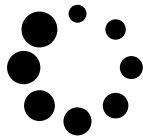


AN-ICON



More than Spectators, Visionaries

by Laura Marcolini

Socializing Interactivity
Space of Relationship
Point of Being
Intersubjectivity
Unthought

AN-ICON

Studies in Environmental Images

Issue №2 Year 2024

→ Liberty on Parole? Challenges
in Interactivity

Edited by Pietro Montani
and Andrea Pinotti

More than Spectators, Visionaries¹



LAURA MARCOLINI, Studio Azzurro

Abstract

The paper aims to highlight theoretical reflections and project implications about technological interactivity within the artistic research of Studio Azzurro, setting them in a constellation of relations and affinities with the context of reference.

The distinctiveness of the Milan-based collective, founded in 1982, has been shaped around the concept of “socializing interactivity.” This phenomenon stems from a design process that involves a constant negotiation between narratives, space, bodies and technologies, conceived as a system of relationships mediated by “natural interfaces.”

The study traces the roots of this placement back to the counter-information experiences of the 1970s and the intersection with the experimental theatre of the 1980s, evolving through the language of cinema and video. At the same time, Studio Azzurro research remains constantly focused on the physical and sensitive properties of space, objects, bodies (both real and virtual), and the potentialities of montage – understood both as video editing and as spatial dramaturgy.

The paper finally considers the socio-political implications of this form of art, bringing the attention on the

¹ See W. Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations: essays and reflections* (1955) (New York: Schocken Books, 2007): 253-264.

creation of “spaces of relationships” that foster community and intersubjectivity.

This investigation situates Studio Azzurro’s contributions within the broader context of technological interactivity and its potential to reshape human experience and communication.

Keywords Socializing Interactivity Space of Relationship
 Point of Being Intersubjectivity
 Unthought

To quote this essay: L. Marcolini, “More than Spectators, Visionaries,” *AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images* [ISSN 2785-7433] 3, no. 2 (2024): 97-130, <https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/25154>.

In this contribution, I have attempted to gather some reflections on Italian artists who pioneered the use of technologies that led to VR and the technological interactivity as we know them today. They sound like early insights into urgent issues of our time, which have accompanied the research of Studio Azzurro from its beginning. Founded by Fabio Cirifino, Paolo Rosa and Leonardo Sangiorgi, the Milanese artistic collective has worked towards the definition of “narration formats” that integrate technological advancements while maintaining a strong emphasis on montage in physical space. This approach allowed them to situate themselves in continuity and dialogue with art historical formats, never abandoning the idea of being responsible for a legacy that cannot be elided or lightly dismissed. The artists’ reflections from the 1990s, which focused on the socializing and re-sensitizing potential of certain forms of technological interactivity, still seem relevant today. Indeed, in the era of acceleration and entangled complexities we are living in, these may have even gained in significance, as the impact and reach of these technologies have grown more extensive and pervasive. The perspective I here intend to suggest, given my involvement with Studio Azzurro, can be seen both as a tribute to those artists and thinkers who began questioning the early signs of an epochal change, and as an exercise of memory through which I observe the current state of things. It is an attempt to look forward while glancing back, to avoid being swept away by this “storm” that irresistibly propels us into the future, to quote a well-known passage from Walter Benjamin.²

2 See W. Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations: essays and reflections* (1955) (New York: Schocken Books, 2007): 253-264.

The artwork as a party (?)

Ordered not according to the rules of the “cinematographic spectacle,” the exhibited material is an opportunity to reflect on a partial but significant fragment of a reality, such as that of youth, shattered and in search of new references; an active documentation, neither impartial nor predetermined, whose final processing is up to the viewer. Studio Azzurro, from the synopsis of *Facce di festa*, 1979-1980.³

With these words, Studio Azzurro presented its first production, *Facce di festa*, in 1980. The movie burst into the territory of cinema with the strength of an artistic manifesto, invading that “inhabitable space” that lies outside the filmic frame to invest the audience’s body and cognition. What is reported here is a programmatic declaration: the “spectacle” and its rules are rejected, there is mention of “exhibited material,” “active documentation” and of a “final production” that “the viewer” is called to perform. The word “spectator” is carefully avoided, and the semantic field of fragmentation is emphasized to describe the disposition that moves the authors’ young peers, the movie’s protagonists.

In 1979, a party is organized at a friend’s house, overtly to shoot the movie. The filming is carried out with hand-held cameras, two hidden fixed cameras, enacting a Reikian-style⁴ interview workshop, which takes place in the house vault with the footage played back in a control monitor so that the interviewees can see themselves as they answer questions such as: “What part of your body do you associate your name with?” or “How did you prepare to come to the party?” In short, a

3 All quotations from Studio Azzurro e Paolo Rosa are based on the consultation of Studio Azzurro Archive and translated by the author.

4 In reference to the theories and practices related to bioenergetics and body psychotherapy of Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957).

real self-exposure device installed in a place designed for protection (namely, the vault).

Upstairs the party goes on, people look down the stairs into the basement, and wait for their turn. They lie, rebelling against the questions; but not too much. They unwittingly stage a rampant sense of confusion, proof of



Fig. 1 – Studio Azzurro, *Facce di festa*, 1979-80, still from film, courtesy the Artist.

the definitive waning of ideological references, which are being replaced by a glittering individualistic component. The party comes to an end and the movie's finale shows a slow trickle into the backstage, starting with the image of a Polaroid camera abandoned on a table with the evening's leftovers. Only then do we realize that it is as if we had been watching a movie on a projection's screen for the whole time. We hear a rhythmic whirr. The camera pans back, and we see the projector, we see the artists' heads as they sit in the dark, ironically commenting on their own movie: "The mass is a spongy referent." At this point, the camera brings on stage the backstage from different points of view: it is the eye (a *Kino-Eye*?)⁵ of another person observing the artists, a curious subject moving among them. It is easy for the spectator to identify themselves with that

5 Reference to the movie *Kinoglaz* (1924) by Dziga Vertov, which I will return to later.

gaze. The movie's surface becomes unstable. The projection moves, sliding across the wall to the floor, between the artists' feet, then on their faces and then onto a screen. With an unexpected reverse shot, we find ourselves in front of the artists, but the projection is still in favor of the curious subject (in "our" favor). We hear a voiceover: "And the director? I'd like to know who my director is?"⁶ The camera moves further away: a set appears, the ambient lights of a studio turn on; it is the same studio that appeared at the beginning of the movie.

The movie with its structure and its editing hints at the *presence of another space*. A space where these remediations and their authors move, and where – a few years later – the viewer will also be able to walk. It is an "off-screen" space, which lies outside of our attention focus, in its apparent emptiness and lack of informations. However, something significant springs out of it: it generates connections. It is a "space of thought"⁷ and of *emerging relationships*.⁸ Almost twenty years ago, Pietro Montani (2005) already warned us about the eminently political implications of the "off-screen:"

We will realize that these images [...] talk to us about their aptitude to correlate with an out-field requiring an open community of interpreter/users who must, in their turn, have both the technical

6 The voice-over is by Leonardo Sangiorgi.

7 I am referring to that "space in between" (*Zwischenraum*), which was very dear to Aby Warburg and in his writings is also mentioned as the "space of thought" (*Denkraum*), namely an intermediate world that can also become a source. Victoria Cirlot spread on two terms in "engramma," 151: V. Cirlot, "Zwischenraum/Denkraum. Oscillazioni terminologiche nelle Introduzioni dell'Atlante di Aby Warburg (1929) e Ernst Gombrich (1937)," *La Rivista di Engramma* 151 (2017): 121-146, https://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=3341, accessed July 14, 2024.

