

Italian interactive installation art: an assessment of the pioneering works of Mario Canali, Piero Gilardi, Studio Azzurro e Giacomo Verde¹.

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The aim of this paper is to survey the artistic production of four Italian pioneers of interactive installation art in Italy: Mario Canali, Piero Gilardi, Giacomo Verde, and the group of artists Studio Azzurro. Their experimental works have played an important role in the critical and aesthetical investigation of digital interactivity. Yet their contribution to the history of New Media Art is scarcely known abroad and is not sufficiently recognized in important scholarly studies such as - just to mention recent publications - Oliver Grau (ed.) *MediaArtHistories* (Mit, 2007), Christiane Paul *Digital Art* (Thames & Hudson, 2008); Edward A. Shanken *Art and Electronic Media* (Phaidon, 2009).

One of the reasons for this lack of recognition is due to an endemic lack of interest by Italian both artistic and educational Institutions in the promotion of new media art, which has prevented the growing of systematic critical studies. Recently the situation is changing, and courses in New Media Art have been activated in many University and Fine Arts Academy. But what are still missing are Laboratories and Centers - such as for example, ZKM, Ars electronica - which are crucial for the production and the promotion of new media art, as well as for the elaboration of a critical discourse around it.

Before starting to analyze more in detail the works of the artists mentioned above, I would like very briefly say something about the context in which a certain kind of artistic research aroused.

During the 90s, most of the Italian artists interested in New Media, developed their research almost in isolation, relying - for the production and the diffusion of their works -

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on occasional events and exhibitions, organized either by private galleries or private cultural associations, sometimes financially supported by local government institutions.

This state of isolation led to the development of a small community of artists and critics mutually supporting each other, in the attempt to investigate new theories and artistic practices fostered by the digital revolution of the 90s.

In this context, an important statement was represented by the essay *Per una nuova cartografia del reale (For a New Cartography of the real)*, written in 1993 by the critics Antonio Caronia, Gino Di Maggio, Maria Grazia Mattei, together with the artists Mario Canali, Giacomo Verde, Paolo Rosa (a member of Studio Azzurro), and Antonio Glessi. The essay was presented in Milan at the Fondazione Mudima, during the opening of the solo exhibition of Studio Azzurro *Videoambienti, 1982-1992 (Video environments, 1982-1992)*. It focuses on the necessity to investigate new forms of contemporary sensibility introduced by emerging technologies, - in particular, virtual reality and digital interactivity - which require new approaches to the modalities of creation and fruition of the work of art.

I quote from the text a passage which is particularly relevant:

The “aura” rule of the correct distance between the picture and the observer, the establishment of an unique and privileged vanishing point don’t work anymore when we are all inside the picture, we are all part of the same audiovisual weave, of the same sensorial flux that characterize the contemporary experience. To read the work of art today means to read oneself, like a large Las meninas where not only the painter but also each observer is placed inside the painting.

Around the issues of virtuality, immersion and interaction, aroused a variety of artistic practices. Among the artists who have consistently experimented in this direction, Studio Azzurro, Giacomo Verde, Mario Canali and Piero Gilardi have realized a corpus of significant works which I am going to illustrate in order to emphasize the richness of their proposals.

I will start by analyzing the artistic production of Mario Canali, who began his artistic career in 1975 as a painter. Canali’s painting style ignite what would become a lifelong

exploration of symbolism, archetype, surrealism and Jungian theories of collective unconscious.



