Remarks on Art, Cyberspace and Sociality

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Abstract: The development of information and communication technologies delineates, especially in its reticulate articulation, an environment in which artistic experimentation, with its modalities of representation, is able to express itself in a particularly remarkable manner. This environment, moreover, seems to promote creativity and the affirmation of the cognitive capacities in general. To better understand such potentialities, however, it is opportune to consider also those positions (such as Paul Virilio’s) that are hyper-critical of the advent of the “electric environment” and its “artistic” articulations.

The Mutant Artist

In his dialogue with Enrico Baj on the “horror of art,” Paul Virilio critiques the motif of the “correct” image, produced by that art of “motorization” (“through projection, intense beams of light, video installations, high definition”) which today, through its “effectiveness” and “spectacularity,” seems to have declassed all other optical sensibility and figuration, leading to nothing less than an outright “disappearance of painting, drawing, and engraving.”

As Virilio sees it, even if we revive McLuhan’s well-known formula of the “global village” we cannot but note that the “village” has been enlarged to the point that, today, it coincides with the reality of globalization, within which communication (on “screen”) travels at extraordinary speeds. The production of more and more spectacular images – here, we recall Guy Debord’s “integrated spectacular society” – leads, within the reality of globalization, to an increasing marginalization of the artists who continue to work with techniques of representation different from those specific to motorized art. Today, in fact, we urgently need a serious re-posing of the question of art – once again, What is a work of art? – especially now, when the development of microelectronics

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“incarnated” in the Internet appears to favor a different way of conceiving “receptivity,” transforming it radically (if not, in fact, changing it into something else), particularly with respect to an instantaneity that borders on the traditional practice of falsification, on a veritable “art of the false.”

It is equally significant, however, that contemporary art, in its evolution, often appears as the most appropriate stimulus for a proliferation of discourses with a philosophico-aesthetic slant, especially now, with the refining of communications technologies setting itself up as the appreciable “environment” of an expressive practice characterized in new terms. But this proliferation must not be taken as simply a sort of technological “academicism,” as pure apology for the impact of motor art – the “motorized” – on all the arts, and on the plastic arts in particular. We need to think of motorized art – video art especially – as a form of artistic experimentation sustained by one technique of representation among others, as the means of expression of one subject among many, thus avoiding any propensity for simplification or – in the extreme – for “elimination.” In this sense, also in referring to the Internet – or, broader still, the “network” – as the new environment of image production, we must assert the typical principle of inclusion (and not exclusion) that distinguishes a field such as cyberspace, which “is designed to interconnect and provide an interface for the various methods of creation, recording, communication and simulation.”

We can, in fact, think of cyberspace itself as a construction site that must be recognized as a “potential for beauty,” as Pierre Lévy maintains, in the sense of a technocultural environment that “will encourage the development of new kinds of art, ignoring the separation between transmission and reception, composition and interpretation.” Lévy, the theorist of collective intelligence, describes the artistic phenomenon and how it has presented itself – in the West, at any rate – for centuries: “[...] a person (artist) signs an object or individual message (the work), which other persons (recipients, the public, critics) perceive, appreciate, read, interpret, evaluate. Regardless of the function of the work (religious, decorative, subversive, etc.) or its capacity to transcend function in search of the core of enigma and emotion that inhabits us, it is inscribed within a conventional pattern of communication. Transmitter and receiver are clearly differentiated and their roles uniquely assigned.”

Lévy particularly insists on the fact that the development of new forms of art cannot but be favored by a technocultural environment to be understood as a sort of concrete “possible” always open to realization and mutation. It is this comprehensive “mutant” – this anthropological space of knowledge, of

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3 Ibid., p. 122.
the virtual *par excellence*, of networks — that now constitutes a new form of art, capable of proposing “different modalities of communication and creation” to those who participate in it.