8 A "relational space" was also mentioned by Paolo Fabbri in conversation with Paolo Rosa (2012); as he noted the technologies used for sensitive *environments* "make the pronoun shift from *you* to the *we*." See the recording of "Conversation between Paolo Fabbri and Paolo Rosa," held on the occasion of the presentation of the book P. Fabbri, P. Rosa, *L'arte fuori di sé*, filmed 2012 at Gambalunga Library, Rimini: "Paolo Fabbri e Paolo Rosa su L'arte fuori di sé," vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/425833126>, accessed May 29, 2024.

and political (political as technical, and *vice versa*) to make it theirs and re-articulate it responsibly.⁹

The information gathered around Studio Azzurro's first production points out the origins of the group's research on interactivity, which is marked by a tension that combines technology with the investigation of visual languages¹⁰ carried out by the artists in the 1970s.¹¹ Rather than driven by technological evolution, this research emerged as an intrinsic need to reclaim the ability to communicate poetically through expressive languages, without falling prey to the distortions of mass media communication, with its passive frontality and its shift towards a seemingly immediate expression, facilitated by the "real-time" capabilities of video.¹²

The opening words of *Facce di festa* echo the militant tones of the 1970s, directly addressing the audience to ask them to reactivate *their* imagination within the

9 P. Montani, "Prolegomeni a una politica sull'immagine elettronica," in F. Bernardelli, L. Fusi, P. Montani, eds., *Guardami: Percezione del video* (Prato, Siena: Gli ori, Palazzo delle Papesse centro artecontemporanea, 2005): 38.

10 On the use of video in the 1970s, Valentina Valentini's survey (1996) is instructive: "Video was at the same time a medium that, in Italy, feminist movements and counter-cultural and counter-informational political groups took possession of, in a participatory function and for activating processes of socialisation and collective identification. In the 1970s, it was the medium of widespread creativity that fuelled the myth of the transformation of the spectator into the operator, because it favoured immediate contact and triggered interactive processes. Its effectiveness was measured pragmatically by the intensity of the involvement it was able to arouse in the context in which it intervened," in V. Valentini, "Il video in Italia: genio e sregolatezza," *Visibilità zero. Immagini in movimento. Arte elettronica* (Rome: Gangemi, 1996): 10.

11 The *Fabbrica di comunicazione* opened in San Carpoforo in 1976. At the moment of transition between the 1970s and 1980s, the call for the active participation of the spectator as co-author, as "spect-author" and then also "spect-actor" was already one of the sensitive themes of the newly-born Studio Azzurro. It presents itself as a poetic and at the same time peremptorily political tension and is accompanied by the ostentation of the television as a medium, or rather as a "remedial" household appliance, disconnected from the antenna of the television networks, used as a control monitor just like in the workshops of the previous years.

12 In fact, Studio Azzurro will work extensively on this "real time" quality of video, especially in its later theatrical and installation works. See Studio Azzurro and Giorgio Barberio Corsetti's *Vedute (quell tale non sta mai fermo)*, which, from a site-specific video installation designed for Palazzo Fortuny (Venice, 1985) was transformed into a theatrical performance after the venue closed to the public the day after the opening. Also relevant to this discourse are the two performances where the artists experimented with the invention of the so-called "double scene," namely *Prologo a un diario segreto contraffatto* (first presented in Rome, Teatro La Piramide, 1985) and *La camera astratta*, (first presented at Documenta VIII, Kassel, 1987). For more informations, see the volume curated by Studio Azzurro, G. B. Corsetti, *La camera astratta, tre spettacoli tra teatro e video* (Milan: Ubulibri, 1988).

folds of a seemingly established language; to ask *them* to *complete* the narrative.¹³ The movie is filled with metalinguistic devices. The story, however, is very simple. It is a party, observed in the making, with wide shots of the surroundings and closed shots of certain details: situations, faces, gestures, objects and traces that people leave behind. The party is shown as a contemporary ritual, the quintessential space of socialization, where personal and cultural habits are unveiled.

Last year (2023), on the occasion of a symposium, art historian Lidia Decandia referred to the creation of MATer Museum (Museum of Archaeology and Territory) in Mamoiada (Sardinia) – which was undertaken by Studio Azzurro with a significant participation from the local residents – saying: “The work was a party.”¹⁴ The community’s involvement was genuine and active, and because of this, the project tapped into a reservoir of traces and memories scattered throughout the territory, turning it into “a place where the present is renewed in a flash.” After all, the party is the place of *commoning*, from the Latin *cum-munus*.

At the same conference, Pietro Montani commented on Studio Azzurro’s artistic format of *Portatori di storie* (*Story Bearers*), where the visitor’s hand can call upon life-sized projected characters, as if stopping them on the

13 A few years later, in 1984, the first synchronized video-environment by Studio Azzurro, namely *Il Nuotatore (va troppo spesso ad Heidelberg)*, was presented as “a large electronic montage-box to be read through its synchronies and out-of-phases, to be imagined through its gaps, to be practiced with one’s own movements” as written in a presentation found in Studio Azzurro Archive. In a handwritten note by Paolo Rosa, found in 2023 in Studio Azzurro’s archive, we read: “The intention is [to generate] an imaginative involvement of the audience to fill empty intervals, an interpretative solicitation of segments of events that evoke hypothetical situations.” Translation by the author.

14 Lidia Decandia during the symposium designed around the volume Studio Azzurro, *Portatori di storia. Portatori di storie* (Milan: Mimesis, 2023) entitled *Le immagini e le storie. Riflessioni sull’arte contemporanea a partire dalle esperienze di narrazione di Studio Azzurro* (curated by Francesca Pola and promoted by the European Research Centre in History and Theory of the Image -ICONE, in collaboration with Studio Azzurro), was held at University Vita-Salute San Raffaele’s congress venue of Palazzo Arese Borromeo (Cesano Maderno, MB), between November 10-11, 2023. Conference proceedings will be available in 2025, published by Mimesis, in the ICONE serie.

street.¹⁵ He stated that in the “substitute spaces” generated by these *sensible environments*¹⁶ there is an act of welcoming (an offering), and seizing (an opportunity) that creates a relational initiative.¹⁷ This is where the *cum-munus* begins, which is also the foundation, or the “matrix” of ethics.¹⁸ Similarly, Vittorio Gallese, defining the characteristics of the same format from a neuroscientific perspective, stated that these artworks function “as mediators of intersubjectivity.” These points will be revisited later, as they are essential for understanding Studio Azzurro’s practice and its development over more than forty years.

Against the clock (In controtempo)

The statement about *Facce di festa* which opens this article is a sharp stance against the spectacle-oriented nature of expressive forms at the beginning of the 1980s. On the other hand, it anticipates a tension toward the experiential dimension, which spectacularization itself has appropriated, deeply distorting its meaning. Ten years after the movie, at the beginning of the 1990s, technologies that definitively dematerialized images became accessible, pushing towards a new territory of experimentation. The warning about the “spectacle” further

15 *Portatori di storie (Story Bearers)* is the name given to a group of artworks that Studio Azzurro has treated as a true format, with its variations. Studio Azzurro has been creating this format since the early 2000s in geographical areas with strong socio-anthropological connotations, or within communities united by unique characteristics. These are namely contexts and communities threatened by oblivion, or erasure, which, through the gathering of stories presented in a “sensitive” (meaning interactive) environment, can be passed on and preserved for the future.

16 In the artist’s vocabulary, the term denotes interactive video installations, marking the assumption of a precise position that I will refer to below.

17 P. Montani, *Che cosa significa “portare” una storia? La parola negli ambienti sensibili di Studio Azzurro*, presentation held on the occasion of the symposium *Le immagini e le storie* (Cesano Maderno, Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele – Palazzo Arese Borromeo, November 10-11, 2023). Conference proceedings will be available in 2025, published by Mimesis, in the ICONE serie.