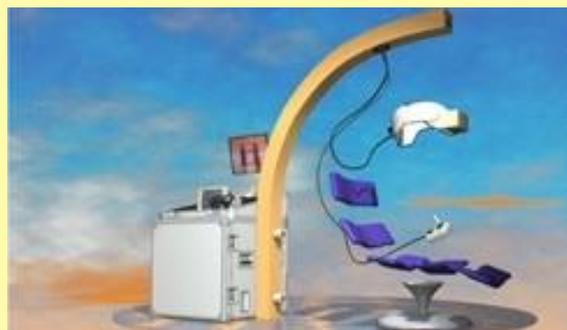
Mario Canali, *Animalone* (1980), oil on canvas Mario Canali, *Pesce* (1980), oil on canvas

He then turned his attention to electronic and digital art, and in 1985 was one of the founding members of Correnti Magnetiche, an Electronic Art Group set up in Milan. For the next decade, Correnti Magnetiche produced groundbreaking digital images and 3D animations, earning awards at international exhibitions like Siggraph, Imagina, and Ars Electronica. With Correnti Magnetiche Canali created also his first two interactive installations: *Satori* (1993), and *Oracolo Ulisse* (1995).

Satori is an installation of Virtual reality, the first to be made in Italy. It consists in an immersive virtual world made up by over ten “spaces” that the public can navigate using an helmet and a joystick. The intention was to create a virtual space that was not a replica of our reality, but an imaginary world full of archetypal and symbolic suggestions. In Zen philosophy, *Satori* is a term associated with states of illumination. According to Mario Canali, the moment of illumination was not to be reached during the virtual experience, but when, coming back to reality, the visitor could perceive it with new eyes. The aim of the installation was to create a new awareness of reality.

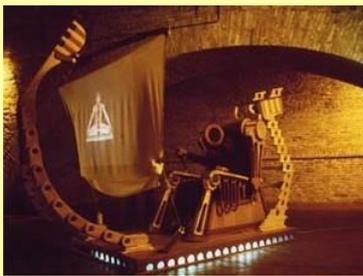


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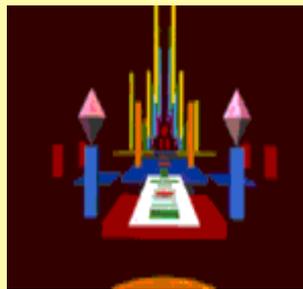


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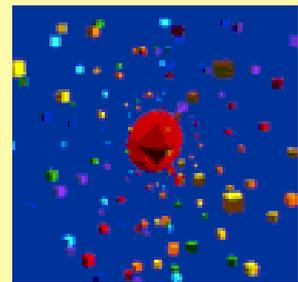
The idea of a journey towards new forms of sensorial experiences characterizes also *Oracolo Ulisse*. In this installation, psychophysical parameters of the visitors are intercepted through sensors connected to a computer and translated into images and sounds projected on panel similar to the sail of a ship. At end of the audio-visual journey, an oracle provides its response, depending on whether the user has activated more his/her emotional side or the rational one. The originality of the installation consists in the elaboration of an “oracular algorithm” realized by Mario Canali in collaboration with the psychologist Elio Massironi, whose contribution became fundamental for the development of Canali’s poetic toward the realization of “complex emotional machines” (as the artist call them), capable of recognizing, interpreting, translating and amplifying people’s emotional, psychological and physical states.



Mario Canali, *Oracolo Ulisse*, 1995

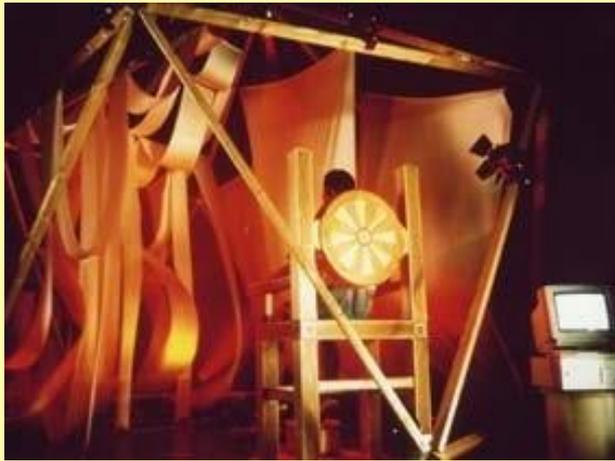


The West - Rational side



The East-Emotional side

Other interactive installation exploring these themes are *Neuronde* (1997) and *Scribble Test* (2002). *Neuronde* allows the visitors to activate a scenario that changes in accordance with their brainwaves. Sounds, smoke, light and wind playing with soaring pieces of silk create an environment that is directly connected, in real time, to our inner states. *Scribble Test* is based on the interpretation of scribbles realized by the users. The work takes inspiration from the therapeutic practices of Elio Massironi who consider the scribble an important instrument for revealing personality traits and emotional states. *In Scribble Test*, at the end of the experience, the visitor’s psychological profile is visualized through a video, and he/she can also pick up a report describing his/her personality traits.