The “artist” works to construct “an environment, a system of communication and production, a collective event that implies its recipients, transforms interpreters into actors, enables interpretation to enter the loop with collective action.” The art of cyberspace does not identify itself with any works in particular, but is characterized as an articulation of processes, as creative practice of/in a living environment whose co-authors are the “many” (the embodiment of this creative cycle is manifested in “moments, places, collective dynamics, but no longer in individuals”). In short, there is the concrete possibility that a collective brain, intelligent collectives, in virtue of the new means of communication, can give “body” (here: an artistic “body”), as a multiple imagining, to processes of continual invention (of languages, signs, figures...). It is in this perspective that one can claim, as acute critics do, that the artwork is being radically transformed, just as, in all likelihood, the very figure of the author is being metamorphosed. Today, the author takes shape more and more as the executive party (hence not the “whole”) of theoretic and projectual experimentation that can by no means be referred to a single subject. Of course, our focus here is on the dimension of reticulate art, as it is articulated in the digital world on the basis of its essential dynamics of demand for generalized participation. It is here that we can appreciate an idea of artistic identity without precedent, far from traditional forms, at the moment in which rapid technological development, underlining the collective character of many current tendencies of network art, is favoring a metamorphosis of authorial identity. The artist’s “electric” environment creates a communality of signs but does not limit itself to a terrain of artistic diffusion and distribution: the groups, the communities that constitute/construct it are authors of expressive practices. Such practices cannot be grasped at all unless we understand their communitarian quality, which stimulates us to delve into a “new” way of understanding what is defined as “author” (and the author’s “role”). By their power of anonymous self-definition, these artistic groups — take, for example, the collective work of Strano Network, with its innovative use of the electronic scenario, of the immaterial territory of communication represented by the network — call into question the meaning of art. These communities “tell us that art is now everywhere and its authors are ubiquitous, in all social dimensions. For the sake of exaggeration, we could say: in any collective extension whatsoever, any public magnitude, any length common to environmental physicity, any latitude comprehensive of the world in its space-time manifestation, any height unanimous to the corporeal peaks of our internal and external extension, any surface of the earth
and of the constructed city, any depth, volume, or object of the natural, or artificial, production of technology."

The “real” expression of collective intelligence – the network or complex of networks – thus appears today, for those interested in fundamentally dis-individualizing artistic practices (“de-signs without name”), as an opportunity for contact with the aesthetico–sign–de–sign capacities of the dimension of “common” intelligence. It is important, then, to go back to Gabriele Perretta’s remarks on the Strano Network group, on the experimental approach to the network of an artist such as Claudio Parrini and of a cyber-rights hacktivist such as Ferry Byte, and on Tommaso Tozzi’s radical critique of the entire “apparatus of evolution and support of psycho-technological material,” as such a critique could be utilized by the most canonical legacies of the Western visual artist. Insisting on a sense of an artistic practice that asserts in new forms the “collective” premise of all technologically-supported artistic research, Perretta writes: “In recent years, Tozzi, also with the collaboration of the Strano Network group, has been promoting a philosophy he calls cotropia. The Florentine artist says that in the twentieth century people came to realize that the production of objects, ideas, or events, even when an individual act, is nevertheless the result of a re-processing of the collective heritage; such artifacts depend on the structure of the context in which they were produced. This methodology is thus applied to the utilization of the electronic scenario, using the network as an immaterial territory of global communication. Tozzi orients the most advanced media and conceptual processing of our current hyper–technological capabilities. Likewise, Claudio Parrini engages in this critique of the author as a profitable artist. Beyond these possibilities the collective artistic mind cannot go; let us say that, beyond this, there is only a semantization of biologies.”

A wide-ranging reflection on twentieth–century art cannot fail to note how it presents lines of development that seem to lead to that artificial scenario – that Umwelt of the network – which is today the scene of (techno)–artistic experimentation. On the one hand, we find the concretization of processes that radically critique the concept of art as object (“commodity”) of collection and/or museum exhibition (within a well-defined art market system), as well as the unitary figure of the artist – a figure that is today broken up into an open plurality of users capable of animating artistic creation and prolonging it in time. On the other, it is precisely the resolution of the mate–

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4 G. Perretta, Art.comm. Collettivi, reti, gruppi diffusi, comunità acefale nella pratica dell’arte: oltre la soggettività singolare, Rome: Cooper & Castelvecchi, 2002, p. 7. Next to Perretta’s text I also put the reflections of scholars who are particularly attentive to the developments of digital multimedia art: first, the work of M. Costa, but I also recall the studies by M. Deseriis and G. Marano.