18 Although the “matrix” of the work – meaning the software that manages the environment’s reactions to the actions and presence of the audience – is not altered, it is important to point that it influences a “matrix” of a different *nature*. This matrix pertains to sensitivity and the ability to discover and experiment with variations in one’s habitual reactions, and behaviors that have become hardened or routinized.

expands, anticipating the possibility of explicitly involving viewers through forms of technological interactivity, as Antonio Caronia (2006) recalls:

Between the late 1980s and early 1990s, during the successful but brief era of virtual reality (VR), there was a certain enthusiasm for the communicative innovations of this new immersive and interactive technology. The “objectual” immediacy of VR environments and their absolute manipulability led many to believe that McLuhan’s prophecy about the “Pentecostal” nature of electric and electronic communication was coming true.¹⁹

By only remaining in the Milanese context, in 1993 Mario Canali with the group Correnti Magnetiche, was developing forms of VR comparable to what we now call “VR headsets.” Studio Azzurro, on the other hand, “took a period of reflection during which they slowed down productions and gathered the results of their first ten years of activity with an exhibition dedicated to their “video environments.”²⁰ This exhibition was held in Milan at the Fondazione Mudima (late 1992) and included, among other works, also two pieces (*Il giardino delle cose* and *Il viaggio*, the latter exhibited there for the first time), which addressed the theme of “visibility”²¹ and the memory of “objects.” These

19 A. Caronia, *L'inconscio della macchina, ovvero: come catturare il significante fluttuante* (Milan, Mimesis 2006), <https://www.pulplibri.it/linconscio-della-macchina-e-altri-scritti/>, accessed June 30, 2024. Translation by the author.

20 *Exhibition Studio Azzurro: Videoambienti 1982-1992*, Milan, Fondazione Mudima (December 10, 1992-January 31, 1993). About the exhibition see: “Archivio attività,” Mudima, <https://www.mudima.net/archivio-attivita-dal-1989/>, accessed June 15, 2024. A monographic issue of the periodical *Bullshit 6* (December 1992), was published for the occasion.

Fondazione Mudima, in Milan, via Tadino, is an exhibition and meeting space, directed by Gino Di Maggio, it hosts and supports international artists, including the protagonists of the Fluxus movement.

21 There is an immediate reference to Italo Calvino’s *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, from a few years earlier (1988), where the writer asks a crucial question about the ability to imagine and see with one’s eyes closed. See I. Calvino, *Lezioni americane* (Turin: Einaudi, 2002): 103-104. In this regard, Andrea Balzola and Paolo Rosa write: “When Italo Calvino suggests, based on his own experience and personal narrative style, to follow certain rules for writing (lightness, quickness, exactness, visibility, multiplicity), he does not intend to provide manual-like prescriptions. Instead, he offers coordinates for a journey that will always be unique, but with the awareness that navigation maps exist, and that the sea and the wind have precise rules that must be reckoned with,” in A. Balzola, P. Rosa, *L’arte fuori di sé*: 40.

works employed technologies that Paolo Rosa often referred to as remnants of military research, namely thermal and X-ray cameras, which became a means to explore the limits of human vision, questioning the close relationship between sight and touch. This was a genuine premonition of Studio Azzurro's forthcoming research on non-prosthetic tactility, expanded through the use of sensors "domesticated" by programming.

It is fair to point out that Studio Azzurro never carried out experimentation on VR, but developed research that continues to privilege the "real" physical space – the space alluded to in the montage of *Facce di festa* – , planning to "augment" it through the incursion of stories that transfigure its coordinates, its orientation system.²² I write "continue to privilege" because ever since that hint in *Facce di festa* and then in the video environments,²³ Studio Azzurro always directed its research at a space where stories can actually lay and happen, and at the forces field that is predisposed for the audience. Even in their theatre productions of the 1980s, the artists insisted on the expansion of the stage towards the backstage; namely, on the possibility of crossing its boundaries and giving us virtual access to the portion of space and presences that we would otherwise not be able to see.²⁴ All of this thanks to video as medium.²⁵ The invention of the so-called "double scene" brings the trick of that movie into the field of theatre and brings the backstage onto the stage, crossing the threshold

22 The issue of orientation is a recurring theme in Studio Azzurro's design thinking and often translates visually in the presence of an horizon, and conceptually in the metaphor of navigation at sea, with its semantic range.

23 *Videoambienti / video environments* is a Studio Azzurro definition to indicate what are normally called video installations, emphasising the attention to space and its habitability, the not exclusively frontal fruition they determine, the invitation to exploration they arouse in the spectator.

24 This item characterises the aforementioned video-theatre performances *Vedute (quel tale non sta mai fermo)*, 1985, *Prologo a diario segreto contraffatto* (1985) and *La camera astratta* (1987), that Studio Azzurro realized with Giorgio Barberio Corsetti.

25 On the intersectionality of research between cinema, theater, and video in the first 10 years of Studio Azzurro, it's indispensable to know the conversation with V. Valentini, "Temi e figure nell'universo estetico di Studio Azzurro," in V. Valentini, ed., *Studio Azzurro. Percorsi tra video, cinema e teatro* (Milan: Electa, 1995): 105.

between the authors' domain and the area reserved for elaboration and preparation. Underlying this choice evidently is the aspiration to create environments (whether in a movie, a theatre or a video installation) where people not only encounter a story and are invited to imagine something anew, but where they also meet the space of the so-called author and are engaged as active agents of the work itself. As Valentina Valentini wrote back in 1988 "Those who are watching, are also at risk of seeing nothing and not recognising the possibility for the spectators to occupy the empty place that is the performance, where instead of a container of things, they find the open, the movement."²⁶

In other words, a space where this engagement is *not* one-on-one and invites multiple participants in a protected, intuitive dimension. Here, they can move freely, encounter the stories, and engage with the work as well as other people who inhabit it, although temporarily.

I do not know whether these aspects can be considered as a specific form of interactivity today, but I believe they should be. This is not only because neuroscientific research has shown us how significantly the brain-body is engaged both in front of a movie and in a physical space,²⁷ but also because it is increasingly clear – especially in the design of multimodal and intermedial museums and artworks – that we cannot allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the "collapse of context." On the contrary, we must insist on designing environments in which the context is the precondition to welcoming our "co-authors" so that they may feel naturally engaged in the experience, and not

26 V. Valentini, "Lo spazio interiore," in Studio Azzurro, G. B. Corsetti, *La camera astratta, tre spettacoli tra teatro e video* (Milan, Ubulibri 1988): 78.

27 V. Gallese, M. Guerra, eds., *The Empathic Screen: Cinema and Neuroscience* (2015), trans. F. Anderson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); S. Robinson, V. Gallese, "Dialogue between Sarah Robinson and Vittorio Gallese," *Intertwining* 1 (2018), https://www.academia.edu/37134702/Intervista_su_Architettura_e_Neuroscienze_con_Sarah_Robinson, accessed June 30, 2024.

challenged by agonistic or procedural devices.²⁸ The collapse of context is one of the most dangerous prospects we face, as it foresees an almost total inability to understand each other outside of very narrow “niches.”

In 1990 the performance *Delfi. Studio per voce, suono, video e buio* is presented in Parma. It pushes the affordances of the “double scene” to the extreme, making the backstage coincide with the stage itself. However, it only allows the audience to see it through the mediation of monitors that broadcast live footage from unknown sources. The stage, in fact, is plunged in the darkness.

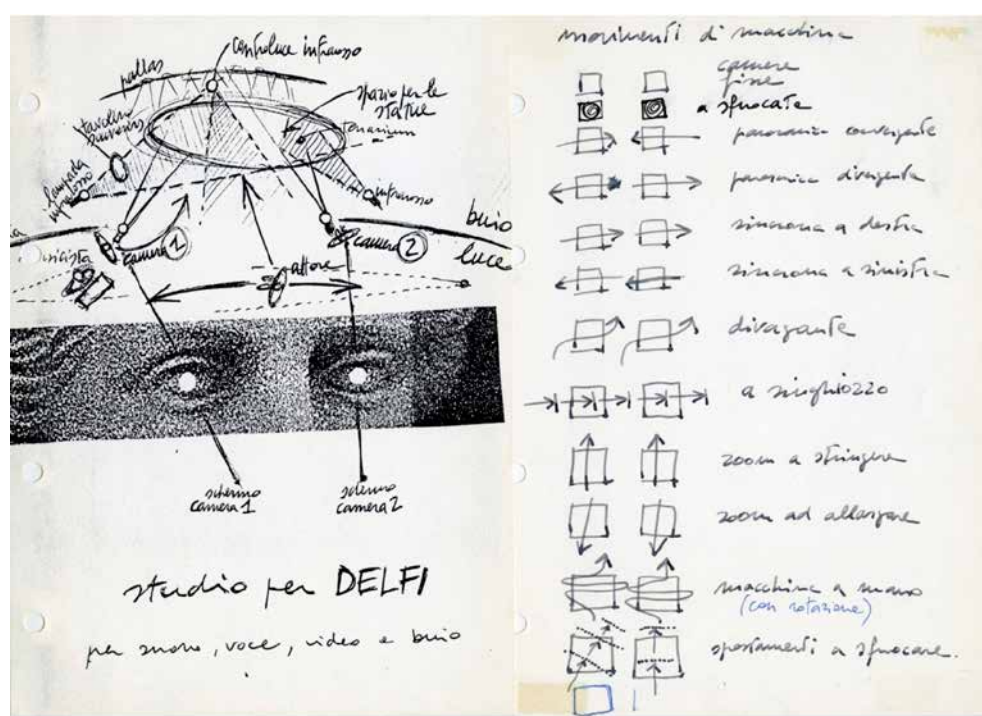


Fig. 2 – P. Rosa (Studio Azzurro), *Delfi*, 1990, project sketch, courtesy of the Artist.