Mario Canali, *Neuronde*, 1997

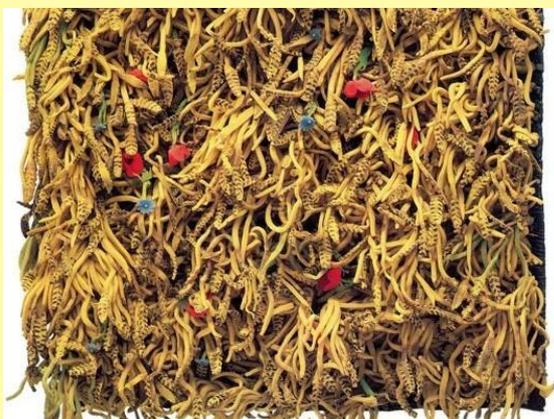


Mario Canali, *Scribble-Test*, 2002

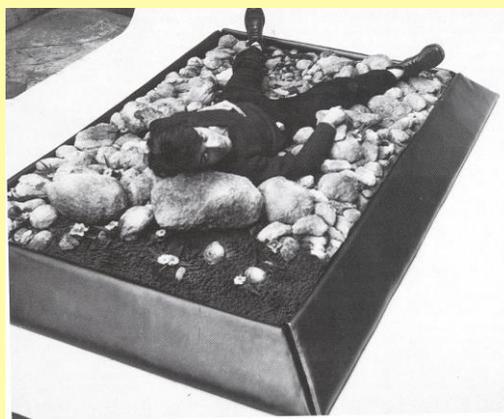
Canali's poetics is influenced by Jung theory of collective unconscious, by oriental philosophy and by meditation practices integrating mind and body, and he has found in interactivity a powerful instrument to explore these issues.

Besides his artistic activity, Canali has always been interested in promoting cultural interdisciplinary events. Since 2007 he has set up in Milan a multimedia center, *The Canali's Studio*, hosting exhibitions with Pop Art and the Arte Povera movement. As a young artist during the Sixties he made conferences and workshops, to which artists, scientists and philosophers have participated.

Similarly to Mario Canali, Piero Gilardi started his artistic career outside the world of new media art, as painter and sculptor associated became very successful and internationally known for his series of works called *Tappeti-natura* (*Nature-carpets*), reproducing in a very realistic way little segments of natural world in polyurethane, in order to emphasize the complex relationship between nature and artifice.



P. Gilardi, *Campo di grano*, Poliurethane, 1967



P. Gilardi, *Tappeto di sassi*, Poliurethane, 1967

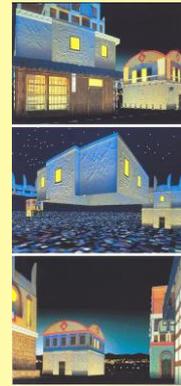
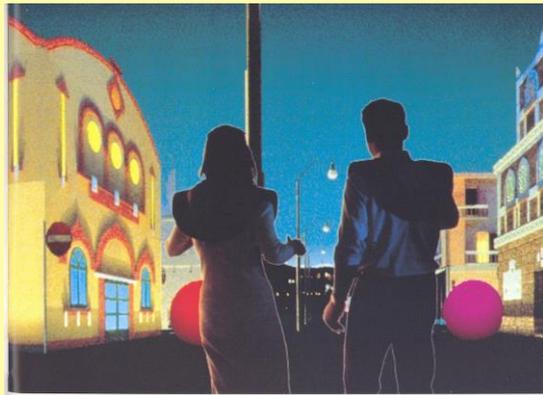
However, he very soon grew disillusioned with the art world, and, by the early 70s, ceased making art, spending the next 10 years travelling in Italy and abroad, writing theoretical essays, and practicing alternative forms of art aimed at exploring dimensions of collective creativity. He practiced Art Therapy, Art Activism, Political and Anthropological theatre, orienting his interests toward relational forms of art and technological interactivity. In 1989 he was among the founders of *Ars Technica* in Paris, a cultural association devoted to an interdisciplinary investigation of interactivity, and in 1992 he founded in Torino a filiation of it, named *Arslab*, which represented an important laboratory in Italy for the promotion of new media art. In this period Gilardi created interactive installations aimed at stimulating community involvement around issues related to globalization, ecology, and the impact of technology both on the private and public sphere.

