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A menu option. Notes on post-digital photography

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I pick the phone, type the security code, aim straight to the “Camera” app. I raise it in front of me, and when the image I see on the screen convinces me, I press a virtual button. Three times. I open the gallery, choose the picture I prefer, select “Share” and “Instagram”. I frame the image, apply a filter, access the parameters and add some contrast. I proceed by “tagging” a person and adding a couple of #hashtags and a caption, then I share it. Instagram automatically posts my image on Facebook and Twitter. If I am lucky, a cloud of hearts and thumbs will rise around it, maybe a few comments. Maybe someone will download it and do something with it. Or maybe not. But, for sure, some obscure algorithm will use it to collect personal information about me or the person I tagged, and it will be more certain when it will suggest someone else to tag the same person in another image.

The ritual I have just described is so banal today that to describe it seems even more inane and predictable than to put it on stage. Yet, there lies one of the most interesting revolutions of this era of daily revolutions: the reinvention of photography. Every single gesture, in the sequence I described, contains a trace of this reinvention. The device that has been used is a phone: a non-photographic device, but which has a camera embedded in the hardware and a dedicated application installed in the software, among many others. The framing is verified on a screen, not through a viewfinder; and the photograph is registered on an SD card, not a film. Photo editing and distribution are options embedded in the same device: recorded as a digital file, the image is freely manipulable; and as a digital file, it can travel along with a whole host of information, such as tags and metadata. Some pieces of this amount of information has a specific social connotation: they serve to draw someone's attention, or to be readable by someone else; others are intended for other devices: search engines, facial recognition algorithms.

The artifact that this ritual produces is, for the most part, still recognizable as “photography”. It represents a fragment of reality according to the conventions of this medium. Even if it is liquid and malleable, it is rarely manipulated to the point of making reality unrecognizable, or to be confused with another type of image (an illustration, a drawing). The data that accompany it mostly maintain a discrete, marginal position, like a caption. Usually, it also preserves the mythological “noema” of photography: it exists to testify that something has been. That we went to that opening, that we bought that book, that we had fun on vacation, that we made popcorn that night. And yet, it is something intimately different: it is liquid and immaterial, it does not turn yellow; it is the result of a production tool that has incorporated the means of post-production into itself; it travels at the speed of light, it is replicable and ubiquitous, full of information, bearer of sociopolitical implications alien to photography as such.

This reinvention, of course, was not produced by the “phone” device and the advent of social networks as the privileged site of dispersion of the amateur photographic imagery, although these recent developments have contributed to making it precipitate and to making it, if possible, even more evident; but it was born much farther away, when photography was engulfed by the digital metamedium: the

computer.

The body snatcher of photography

In order to explain what happened to photography with the advent of digital, I often refer to a science-fiction classic: *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. In the film, directed by Don Siegel in 1956, the American town of Santa Mira falls victim to a strange alien invasion. Within huge pods, extraterrestrials evolve into perfect copies of human beings, which they replace after having eliminated them during sleep. The copies are completely similar to the originals, if not for a small but decisive difference: they are devoid of emotion.

Digital photography is the body snatcher of photography. Quietly arriving in the second half of the twentieth century, digital photography has discreetly replaced its analog counterpart, continually reaffirming the same promise: to be the same thing, just better. Over the years, digital photography has kept its promise in its entirety and for all, perfectly correcting its model, adopting its social function, and even keeping what Roland Barthes called its “noema” (1). Like the replicants in the movie, digital photography does not want to be anything different from what photography has always been, and it will probably continue to appear so to those who, like the incredulous interlocutors of the protagonist in the movie, refuse to take note of reality, preferring to think that we are faced with a natural evolution of the tools, or we are simply accelerating the technological development of a medium - photography - which, ever since its inception, has never ceased to evolve.

To the body snatcher, whose main desire is to be invisible in a self-conservative and potentially hostile environment, this attitude is more than fine: it pretends to be what it is not, and silently advances in its meticulous process of replacement.

Yet, as body snatchers are radically different from humans, so digital photography is radically different from its analog model. The difference is not in appearance, which is perfectly replicated: but in the substance of the two entities. In the movie, the radical alterity of aliens manifests itself in their absolute lack of emotions: if the human shell is faithfully reproduced, what is missing in the body snatcher is precisely the deep substance, that is, humanity. The deep substance of the body snatcher of photography lies in its digital being, and in everything that this implies in terms of production, post-production and circulation of the photographic image.

The digital metamedium

The term metamedium, referring to the computer, was introduced in 1977 in a text by engineer Alan Kay. Kay writes: “Although digital computers were originally designed to do arithmetic computation, the ability to simulate the details of any descriptive model means that the computer, viewed as a medium itself, can be *all* other media if the embedding and viewing methods are sufficiently well provided” (2). The concept is resumed a few decades later by media theorist Lev Manovich, who defines the computer a “universal media machine” and explains: “All existing media are translated into numerical data accessible for the computers. The result: graphics, moving images, sounds, shapes, spaces and text become computable, i.e. simply another set of computer data. In short, media becomes new media” (3).