Delfi is a radical exploration of visibility that introduces the theme of tactility in virtual presence at an early stage. It involves spectators immersed in the almost total darkness of a theater whose stage is populated by

28 It may sound far-fetched, but the commercial push of certain technological apparatuses (we deliberately avoid using the term “device” here) encouraged by open calls for museum projects, as well as a certain types of cancel culture, appear as the byproduct of a phenomenon of self-defence. Namely, a defensive mechanism against the excess of inputs we receive from the world (context) that comes from the difficulty of processing them. This phenomenon not only concerns our experiences on Social Networks, but also impacts our everyday lives, in these and other simpler forms. What Studio Azzurro is trying to foster is precisely an opposite cognitive motion. The expansion of possibilities, the crossing of the “membranes” that separate “niches.” Not an invasion but the premise for a connection – or even osmosis – between zones of different sensitivity.

classical statues and archaeological fragments that remain invisible until – in the end – they are hit by the light. The audience is unaware of these imposing white presences, though they see their details displayed on two cathode ray tube monitors positioned at the front of the stage like large, luminous eyes. A beam of light cut across the stage, where a young Moni Ovadia moves in and out of the darkness while performing a timeless text by Yannis Ritsos.²⁹ The darkness makes the space of the audience less discernible from the stage. In the large dark room the light comes out of the eyes of a large invisible face that looks right at the audience. The stage is that questioning face. "Who is the director?," seems to echo ten years later.

Finding the words (as well)

In January 1993, after the exhibition *Videoambientali 1982-1992* at Fondazione Mudima, the same institution hosted a discussion during which the *Materials for a Manifesto of Art and Communication in the Virtual Age* were first collected. This symposium was curated by Mario Canali, Antonio Caronia, Gino Di Maggio, Antonio Glessi, Maria Grazia Mattei, Paolo Rosa and Giacomo Verde and led to the identification of five key points:

- **EVENTUALITY:** Art is a process not an outcome;
- **COLLECTIVE AUTHOR:** New technologies revive the possibility and necessity of a collective artistic process;
- **INTERACTIVITY:** involvement and participation of the viewer in a creative relationship with the technological artwork;
- **VIRTUALITY:** a new expressive and communicative dimension materializes the moments of design and creation of the work,

29 Y. Ritsos, *Delphi. La sonata al chiaro di luna* (Milan: Crocetti Editore, 2012).

dematerializing or fluidifying formal supports, disciplinary genres, and linguistic codes;

■ **PLURISENSORIALITY:** new interactive technologies tend to overcome sensory fragmentation and audiovisual primacy in the direction of a synaesthetic experience.³⁰

In his notes, Paolo Rosa wrote down some thoughts that he later resumed together with Andrea Balzola – who also participated in the 1993 conference at Fondazione Mudima – for their joint publication, *L'arte fuori di sé. Un manifesto per l'età post-tecnologica (Art Beyond Itself: A Manifesto for the Post-Technological Age)*:³¹

After an initial cohesion suggesting the birth of an artistic movement, significant differences in approach to the research material began to surface, leading to the group's dispersion. This creative and theoretical ferment, regardless of the extent of its public exposure, immediately demonstrated that the novelty and complexity of virtual and interactive technologies demanded a collective approach to both artistic practice and theoretical elaboration, requiring the interweaving of different skills, expertise, and visions. In essence, "Virtual Reality" introduced a new way of thinking and creating art, the emergence of "a participatory work," of a "collective author," of what we would call a plural artist.³²

Within three years, in 1995 – also thanks to Stefano Roveda's expertise³³ – Studio Azzurro conceived

30 On Giacomo Verde's website the full text of the discussion is available under the title *Per una nuova cartografia del reale (For a new cartography of the real)*: M. Canali, A. Caronia, G. Di Maggio, A. Glessi, M. G. Mattei, P. Rosa, G. Verde, "Per una nuova cartografia del reale. Testo base di discussione per l'assemblea svoltasi alla Fondazione Mudima di Milan il 14 gennaio 1993," Verdegiaac, <https://www.verdegiaac.org/teorie/cartogra.htm>, accessed June 9, 2024.

31 A. Balzola, P. Rosa, *L'arte fuori di sé*. The publication is currently only available in Italian, therefore all following quotations are proposed by the author of this article.

32 Ibid.: 49-50.

33 Stefano Roveda joined in the group until 2011.

and realized their first seven interactive artworks,³⁴ which they defined as sensitive environments. Viewed from the perspective of bringing the public closer through working on vision and interaction devices, it becomes clearer what path Studio Azzurro has taken during that epochal shift that allowed images to drop off on any surface, at any scale, without the constraint of a monitor and with the ability to respond to human presence. Since the naming of things actively contributes to the redefinition of the world through a transforming language, the urgency to *name* these new “complex artifacts” indicates a desire to emphasize a poetic rather than technological realm of reference.

The ethical function of art acts not so much in being a communicative vehicle of ethical thought, but in being capable of generating language from things, materials, tools and technologies, since it is in language that the patterns of human experience and the possibility of reflecting on it are drawn.³⁵

On closer inspection, it is a matter of seeking names for a *latent imagery*. And this particular name, which attributes a characteristic *of the living* to an assemblage of space, light, objects, machines, sensors and living presences, shifts the focus from the technological apparatus to the relationship it can *contribute to* with an “intercepted interaction”³⁶ within a complex ecosystem. A relationship

34 All presented together in 1998 at the exhibition curated by Maria Grazia Mattei, *Interattività*, the fourth edition of *Progetto Tecnoarte* for the Biennale Arte-Tecnologia at CERP-Rocca Paolina Arti Visive Contemporanee, in Perugia. See the catalogue M.G. Mattei, ed., *Interattività. Studio Azzurro opere tra partecipazione e osservazione. Progetto Tecnoarte 1998* (Perugia: Fondazione Umbria Spettacolo, 1999).