Nord versus Sud (1992) is an interactive installation that can be used simultaneously by six persons. On a rotating platform representing the world, by manipulating some knobs, people can listen to messages concerning contrasts between rich and poor country, or suggesting forms of pacific resolutions. By tuning the messages on a common content concerning peace, the platform remains stable, otherwise it slants creating a condition of physical risks for the participants.



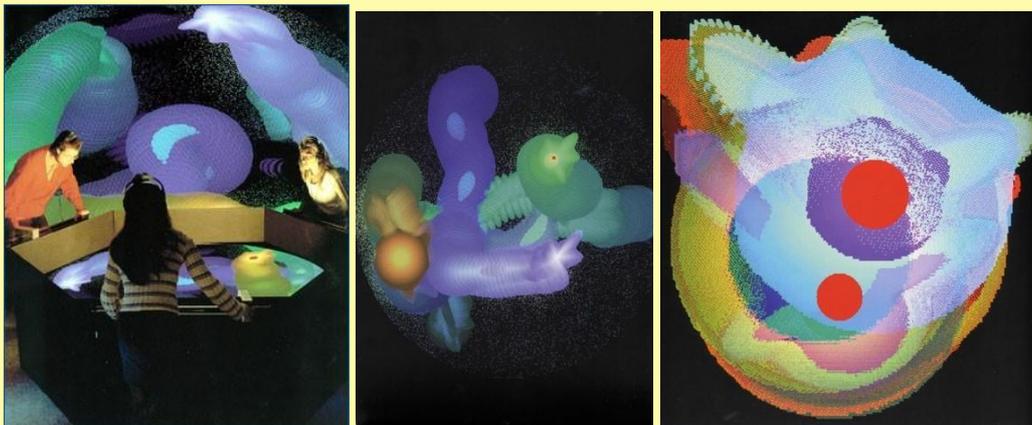
Piero Gilardi, *Nord versus sud*, 1992

General Intellect (1997) deals with multiethnic society and globalization. Also this installation can be used by six people simultaneously, who can interact into a virtual space by building a multi-ethnic metropolis composed by different architectural styles.



Piero Gilardi, *General Intellect*, 1997

In *Connected Es* (1998) the participants to the installation wear a breath meter and a cardiac frequency detector, through which they can influence the evolution of globular pulsing shapes, similar to cells, which gradually agglutinate, creating a visual metaphor of a state of fusion among people.



Piero Gilardi, *Connected Es*, 1998

Since 2002 Gilardi has been involved in the realization of the *Living Art Park Project*, an Experimental Centre for Contemporary Art focusing on the dialogue among art, nature, biotechnologies and ecology.

Located in a formerly industrial area of Turin, it consists in an an open-air exhibition site and a building called *Bioma* subdivided into six rooms, housing six interactive stations devised by Piero Gilardi.



PAV - Parco d'Arte Vivente <http://www.parcoartevivente.it>

To many extend the *Parc of Living Art* represent a synthesis of all Gilardi's previous artistic experiences. As artistic director of the center, Gilardi supervises the realization of contemporary art projects, consisting in site specific and permanent works, in residence for artists, and in workshops and laboratories open to the public.