5 Ibid., p. 277.
rial art object into so-called “social art” that underpins the “art of networking” and its current flowering in “net art,” i.e., creation of virtually existing spaces in the network by artists capable of participating together in the realization of art value. So, we cannot but emphasize the fact that telematic progression has brought greater “democratic spirit” to artistic creation and to the art system itself, conferring even more sense upon Duchamp’s conception of an art no longer “under protection,” i.e., overdetermined by the powers that be, in terms of time, symbols, signs, etc. At the moment in which the artwork acquires virtual form, as a network artwork, it casts off its traditional objectual guise to become a fluctuating event, a variable and collective communicative flow, transmitted through the multiple networks of cyberspace, where the principle of inter-action holds sway. It is in this perspective that we can appreciate how network art produces “community,” it itself becoming a network, a full and proper medium for different individuals/collectives and, thus, revealing its capacity to critique the cultural production mechanisms within global information society. In this particular artmaking, there is an idea of the possible creation of a communicative space that is mobile, open, metamorphic, predisposed to the manifestation of a self-promotion delivered into the hands of collectives capable of self-management: this, also, in virtue of the technological accelerations and interface systems that permit the co-evolution of distinct human practices and, indeed, of artistic operations.

Art and Value

In a text from the late 1980s, Antonio Negri advanced the thesis of an art characterized by the intimate contestation of capitalist domination, based on recognition of the full realization of Marxian “real subsumption,” understood as “that domination in which all the categories of life are reduced under a single form, in the service of the capitalist reproduction of society.” I think it would be opportune to return to this thesis today, when art appears to be making possible a more detailed reading of this situation – and not only in the sense of having, in some sense, to submit to it. The idea consists, precisely, in discovering in art a radical form of refusal of capitalist domination over productive activity, a figure of criticity connected with “the material position subjects have, as producers, in the movement of social constitution.” “Art, as an activity intent on the valorization of mass labor for the enjoyment of freedom, as the construction of a surplus of being through the liberation of collective labor power, cannot but be a refusal of capitalist domination. Art cannot accept the capitalist command. The fact that some artists do so means only that such artists lack consciousness and their discourse represents...
a *contradictio in adjecto*. In other epochs, when capital had not yet come to dominate the entire society, spaces in which poetic self-valorization carved out a niche of freedom were possible. That in this case art was enjoyed above all by the affluent classes is not fortuitous (as Marx emphasized: “the nonlabor of the few as a condition of development of the general powers of the human mind”). It is not fortuitous that patronage played a positive role for many artists: it permitted them to exist not as slaves of capital but, on the contrary, as liberated through patronage of the necessity to serve it. But when the real and total subsumption of capital over society is a *fait accompli*, then artistic self-valorization rebels. Its metaphysical condition is that of rebellion and refusal."

Interesting in Negri is this idea of art as power and ethics together, as a sort of hieroglyphic of power itself that is a sign of imagination and, more generally, of the capacity to invent and create. In short, in art one has to do with a self-promotion of bodies and brains (imagination and intellect) that in the age of the “new capitalism” – post-Fordian capitalism – even more than in the past – is employed in and bent to the logics of valorization. The psychological and physical, spiritual and bodily, energy that is expressed also in artistic experimentation is the prime fuel of a productivity that invests the totality of life and moves against the power of what is dead (labor). *En bref*, we can think of a surplus of being that is determined as a creative fact that arises from labor. Art, especially now, when labor is becoming increasingly “immaterial,” is perhaps constructed value *par excellence*, the most universal and individual at the same time; precisely because it springs from the transformations of the mode of production, it fits into new modes with relative ease. Is it possible, then, to describe, concretely, artistic labor as liberated labor, and its realizations as freely produced surpluses of being? For Negri, artistic values tend, increasingly, to elude – in their particular alternative production – the grip of capital, which nonetheless attempts to subdue them in the distribution and continual reorganization of the market. In a materialist perspective, art has the great power to bring us back to the creative act that constitutes labor in its real essence, even beyond the technical articulations that make its reproduction possible. The author of *Empire* is right when he sees artistic labor as the indicator of an extraordinary human capacity to “render being redundant,” to liberate labor itself. Liberated labor means, here, labor that is not subdued/enslaved/alienated/exploited, and is thus an expression of desire, of freedom, which innervates accumulated, abstract labor, in the sense of stimulating it to exceed, “to develop new meanings, in excess of being.” Beyond Negri’s remarks, what can help us here to understand the network as an immaterial territory of communication is an idea of the creative power of labor that can

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determine the artistic event as “beautiful” when it moves towards its liberation, the collective construction of an excess of being. En bref: what is “beautiful” is the production of new being that expresses the capacity of collective labor to re-make the world beyond the restraints of obligation and command; of all this, artistic practice is an important determination, especially because it informs us of the fact that “art can only live within a process of liberation. Art is, so to speak, always democratic – its production mechanism is democratic, in the sense that it produces language, words, colors, sounds that come together into communities, into new communities. To elude the aesthetic illusion, one must escape solitude; to construct art, one must construct liberation in its collective figure. [...] In the artist the collective liberates a surplus of being and singularizes it: the artist is itself an artwork. And if being is abstract and fictitious, the artist itself will be a re-making of being.”