35 A. Balzola. P. Rosa P., *L'arte fuori di sé*: 49-50.

36 This is the formula used by Paolo Rosa to distinguish natural from technological interaction.

that involves subjects of different *natures* acting within the same *field*.³⁷

Perhaps it is no coincidence that exactly in the same years of the research around *Tavoli (perché queste mani mi toccano)* – the first *sensitive environment* by Studio Azzurro using a *natural interface*³⁸ – the so-called “mirror neurons” were first identified in Parma. This discovery was later developed by Vittorio Gallese³⁹ into the theory of Simulation and Embodied Cognition. Meanwhile, at the conference (1995) titled *ARTE + SCIENZA*,⁴⁰ Paolo Rosa was exploring the concept of “socializing interactivity”. It seemed to be one of those historical moments where something flashes and synchronizes, generating a shared tension in fields that only appear to be distant. The insights into these early experimental results in science and art carry with them an urgency to understand, investigate, and ultimately promote the realm of *intersubjectivity* that Vittorio Gallese has long emphasized. A pressing and anticipatory question, which today becomes increasingly critical in the

37 This kind of assemblage today resonates with N. Katherine Hayles’ theory of *Cognitive Assemblage and the Unthought*, exposed in N. Hayles, *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious* (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

38 *Natural interface* is another fundamental formula introduced in the 1990s to indicate the programmatic choice of using surfaces, objects, and everyday gestures as triggers for their interactive systems. The artists carefully and intentionally avoid buttons, mice, or keyboards (both physical and virtual) to avoid another type of “trigger,” namely the recognition of a technical procedure aimed at “achieving something.” *Natural interfaces*, in addition to warding off technical enthusiasm, are excellent allies in activating unprecedented forms of synesthesia, a crucial process for re-sensitizing the viewer. The expression is not completely overlapping with the more recently used NUI (Natural User Interface). Regarding the concept of interface, it is enlightening to consult Internet archive, erewhon.ticonuno: G. Anceschi, “Ergonomia cognitiva. Convegno di studi su La Filosofia del Web. Tempo e connessione: i fondamenti dell’ipertestualità tra ermeneutica e decostruzione,” Web Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080502034225/http://erewhon.ticonuno.it/riv/rete/filodelweb/convegno.htm>, accessed May 25, 2024.

39 Already in 2003, Vittorio Gallese wrote: “Much of what happens in our interpersonal relationships would be the result of the ability to create a ‘us-centred’ that we can share with others. The creation of this shared space would be the result of the activity of ‘embodied simulation’,” in V. Gallese, “La molteplice natura delle relazioni interpersonali: la ricerca di un comune meccanismo neurofisiologico,” *Networks* 1 (2003): 24-47. Translated by the author.

40 P. Rosa in *ARTE + SCIENZA. I mutamenti indotti dalle Nuove Tecnologie nell’Arte Contemporanea* (Accademia di Brera, Milan, 1995). The recordings of the conference are available at: P. Rosa, “Parolo Rosa (I) *Interattività socializzante,” Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30CCoVgCqlw>, accessed May 25, 2024.

face of the rising virtualized forms of sociality that we all inhabit daily in our “crowded solitudes.”⁴¹

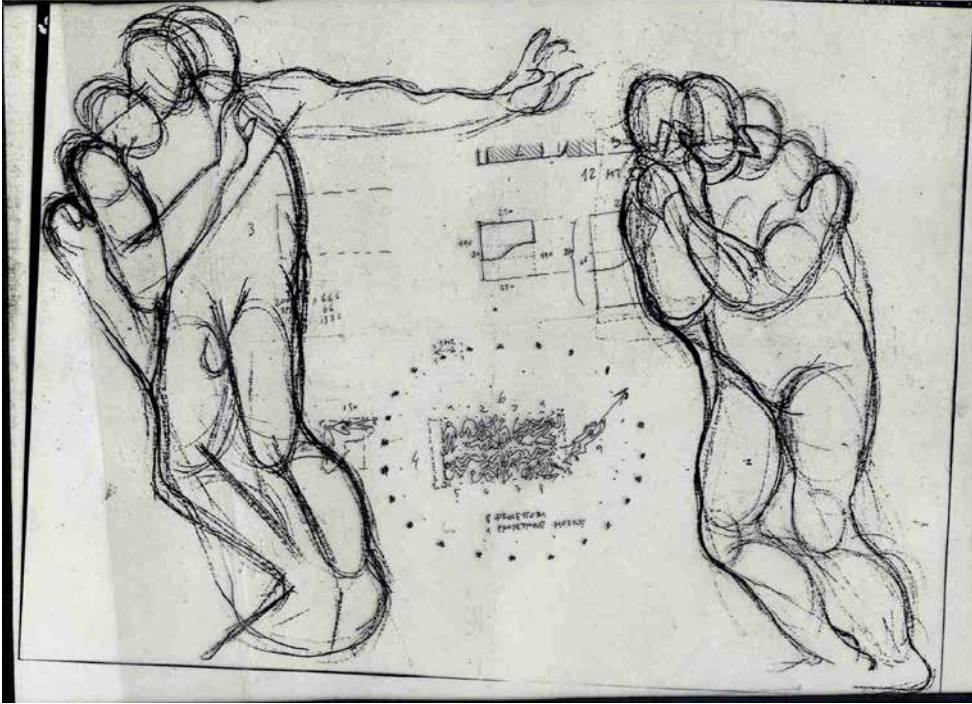


Fig. 3 – P. Rosa (Studio Azzurro), *Coro*, 1995, project sketch, courtesy of the Artist.

At that conference, Paolo Rosa, emphasizing the socializing potential of the technological interactivity that Studio Azzurro was working on, hinted at a design approach that considers very specific elements related to the material and perceptual qualities of the artworks, such as space, sound, surfaces, and atmosphere, in addition to the interaction modes. The context, interfaces and the possibility of a shared and collective fruition: today all these aspects of the project seem to be more urgent than ever, as we constantly realize that “we engage in a sea of connections but have devalued the dimension of relationships.”⁴²

Through direct experience in designing interactive works, Studio Azzurro established some key principles that became essential and distinctive for their approach. The first one was to resist the narrow focus encouraged by the personal devices that were beginning to proliferate

41 U. La Pietra, *Viviamo affollate solitudini* (Milan: Politi Segnanfreddo Edizioni, 2023).

42 From a conversation between Paolo Fabbri and Paolo Rosa on the occasion of the presentation of *L'arte fuori di sé*, filmed 2012 at Gambalunga Library, Rimini: “Paolo Fabbri e Paolo Rosa su *L'arte fuori di sé*,” vimeo.

at the time (starting with personal computers). The second was to avoid succumbing to the allure of flashy technology and the commercial development of its operational interfaces. These two guiding lights still orient the reflection on the space of action and contemplation opened up by the artwork and illuminate the group's research; the development of *natural interfaces* and the potential to foster *collectivity* within a work. In the span of three years, these two principles become part of the twenty brief reflections that Paolo Rosa gathered under the programmatic title *Confidential Report on an Interactive Experience*,⁴³ which was proposed for a publication in connection with another conference, held in Pisa and entitled *Mediamorfosi '98*.⁴⁴

From “reacting systems” to the “point of being” [ndr. punto di vi(s)ta]

In a paper drafted between 1998 and 2003, parallel to the *Confidential Report*, Paolo Rosa expressed a rather pessimistic view on the extent of the anthropological and social changes linked to what he then called “reacting systems,” meaning capable of “amplifying, transforming, and storing.”⁴⁵

“Amplifying a need for participation;” “transforming” in the sense of “connecting things of a totally

43 The text was published in its entirety in 1999 on the occasion of the abovementioned exhibition *Interattività*, organized on the occasion of the Biennale Arte e Tecnologia, CERB – Perugia. See the catalogue M.G. Mattei, ed., *Interattività – Studio Azzurro, opere tra partecipazione e osservazione*, (Perugia: Fondazione Umbria Spettacolo, 1999): 26. The Confidential report was also included in Studio Azzurro, *Ambienti sensibili*, (Milan: Electa, 1999).

The publication that followed the symposium “Mediamorfosi 98,” S. Vassallo, A. Di Brino, eds., *Arte tra azione e contemplazione. L'interattività nelle ricerche artistiche* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2003), instead contains a more discursive and concise version of the text, where Paolo Rosa begins to emphasise the expression “arte fuori di sé” (art beyond itself).

44 In the dossier that compiles the materials suggested for the conference, it is interesting to note the article by Antonio Camurri, which explores museum applications for Ambienti Multimodali Interattivi (Interactive Multimodal Environments), or “AMI.” See the article A. Camurri, “Ambienti Multimodali Interattivi,” *Sistemi intelligenti* 9, no. 2 (1997): 315-342.