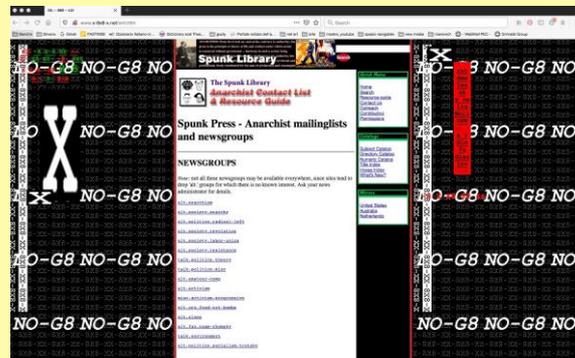
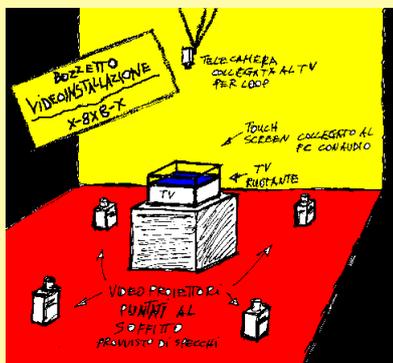
For Giacomo Verde and Studio Azzurro the interest in digital interactivity originates from previous experiments with video and multimedia art, which have marked the beginning of their artistic careers. Giacomo Verde is a very eclectic figure, with a background as performer and videoartist. Since the Eighties he has been making artistic works characterized by the employment of low-technology equipment, a choice motivated both by ethical and political stances and the will to share his creative practices making them accessible to everyone.

The experiment with interactivity has represented a natural outcome, as Verde has always based his poetic on forms of relational art. In one of his first interactive installation, *Degli Avi libera la memoria* (1992), the viewer, by tightening a pair of pincers, triggers a series of images on a PC documenting episodes associated to the African slave trade. The installation intends to evoke several associations: first of all, the importance of preserving the memory of slavery, secondly to reflect upon the multi-faced role of the computer: as a powerful memory machine, but also as medium that can cause a sort of slavery, of addiction, if it is not used properly.



Giacomo Verde, *Degli Avi libera la memoria*, 1992

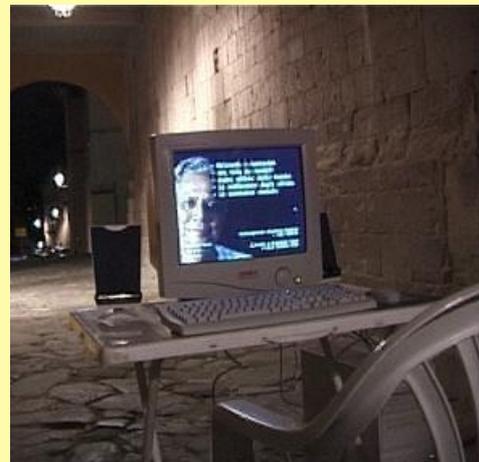
In the net-art installation *x-8x8-x* the visitor, through a touchscreen, can connect him/herself with a site containing both information on NGO (Non-governmental Organization) and links to groups involved in relational and community practices. Giacomo Verde has defined *x-8x8-x* “a non-profit-web-art- antiportal” and it can also be available simply as a site that everyone can access at the following link: www.x-8x8-x.net/index8.htm. The work shows an unconventional interface that guides the user through the web site using the principle of trial and error.



Giacomo Verde, *X-8X8-X*, 1999

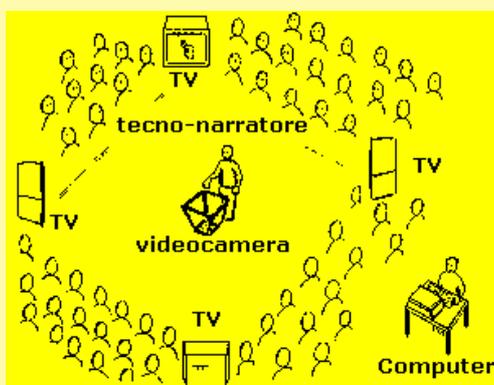
A particularly evocative work, extremely powerful in its simplicity, is represented by *Inconsapevoli macchine poetiche: sull'utopia* (2003), a series of four interactive installations respectively dedicated to San Francesco D'Assisi, Julian Beck, Subcomandante Marcos and Mohammad Yunus, figures whose utopian ideals have been put into practice. In order to activate the installation, visitors have to answer some questions on a computer which have been formulated by Giacomo Verde taking in mind the utopian ideals of the