The key here is in the translation process into numeric data, which we refer to with the term digitization. Produced by digital means or converted by scanning, from the moment in which it exists as a digital file, photography, like any other medium, has

two spectators: man and the computer. The first recognizes it as an artefact that is well-known to him: a photographic image. S/he can judge it on the basis of equally familiar factors, such as beauty, the outcome of the photographed subject, the truth of light and color, the quality of the image. The computer, for its own part, recognizes it as a reality that is just as much familiar to it: a long string of information in binary format. In this long string of 0 and 1, some pieces of information allow it to return the image as we see it, others instruct it on other decisive factors: the file format, the compression system, the program with which the image should be opened, the meta-information associated with the image at the time it was taken: time, day, place, device, etc.

These pieces of information distinguish this specific string of information from the countless other strings which a computer has to do with on an everyday basis: text files, audio and video, html pages, programs and so on. But, at a deep level, inaccessible to the common user, the computer continues to see our image, and to operate on it, for what it is: a sequence of information. After all, the new media mentioned by Manovich are nothing else than this: different media objects that share a common DNA, which makes them subject to the same rules, and above all to the same logic: the logic of the computer. "The logic of a computer can be expected to have a significant influence on the traditional cultural logic of media. That is, we may expect that the computer layer will affect the cultural layer. The ways in which computer models the world, represents data and allows us to operate on it; the key operations behind all computer programs (such as search, match, sort, filter); the conventions of HCI — in short, what can be called computer's ontology, epistemology and pragmatics — influence the cultural layer of new media: its organization, its emerging genres, its contents" (4).

In other words. The cultural artefact we call "photography" today lives in a limbo placed between "us" and "them", between man and machine. We are the agent of conservation: the one who uses the camera as s/he has always done, who interprets the digital image like any other image. The machine is the agent of innovation: the one that generates simulacra, body snatchers that are perfectly identical to the simulated reality on the surface, but with a completely different genetic code; the one that sees the simulacrum as such and that manipulates it on the genetic code level; the one that, cohabiting more and more with us, and acquiring an ever greater importance in our lives and in our way of communicating, is gradually transferring its logics - the computer layer - to our culture.

This is why photography has not substantially changed with the advent of digital technology. This is why we can continue to use it as we did in the mid-nineteenth century, or in the mid-twentieth century. That is why we continue to look at it as an "index", despite Photoshop: because we want it to be so. But, despite us, photography is irremediably changing - because, for the other main actor in the field, it is nothing but a string of bits, and its vision is gradually influencing ours.

In the continuation of this text, I will briefly analyze the works by some artists who, starting from this turning point, try to question themselves about what photography is today and how it relates to reality. Specifically, the works will be chosen to illustrate three crucial issues: post-production, the overabundance of photography, photography as a social device.

Post-production

Constant Dullaart is a Dutch artist whose work could be described as a rigorous

conceptual survey of the cultural, social and political-economic implications of devices. Among his most recent projects, *Balconism* (2014) is an essay and a series of images that reflect on the presence / absence position, the “in limine” attention-seeking behaviour in which social media place us; while *High Retention, Slow Delivery* (2014) is an online performance – documented by a video essay – that has seen him getting 2.5 million Instagram followers, and donating them to a personal selection of accounts linked to the art world as an act of “social media socialism”, which stigmatizes the process of self-mercification to which all, artists included, are subjected in the attempt of scaling internet's attention economy.

Coming from an education in photography, Dullaart has devoted a whole line of his work to investigating the implications of digital post-production softwares, and of the best-known among them: Photoshop. In *No Sunshine* (2009 - 2011), for example, Dullaart removes the sun from a series of sunset images found on Flickr, using the editing tools in a dysfunctional way, to erase the subject: the most conspicuous and decisive element, and what ultimately is the origin of the very existence of this image. In *Healing* (2010 - 2012), instead, he uses Photoshop's homonym tool – designed to “heal” the image from spots and grains of dust, making them disappear in the background – applying it, instead of to a detail, to the entire surface of the images: found photos of natural or human disasters, such as the Deepwater Horizon platform incident, which are literally healed, making them disappear in a generalized *blur* (5). In other works, through analogue techniques, using frosted glasses made on commission that he superimposes on photographic images, Dullaart emulates Photoshop's filters, which are in their turn digital emulations of physical effects, opening by doing so the re-mediation circle and turning it into an infinite loop. More recently, the artist has focused his attention on a real digital fetish he rediscovered in the first demo released by one of Photoshop's creators, John Knoll. *Jennifer in Paradise* represents John's girlfriend, and then wife, and is the first image known to have been “photoshopped”. After restoring it, Dullaart included an encrypted text in the image code, and used steganography to hide it in the printed version, where it can be made readable through the use of Black light. Furthermore, he subjected the picture to a series of variations, both in terms of format – from print to wallpaper – and of editing, applying deformation tools and filters (6). Almost thirty years after the advent of Photoshop, Dullaart seems to tell us that the photographic image has now become a liquid fetish to play with, and through which to experience the vertigo of re-mediations.