45 P. Rosa, “L'arte fuori di sé. Pensieri ancora sommari sull'estetica delle relazioni,” in S. Vassallo, A. Di Brino, eds., *Arte tra azione e contemplazione. L'interattività nelle ricerche artistiche* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2003): 40.

different nature;” “detect,” “organize,” and “store” the data obtained from the interactions “in sensitive databases, raw material for new consumption and new consensus.” In the course of this early diagnosis,⁴⁶ parallel emphasis is placed on the ambiguity of the three faculties of the reacting systems: what happens inside them is that “participation” is actually frustrated, if not entirely eluded by the “exasperated individuality” of the subjects, and artfully fuelled by the demand for participation itself; the dialogue between different natures generates an “excess of communication;” “the activation of memories” becomes the exploitation of data, which we now call “extractivism.” Yet, as Paolo Rosa points out, these three faculties are the result of relationships and cannot exist without them. Once again, he emphasizes the relationship as the primary focus for reflection on technology. Piero Gilardi echoes this sentiment in the same volume,⁴⁷ as he writes:

In my view, the relationship is the true substance of interactivity. I also hypothesize that the culture of interactivity could replace language, which is a very rigid symbolic system, whereas interactivity

46 It should be noted that when Paolo Rosa wrote this text (1998-2003), neither Facebook nor Instagram existed.

47 P. Gilardi, “Dall’interazione politica al bio feedback,” in S. Vassallo, A. Di Brino, eds., *Arte tra azione e contemplazione. L’interattività nelle ricerche artistiche* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2003): 160. Translated by the author.

is not. We can imagine that technological interactivity is one of the fields on which a new way of relating to others can develop.⁴⁸

An overwhelming statement that can help us today to interpret some epiphenomena of the use of personal devices and immersion in social media, which reduce the effective communicative capacity of verbal language in favor of gestures, emoji, stickers, memes and other viral forms of communication.

In the Confidential Report, the tenth point is entitled the symbolic system⁴⁹ and proposes a parallelism between the significance of the invention of perspective and that of technological interactivity. Rosa introduces the next point by borrowing an expression from Derrick de Kerckhove⁵⁰ and translating it as “punto di vita” (“point of life”), rather than the usual and more literal Italian translation

48 It is worth quoting here Piero Gilardi’s vision, which seems to resonate both in the past and in the future: “While in our humanistic culture [...] we deluded ourselves that within the individual consciousness there could be an awareness of the whole, today we must recognize –and this is very important from an existential point of view– that each of us, in our singularity, cannot have a complete awareness of the whole. This [...] shifts the problem of consciousness. We cannot think of having a unitary consciousness that encapsulates a true image of the world: inevitably, consciousness becomes diffuse. [...] The fact that consciousness is diffuse highlights [...] the relationship. Today, we are increasingly connected with those around us. We must learn to live in a relationship with others that is very different. [...] A hypothesis that I find very fitting is that of [...] ‘common singularity,’ meaning that each of us has and develops our own singular qualities but does not use them as a point of differentiation from others; we do not use them as a filter in communication with others. Instead, we become totally transparent, making our characteristics and positive qualities fluid and osmotically transferable to others,” in A. Di Brino, eds., *Arte tra azione e contemplazione. L’interattività nelle ricerche artistiche* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2003): 160. Translated by the author.

49 Again, Antonio Caronia can help us in interpreting the manifesto. Commenting on statements from 1989, he notes that “surpassing language” seemed a desirable and especially achievable goal with VR, to the point that the inventor and main “prophet” of that technology, Jaron Lanier, even spoke of the possibility of “post-symbolic communication” See A. Caronia, *L’inconscio della macchina, ovvero: come catturare il significante fluttuante* (Milan, Mimesis, 2006), <https://www.pulplibri.it/linconscio-della-macchina-e-altri-scritti/>, accessed June 30, 2024.

50 Years later, a publication gathers some reflections by de Kerckhove and de Almeida around this title. See D. de Kerckhove, C. de Almeida, eds., *The Point of Being* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

as “punto di essere” (“point of being”).⁵¹ With a stroke of linguistic creativity, he connects the symbolic form of perspective and frees us from the rigid frontality of the optical system, returning us to the body system, the entire sphere of Peripersonal Space, and our being in the world.



Fig. 4: Studio Azzurro, *Fare gli italiani*, 2011, sensitive path, photograph by Studio Azzurro.

This tension to expand the horizon of the habitable for a human gaze that reappropriates its integration with the other senses, starting with extended touch, resonates with the words of architect and thinker Juhani Pallasmaa, who has devoted much of his attention to the relationship between the senses and architecture. “The quality of architectural reality” – notes Pallasmaa – “seems fundamentally dependent on the nature of peripheral vision;

51 In Italian the wordplay is between *punto di vista*, i.e. the fixed point of view in a perspective vision; and *punto di vita*, that refers to the centre of gravity of each of us, the point of balance and orientation, of perception of space and possible relationships. The notion of the “sense of Being” is then developed by Rosa on the occasion of the honorary degree awarded to Derrick de Kerckhove by the University of Urbino. See P. Rosa, “Il punto di vita: uno strumento per perdersi,” *Sociologia della comunicazione* 38 (2006): 79-84. See also D. de Kerckhove, “Lectio magistralis. Il quanto è il messaggio,” *Sociologia della comunicazione* 38 (2006): 13-22.

it is this that unfolds the subject in space.”⁵² As peripheral vision gathers an extraordinary number of stimuli that engage the “preconscious perceptual system,” it is now proven that it can significantly impact our perceptual and also cultural and political experience.⁵³

The program envisioned by Pallasmaa evokes participatory performance practices related to the exercise of gazing at a place and to movement, an effective antidote to our gaze sinking into smartphones.⁵⁴ Dwelling on peripheral vision underscores how much we are influenced by what lies at the edges of our gaze (and conscious thinking) and how it helps us establish reference points to navigate a space filled with objects, bodies, images, and sounds. In this sense, peripheral vision can also help us observe a complex artwork, a museum, or an exhibition differently and see them as a form of montage that unfolds in space and not (just) in time.

The art of “levare”

In the face of complexity and as a counterpoint to the uncontrolled proliferation of forms of communication, the “art of subtraction” emerges as a necessity. It requires

52 “Unconscious peripheral perception transforms retinal gestalt into spatial and bodily experiences. Peripheral vision integrates us with space, while focused vision pushes us out of the space, making us mere spectators. The defensive and unfocused gaze of our time, burdened by sensory overload, may eventually open up new realms of vision and thought, freed of the implicit desire of the eye for control and power. The loss of focus can liberate the eye from its historical patriarchal domination,” in J. Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin. Architecture and the Senses* (New York: Academy Editions Ltd, 2005): 13.

53 Ibid.

54 Just try observing how our awareness of space changes when we walk through a crowd trying to see with the whole field of vision and not just exactly in front of us, temporarily disregarding our focal point. It could be a gaze that is present and yet widened and unfocused, or the reversal of our direction that suddenly makes us aware of the edges of our vision. While walking backwards, everything recedes, and what is new comes from the periphery of our visual field. In these processes, somatic practices and the performing arts have much to teach us.

the courage to “give up something”⁵⁵ in favor of clarity and *cum-munus*.

In a project for a sensitive environment, there comes a moment when it becomes *clear* what needs to be relinquished to avoid disorienting the “co-authors” and to clear the moment of the encounter, establishing a long-contemplated relationship. When imagining the sensitivity of an environment, “the designer’s notion of the audience shifts” and so does the idea of the work! It is no longer a static and permanent object.⁵⁶ What is increasingly required of artistic experimentation is the possibility to:

Generate processes that lead to a point of encounter beyond the materiality of expression. That “artwork beyond itself,” as we might call it, which becomes dialogue, invention by the spectator, a ritual. And all this happens not in a conceptual space, but in a real, physical space, with real gestures and a direct, lived experience, even if the interaction has virtual components. It is an exchange in which no one imposes on the other, but in which each element of difference vivifies and enriches one’s own identity.⁵⁷

We have thus returned to confront intersubjectivity. In this passage, we find it defined in a way that makes it difficult to distinguish this aspiration from the best of utopias regarding human relationships. On the other hand, it also aligns with Lidia Decandia’s definition of the museum as a participatory artwork of a community rich in traces

55 P. Rosa, “Arte leggera,” in Studio Azzurro, *Ambienti sensibili. Opere tra interattività e narrazione* (Milan: Electa, 1999): 6.