figure to which the work is dedicated. By clicking the return-key, a sort of poetry will appear, based on a compositional principle which intermingles programming and chance, automatism and involvement, a technique first introduced in art by Dadaists and Surrealists through the method of the *Exquisite corpse*, and afterwards by William S. Burroughs with his cut-up.



Giacomo Verde, *Inconsapevoli macchine poetiche: sull'utopia*, 2003

Finally I would like to mention *Storie mandaliche*, an interactive theatrical work by Giacomo Verde, the first experiment in Italy of ipertextual dramaturgy. It is based on an ipertext written by Andrea Balzola and played by the “cyber-storyteller” Giacomo Verde who, during the theatrical performance, interacts both with the video-projections illustrating the dramatic plot and the public, involved at every narrative iperlink in the direction and /or outcome of the story. *Storie mandaliche* has been shown in many theatres and festivals and had three versions (1998-2005), with the use of different interactive software (Mandala System, FlashMX).



Giacomo Verde, *Storie Mandaliche*, 1998-2004

Giacomo Verde collaborates with many artists in collective projects, by creating electronic scenography for both musical and theatrical live performances. He also organizes seminars and workshops all over Italy, showing how to use his creative devices, that he conceives as a sort “open source works”, whose “source code” can be used by everyone, in order to foster collective creativity.

Studio Azzurro is an Artistic Studio, that was set up in Milan 1982 by Fabio Cirifino (photographer), Paolo Rosa (visual artist and filmmaker) and Leonardo Sangiorgi (graphic designer and animator). In 1995 Stefano Roveda, an expert in interactive digital systems, joined the group. Right from the first video productions, Studio azzurro has oriented its research on the aesthetical and social implications of technology, focusing in particular on the creation of environments where technology blends with narration and with space.

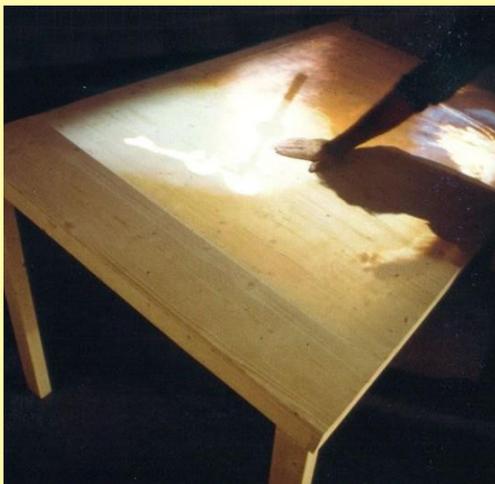
Studio Azzurro has always been involved in interdisciplinary projects that contaminate video with theatre, dance and music, creating groundbreaking productions, such as *La camera astratta*, a pioneering experiment of video-theatre, in collaboration with theatre director Giorgio Barberio Corsetti, commissioned for the opening of Documenta-8 Kassel.



Studio Azzurro, Giorgio Barberio Corsetti, *La camera astratta*, 1987

Starting from 1995 Studio Azzurro began to realize interactive installations. In these works, called “sensitive environments”, technology is hidden and interactivity is triggered by user-friendly systems, reacting to “natural human gestures” such as touching, making noise, walking and so on. The aim of these installations is to involve the participants in a collective experience, where the “man-device relationship” is substituted by the “relationship among people”, who activate micro- events and micro-narrations.

Their first interactive work, *Tavoli - perché queste mani mi toccano? (1995)*, consists of six tables on which are projected six seemingly still images: a woman lying down, a fly buzzing over a tabletop, a drop of water obsessively falling into a bowl. This sensation of apparent calm is suddenly disrupted when someone touches the images: they react, come to life and a small part of their story unfolds.



