and now resound as traces of bygone illusions or myths, like Childhood, Manhattan, or War II—floating, swelling or rainfalling like fleeing but tangible memories.

*Note that all objects must be tracked* (AW1.7).

What are these objects? They are us, tracked by the artifacts that exist out there and nonetheless enter our very bodies and minds, revealing themselves as instructors and masters of our actions (and wasn’t this always the case?).

A sense of transition, from one corner of the page to the other, from hand to digital, from screen to paper, is ingrained in our thoughts and becomes a stable condition, a constant translation where the source language is always missing and the target language never coincides with the final assignment of the information.
Where is matter in this structure of writing and thinking? Matter is what survives the transition: paper and ink. But, being what contains all the motion and all the suggestions, it is living matter, materia signata, or force vive, nothing inert and therefore nothing substantial. Rather, it is always impressed with another form, with another sense, always giving in to its constant morphing. Suggesting at the same time utter weight and utter weightlessness, being both persistent and floating, like Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s marble folds, matter exerts the power of the surface, in its tireless yielding to the centrifugal energy of augmented writing.
ON BROADWAY

The interactive installation ON BROADWAY represents digital traces of life in the 21st-century city through a compilation of images and other data collected along the 11 miles of Broadway that span Manhattan.

The result is a new type of street view created from the activities of hundreds of thousands of people.

Data and Image Sources:
- 684,000 Instagram photos shared during six months in 2014
- Twitter posts for the same period
- Fireplacemark data
- Google Street View images
- Time, arrivals, and drop-offs, and economic indicators

For more, please visit:
http://on-broadway.nyc