56 In support of this reflection, it is useful to quote P. Montani: “on these conditions, the initial technical object is born within the prospect of having to renounce its primary physical identity, rapidly and irreversibly, just like Vertov’s Kinoglaz. At any rate, this capitulation is indispensable in order to grant the image a “way of living” that can again be compared to Vertovian hypertext,” in P. Montani, *Guardami*: 37-38.

57 P. Rosa, “Arte leggera:” 6.



Fig. 5: Studio Azzurro, *Patine e accumulati*, 2015, sensitive environment, photograph by Studio Azzurro.

and roots exposed to different generations: the artwork as a celebration, a ritual, a place of sharing.

Art, for the artist who believes in having a responsibility toward the world, can open clearings that provide orientation tools in uncertain times. However, it coexists with the awareness that their practice relies on an apparently contradictory movement: “To the continuous need of art to irresponsibly explore the most extreme thresholds corresponds the responsibility to set rules for oneself.”⁵⁸

In short, balancing the *Hybris* of artistic research with a vigilant self-regulation. Although responsibility etymologically means “knowing how to give a response,” we know – but it is always good to be reminded of it – that art cannot be asked to answer epochal questions or techno-scientific dilemmas. Art can pose questions that elude rational thinking, it can open up the unthought to a propositional horizon and a transversal analysis of the most urgent issues. Art should trigger processes, not necessarily those that are visible. From art one can – and should – demand (uncomfortable) questions and insights to carve out

58 A. Balzola, P. Rosa, *L'arte fuori di sé*: 41.

horizons in which to find “new constellations of relationships” for self-orientation.⁵⁹

It has been rightly argued that even an ethics of responsibility, much more relativist than the traditional one, seems impractical today. This is because reality is constantly changing due to technological innovations and scientific discoveries, creating entirely new moral issues. For this reason, it is difficult, if not impossible, to feel responsible, as we lack the parameters to interpret them. Here, the notion of responsibility shifts. It means committing to maintaining constant attention to ongoing transformations. While this responsibility may seem less effective from a practical standpoint, it is not demanding. It involves more than just an external perspective; it requires a courageous engagement with phenomena and changes as they occur. The goal is to attempt – perhaps even in vain – to navigate and influence them.⁶⁰

Freedom to?

When we pause to consider the current rhetoric surrounding the production of environmental images, responsibility, freedom, and orientation seem to take on crucial roles. From the five points of the 1990s manifesto that emphasized the *virtual*, reflection has shifted to the six degrees of freedom, which, by definition, suggest a... condition of detention. But let's broaden the scope and return to the *sensitive environments* we have previously approached, where the themes of freedom and interactivity

59 In this sense, as detected by D. Arasse, “L’invention de la perspective,” *Histoires de peintures* (Paris: Denoël, 2004): 63, it is interesting to mention the original meaning of the Latin word *templum*, which originally defined the portion of heaven that the diviner interrogated from the corresponding portion of consecrated ground of the temple.

60 A. Balzola, P. Rosa, *L’arte fuori di sé*: 41.

have long raised a subtle issue intertwining with the theme of authorship.

In 2012, during a conversation between Paolo Rosa and Paolo Fabbri, they tackled the issue of conditioning and manipulating viewers through the possibility of “programming behaviors”⁶¹ by designing interactive environments. The discussion reaches a delicate point, carefully weighing the terms and distinguishing between the demiurge designer and the responsible, curious designer who, instead of expecting a behavior, seeks conditions to be surprised by it. The distinction is suddenly clear when highlighting the difference between programming and designing.

Paolo Rosa often describes how interactive works transform the author into a spectator of the spectators, opening a completely new creative dimension precisely when the author’s contribution is usually considered finished. Today, fortunately, these considerations are quite widespread even among younger artistic groups. The creativity that can be liberated and absorbed from the freedom of visitors’ gestures and behaviors is something difficult to classify and not easily archivable, except in the embodied memory of the designer... who thus finds himself literally commissioned by the spectators to explore new paths or revisit old ones in light of their actions.

After all, “the totality of the battle is made by the spectator,”⁶² Andrea Pinotti summarizes. And the authors are there waiting to finally see it after months of work during

61 Cit. Paolo Fabbri and Paolo Rosa presentation of the book *L’arte fuori di sé*, filmed 2012 at Gambalunga Library, Rimini: “Paolo Fabbri e Paolo Rosa su L’arte fuori di sé,” vimeo.

62 A. Pinotti’s wordplay, in the speech *Studio Azzurro, portatore di historia* held at the aforementioned conference *Le immagini e le storie* (Cesano Maderno, 2023). It is made explicit by knowing that *Totale della battaglia* is the title of one of the first *sensitive environments* created by Studio Azzurro, inspired by Paolo Uccello’s *The Battle of San Romano*. Composed of multiple videoprojections, the work populated the interior of the Baluardo San Paolino and was activated by the voices of visitors. Their calls and shouts established an expressive continuity with the calls of the soldiers who centuries earlier had stood guard over those same walls. Only through multiple interactions could a totality be reconstructed from these fragments dispersed throughout the bastion. Indeed, subsequently, some parts of the installation have been acquired by museum institutions as “fragments of the battle.”

which they tried to imagine people in *the space between* the projections, the stories, and the resonant walls of the San Paolino Bastion in Lucca. So again: Who is my director?

This openness to the other seems to be the key to not being imprisoned by self-referential research forms and not being overwhelmed by the seduction of technology and its degrees of freedom. The key is to keep in mind that it is always time to be surprised and enchanted by the other. To place oneself in the position of observing with curiosity and sensitivity, and in this gesture, to create that small distance after immersing oneself in research...



Fig. 6 – Studio Azzurro, *In Principio (e poi)*, 2013, project visualisation by Studio Azzurro.

A small distance that enables the attitude of not considering the inquiry exhausted. Within this horizon, the “conditional freedom” of *sensitive environments* – although it does not alter the program’s matrix – indicates a shift concerning the issue of the viewer’s freedom, as it aims to connect them with a dimension of expectation and openness to a possible hiatus, to the possibility of renewing rather than restricting freedom through a socially consequences-rich gesture.

This form of interactivity invites the gesture as the very moment of sharing. The *cum-munus* thus also

interrogates the virtual narrative community: touching the life-sized image of a projected person walking in front of us, and in response to our gesture, stops, turns, and tells us something personal, exposing its memory as a gift. This gesture is the encounter of a part of the community that cannot be present in that moment and yet is present with its virtual body and irreplaceable voice.

It should be remembered that, without that flesh-and-blood gesture, without that movement of bodies in physical space, the images are temporally trapped in a spell, in a fixed or recursive instant, and the work does not manifest itself fully, remaining in a state of waiting.

The sensitivity of the organism-environment is indeed one of the components of the system that innervates and articulates the space of the work. The dimension in which Studio Azzurro's peculiarity manifests itself the work on images, sound, and space-time; as mentioned, it is the *montage in space*. Montage in an interactive work is a quantum leap compared to montage in a video *environment*. The "editing box" (*scatola di montaggio*) becomes a "box of relationships." The articulation of the intermedial path, of the process triggered by the presence of the bodies, and the editing of moving images sets the conditions for attempting to "dislodge the feeling"⁶³ of a habituated and anesthetized humanity. The procedurality in which personal devices entrap us is precisely the first "niche"⁶⁴ to avoid in order to access a state of sensitive attention. The automatization⁶⁵ of gestures and reactions must be considered as a

63 R. Bodei, "Riflessioni su alcune premesse dell'arte interattiva," in S. Vassallo, A. Di Brino, eds., *Arte tra azione e contemplazione* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2003): 164.

64 More than Uexküll, this refers to J.J. Gibson and his "theory of affordances" (1977), which distinguished the concept of niche from the concept of *habitat* as follows: "A species of animal is said to utilize or occupy a certain niche in the environment. This is not quite the same as the habitat of the species; a niche refers more to how an animal lives than to where it lives. I suggest that a niche is a set of affordances" in J.J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York: Taylor and Francis LLC, 1986): 195.