The overabundance of photography

All of Constant Dullaart's work dealing with photography has to do with the photography by others. After all, never as today, photography by others has been so present. It is the consequence, once again, of a peculiarity of digital media - well described by the English word *shareability* - taken to the extreme by the implementation of the means of production and distribution in a single device, the smartphone. Sharing, despite all its implications in terms of intellectual property and privacy, has now become an almost thoughtless and spontaneous gesture; and the advent of the cloud, which – promising a controlled and protected sharing space – invites us to consider a server as the default storage location of our files, can only make this situation even more problematic.

From the mountain of Flickr images installed by Erik Kessels at FOAM, Amsterdam in 2011, to the photographic books by Joachim Schmid, to the collections by

Penelope Umbrico, there are numerous recent projects that work on the superabundance of photography. But *The Others*, by Eva and Franco Mattes (2011) still remains peculiar. In fact, the 10,000 photographs of this slideshow have been unintentionally shared, due to an error in the configuration of a peer-to-peer program, and stolen by the artists from the owners' computer. Neither at the time of the theft, nor in that of compiling the video, the artists have put in place any selection process, merely taking and using entire folders of photographs. The only freedom they allowed themselves was that of varying the rhythm of the slideshow accordingly to the soundtrack – mostly, covers of more or less known pop songs, found on the same computers – and to their interest in the images. Following the narration, we are gradually captured not only by the lives of others, but also by their relationship with the photographic medium. Unlike image sets made consciously public through social networks and sharing platforms, these do not aim at constructing a public portrait of their owners; the lack of selection, both from the author of the photos and from the one of the theft, leads the viewer to be a witness of intimate shots, moments of exploration of the body and self-knowledge, failed attempts, a few seconds apart, to capture a moving subject, blurry photos and bad shots. But, precisely because of this authenticity, the story reaches levels of intensity that could not have been obtained otherwise: which also leads the viewer's attitude to shift, from initial disapproval of the unauthorized appropriation of private material, to voyeuristic pleasure and gratitude that comes to the end of an unprecedented aesthetic experience.

Photography as a social device

Realised in 2011, *The Others* could soon be read as a time capsule that preserves a condition in which the notions of “private” and “theft” still make sense. Social networks are increasingly making us accustomed to an idea of photography as a social device, an emanation of ourselves destined to activate and consolidate relationships, to solicit feedback, to subject itself to the indiscriminate use operated by our spectators – both human and algorithmic. As the artist Brad Troemel notes, the value of an online image is determined on the basis of its circulation (7). This mechanism, however, is not functional only to self-promotion and to the definition of a public “self”. In the *Dronestagram* project (2012 - in progress), British artist James Bridle uses it as an unprecedented means to enhance and disseminate information that would otherwise remain inaccessible to most people, and to systematically violate the low visibility pursued by military and security apparatuses (8). *Dronestagram* is an Instagram account that currently counts more than 15,000 followers, connected to a Twitter account and a Tumblr blog that further expand the dissemination and follow-up possibilities. The information that *Dronestagram* reveals are those related to drones attacks in the Middle East, which Bridle finds in the Boureau of Investigative Journalism reports. The reduced visibility of these news is linked not only to their lack of interest for the Western public, but also to their lack of legibility both in textual and visual terms: that of drone attacks is a war front that is not documented by traditional photojournalism. Bridle replaces it by locating and photographing the locations of the attack on Google Earth, and publishing these images on Instagram with a brief textual commentary that makes the news accessible and public, in a gesture that could be defined as “armchair photojournalism”. And it also redeems Google Earth, a global surveillance device, enhancing its potential for democratic access to information.

Notes

- (1) Barthes Roland, *La chambre claire*, Paris, 1980
- (2) Kay Alan, Goldberg Adele, "Personal Dynamic Media", 1977. In Noah Wardrip-Fruin, Nick Montfort (edited by), *The New Media Reader*, The MIT Press, Cambridge – London 2003, pp. 393 – 394
- (3) Manovich Lev, *The Language of New Media*, MIT Press, Cambridge – London 2001
- (4) Ivi, p. 69
- (5) Cfr. Quaranta Domenico, "Healing the Media", Exhibition brochure, Fabio Paris Art Gallery, Brescia, April 2012
- (6) An online version of the project is the website *Jennifer in Photoshop* (2014), online at the link <http://jennifer.ps/>
- (7) Troemel Brad, "Art after Social Media", in *New York Magazine of Contemporary Art and Theory*, Issue 06, online at the link http://ny-magazine.org/PDF/06.07.EN_Art_After_Social_Media.pdf
- (8) Cfr. Bridle James, "Dronestagram: The Drone's-Eye View", in "Booktwo", 8 November 2012