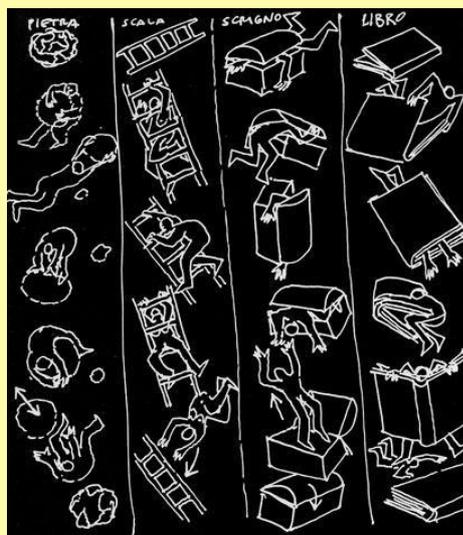
Studio Azzurro, *Tavoli - perché queste mani mi toccano? (1995)*

In *Chorus* the participants interact with a sort of carpets, where human figures are projected, forming a weave that seems to replace the symbols and images found in a traditional carpet pattern. When the visitors walk on the carpets the figures react, move and shout. Gradually a chorus is brought to life through the movements of the bodies. This installation evokes both the disturbing sensation than can be experienced in stepping on other people and the multiplicity of meanings associated to the carpets - as a nomadic territory, as a meeting place, as a status symbol for secular and spiritual power.



Studio Azzurro, *Coro*, (1995)

Il Soffio sull'Angelo (primo naufragio del pensiero), is an interactive installation commissioned by Pisa University in 1997, and set up in the Department of Mathematics, Physics and Natural Sciences. Strange figures hover lightly over three large parachutes, which evoke clouds. Perhaps they are angels fallen due to some intemperance. They seem earthly figures, outlined externally, but they are empty and light. They float in the air trying to cling to objects, like castaways to their wreck. Everything appears enclosed in an apparent calm, up to the moment when the spectators' breath reaches the parachute: then this expands and throws the angel out of its opaque sway. Its balance can explode. The parachute - paradoxical object of salvation - comes alive with many sounds: some light, modulated and sweet, others mechanical and pneumatic.



Studio Azzurro, *Il Soffio sull'Angelo (primo naufragio del pensiero)*, 1997

Sensible map (2008) is an installation made in Casablanca. It belongs to the cycle of works *Portatori di Storie* (*Bearers of stories*), investigating the values of memory, places and communities. On a surface of eight meter in length, a flux of people walking in an architectural environment typical of Morocco are projected. By touching one of this virtual figures the public can stop them and, in so doing, can listen to their personal narrations: to a song, a story, a personal memory, which will be materialized in visual suggestions. All these figures and narrations will compose a virtual map of Casablanca, made up of the collective memories, dreams and fears of its inhabitants.



Studio Azzurro, *Portatori di Storie*, 2008

In recent years Studio Azzurro have also used their artistic researches in the context of museum displays, exploring the concept of the museum as a “narrative habitat”, as an immersive atmosphere in which visitors can experience “living memory”. Studio Azzurro has obtained important recognitions at national and international level. To the group have been dedicated several solo exhibitions in Tokyo, Rome, New York and Munich. The group also carries out an intense teaching activity, through workshops, seminars and theoretical writings.

In this presentation I have analyzed the works of a group of Italian artists focusing on different aspects of interactivity: Mario Canali investigates psycho-physical reactions by using computer programs and scientific equipment able to monitor and visually interpret heartbeats and brainwaves; Giacomo Verde and Piero Gilardi creates interactive installations socially engaged, aimed at enhancing social and political awareness; Studio Azzurro investigates the idea of natural interface devising sensitive environments triggered by human gestures (touch, voice, movement). In my opinion these artists have

given an original contribution to experimentation with interactive technologies that deserves to be better known internationally in the context of digital art.

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