65 "Attention is an intensification of sensory perceptions and is not necessarily conscious" while "automation is a diminution of attention" [...] "Motor skill learning and instrumental learning [...] take place without any awareness or contribution from consciousness" in J. Jaynes, *The diachronic nature of consciousness* (Milan: Adelphi, 2014): 20-21.

phenomenon of habituation to be disarticulated to interrupt the flow of habit and open an asynchrony, an *interstice of freedom* from which the *unthought* emerges, the spark of cognitive engagement rather than emotional overwhelming.

For the designer, the *unthought* is a goal. For the visitor, it flashes unexpectedly in a flow in which they are spontaneously involved. The designer is asked to make the effort to displace gestural, mental and perceptive habits and to rekindle a disposition to discovery, an essential condition for hoping to compose a trace in the visitor's memory.⁶⁶

The shape of the gesture

Procedural expectation adds to the anaesthetic effect an emptying of form. The difference between the care for the ritual gesture and the intolerance or indifference of the procedural gesture carves our scenario with great clarity.

Paolo Rosa's emphasis on *gesture of the relationship* today highlights the theme of the *agentivity* of the material with which the gesture interacts, as well as *performativity*. The latter is an irreducible element that characterises us as subjects from birth, the Ego being "primarily a motor Ego."⁶⁷ The *intercorporeality*⁶⁸ through which our experience of the world is gradually articulated poses a question: how is this experience oriented today in the face of virtual bodies entering our peripersonal space? In Studio Azzurro's *sensitive environments*, this performativity,

66 About designer's responsibility in construction of conditions for an emergent relation and virtual presence, see R. Diodato, "Relazione, sistema, virtualità. Prospettive dell'esperienza estetica," *Studi di estetica* 1-2 (2014): 85-103. About memory "We do not think any longer in terms of strictly museum-based approach, but in terms of 'condensation' places, where the memory of the past meets the participation in the present [...]. We start with distinctive historical or productive elements [...]. We gather images and testimonies and we immerse them in our interactive systems. Thus, what is presented – besides telling something of the past, of a story – also tells something of the language used to bring it on stage," in R. Diodato, *Image, Art and Virtuality. Towards an Aesthetics of Relation* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2021): 76.

67 M. Ammaniti, V. Gallese, *La nascita della intersoggettività* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2014): 31. Translated by the author.

68 Ibid.

whether more or less involuntary, amplifies the interactivity itself, if not, perhaps, its poetic fulcrum – “the point of life” mentioned above, *the point of being present*, aware of occupying a space there, at that moment, with those people, in that context. The wordplay⁶⁹ makes clear that this “point” is also a surpassing of perspective fixity.⁷⁰ The *point of life* is a point of untiring negotiation⁷¹ with the world, a “tool for losing and finding oneself”⁷² in the dynamic of a relationship with (the instability of) the artwork.



Fig. 7 – Studio Azzurro, *In Principio (e poi)*, 2013, photo montage by Studio Azzurro.

Performativity *occurs*, in this case, when real and virtual bodies meet within the device that is the artwork.

69 Moreover, activated by a discourse that began with the contemplation of the small panel of the *Flagellation* by Piero della Francesca in Urbino, a supreme synthesis of perspectival wisdom.

70 P. Rosa, *Il punto di vita*: 79-84. As earlier noted, in Italian the wordplay is between *punto di vista*, i.e. the fixed point of view in a perspective vision; and *punto di vita*, i.e. the centre of gravity of each of us, the point of balance and orientation, of perception of space and possible relationships).

71 About the artwork as a site of negotiation of art itself, V. Valentini, “Le installazioni multimedia: come mettere in gioco lo spettatore,” in V. Valentini, ed., *Le storie del video* (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 2003): 288.

72 Subtitle of the same contribution P. Rosa, *Il punto di vita* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2005): 79-84.

Potentially where, to quote Agamben, the subject is structured rather than with *corpo a corpo* (a close confrontation)⁷³ with an encounter within a *protected* environment. This suggests a mode of relationship where the gesture is not driven by the need to be performative or agonistic, but by being with the other. Being aware, even visually, of being in a system of relationship that becomes a collector of *gestures of proximity and grace* can inspire visitors to share the experience as a plastic interpretation, introducing their own gestures into the work's ecosystem, taking into account being seen by others, and actively contributing



Fig. 8 – Studio Azzurro, *In Principio (e poi)*, 2013, photograph by Studio Azzurro.

to the composition, configuration, and vitality of the work.

This “being seen” inherently involves a fundamental *reciprocity* for a technology-based device, as it transcends the one-to-one relationship typically associated with the (brutal) term “user.” It includes a specific reciprocity with the work and the environment where others are also present, seeing themselves within and interacting with the work. The flux that is thus nourished is what most interests Studio Azzurro’s designers: the environment becomes a

73 “I call subject what results from the relationship and, as it were, a close confrontation (in Italian “un corpo a corpo”) between living beings and systems,” G. Agamben in M. Cometa, *La svolta ecomediale* (Milan: Meltemi, 2023): 14. Translation by the author.

laboratory of gestures, interspecies sociality, and behaviors not conditioned by technology and its instructions,⁷⁴ but by the collective presence of bodies and stories within that environment. Ultimately, this is an appeal to the visitor to feel involved and *to take a stance*.

The programmatic declaration of *Facce di festa* already embodied this definitive appeal to the spectator, positioning them as the author of the “total battle,” as the “responsible” and the “responsive-able” (capable of judgment) of the “material on display.” An active subject in every sense – through gesture and imagination – active because *in movement*, free to traverse *the spaces between* images and inhabit the small clearings from which thoughts, dreams, and visions arise... “we said we wanted more than spectators; we wanted visionaries!”⁷⁵

One could argue that much of Studio Azzurro’s work aims to design in order to create the conditions that allow the spectator to re-define himself as a *sensitive subject* – or rather, *re-sensitized subject*, through a specific form of intermedial reassembly. Every *space between* in this form of montage is a latent, apparently neutral space-time of signification, where the potential for an awakening lies, in a flicker of the off-screen, thanks to the unexpected, to interruptions in procedurality, of the device’s feedback.

If the goal of the work is not interaction itself, nor its degree of technological radicality, but rather the poetic verification of rediscovering a forgotten sensibility within habitual frameworks, then we can continue to explore the opening of a condition of auroral perception,

74 “With a politically healthy attitude of wonder” states V. Valentini in *Le storie del video* (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 2003): 297. Translation by the author.

75 P. Rosa in *ARTE + SCIENZA. I mutamenti indotti dalle Nuove Tecnologie nell’Arte Contemporanea* (Accademia di Brera, Milan, 1995). The recordings of the conference are available at: “Parolo Rosa (I) *Interattività socializzante,” Youtube.

receptively disposed to encounter a story, an image, and ultimately with the other outside ourselves.⁷⁶

Acknowledgments

My sincere thanks to Pietro Montani and Valentina Valentini for their constant sincere dialogue during the drafting; Chiara Borgonovo for her indispensable help with the translation; Beatrice Giovannini, Anna Alessandrello and Virginia Di Bari for language revision and encouragement. And, of course, Studio Azzurro for daily opportunities for talks.

76 “Thanks to the body, internal and external, subject and object are nothing more than verbal descriptions of correlative aspects of a basic construct: the intentional relationship, openness to the other than oneself, desire. Other words that describe different ways of considering our intrinsic, consubstantial search for the other,” V. Gallese, forward to H. F. Mallgrave, *L’empatia degli spazi. Architettura e neuroscienze* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2015): XIII. Translation by the author.

AN-ICONOLOGY
History, Theory, and Practices
of Environmental Images



UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO
DIPARTIMENTO DI FILOSOFIA
"PIERO MARTINETTI"



AN-ICON has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. Grant agreement No. 834033 AN-ICON. The project is hosted by the Department of Philosophy "Piero Martinetti" – Department of Excellence at the State University of Milan.