It is in this perspective, I think, that we can locate Lévy’s perhaps excessively “angelic” reflections and Tozzi’s notes on “liberated liberty/freed freedom” within an electronic scenario that is radically innovative precisely because it is essentially “common.” Bien sûr, that which is common today to many theorists and artists is the conviction that – favored by the progression of communication technologies – we must rediscover the collective dimensions of the production of freedom and of the “beautiful,” as surplus of being, in order to broaden the overall potentialities of art now, when we see art as the way out of this anguish and horror that are the dominant existential elements of our present. The twentieth century is replete with tokens of a poetic sensibility that points to a way of overcoming pain through an ethical call that grows poetic and artistic. What emotion in all that! What motion, incredibly lively and productive, even as it leads us to experiences of suffering! Paul Celan’s disquieting and agonizing attempt to find a way out of the crisis is, unquestionably, one expression of this. But Celan has too little awareness of the collective dimensions of twentieth-century events when he indicates, as the next step after the step taken by art, understood as “artifice” that violently abstracts from the “creatural,” a further movement, namely, of poetic rediscovery of the vital reasons of the creatural, of its “breath,” of the “heart, which lived amongst men.” As I have often sought to emphasize, in Celan we can discern a sort of intimately subversive poetic anthropology that brings about a “conversion of pure mortality into infinity.” But, for me, this is not sufficient, precisely because what is needed here is a clarification of the collective condition of innovation, of the construction of being, still actually able – as the poet of a “nouvelle réalité” (H. M. Speyer) writes – to move those who have a skin still “spotted by birth marks, stained by secrets,” even

7 Ibid., pp. 64-65.
when they are “possessed” by “night,” are “under the order of night.”

But in the face of this order we must not declare our impotence, especially when we look to art as a “beautiful” expression of sociality, able to re-construct the world – or, better still, to make it, precisely by asserting itself as an ontologically constitutive power, prefigurative of a liberation that is also and above all “political.” This requires, among other things, a technological progression that makes possible the construction of a different “real” and the “translation” of new fantastic figures into original ontological reality. If we consider how this technological progression is taking shape more and more clearly in the dynamic of productive social cooperation (which keeps anthropological transformations and ethical investment together, along with the very excess of knowledge compared to the institution of knowing), then we can understand how today artistic enterprise can, also, be measured in terms of the actual liberation of being in excess, within and against the powerful “falsity” of a world overdetermined by the logics of capitalist valorization.

Thus we insist on art as construction of a surplus of being that lives on the processes of incessant transposition of the collective power of labor, which tends toward self-valorization in the installation and applications of comprehensive social knowing. Art’s value – in this perspective, and in the time of the “factory of knowledge,” of the “immaterial” (E. Rullani) – is that of a precious solution to the “enigma of the world,” to that “question of world” which forcefully re-presents itself in contemporary thought, especially in its philosophical articulation (essentially in the empirico-positivist and the phenomenological schools). But what most interests me here is an even more forceful call to a question posed by Gilles Deleuze: the question of “belief in the world,” i.e., of the necessary commitment implicit in responding critically to the “bewilderment” of the world itself, to our being “dispossessed” of the world. “Believing in the world” is what we express also in precipitating artistic events capable of eluding all “control,” capable of “engendering new space times, however small their surface or volume.” Over against logics whose objective is to make us not believe in the world, in the events that concern us, to make us break our tie with the world, I think that art can reconnect human beings with what they “see and feel.”

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tion of grasping artistic practice as a modality of the transformation of chaos into chaosmosis (as, again, Deleuze and Guattari put it), but of seeing its demanding character against the background of an enterprise that consists in making “belief” into full and proper “flesh.” En bref, in the intolerable world of post-Fordian capitalism, art gives us “a very special reason” for believing in the possibility of realizing a surplus of being, of producing (metamorphic, “monstrous”...) “body,” witness to life, to a seed that cracks the pavements.

(Translated from the Italian by Giacomo Donis)

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