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«In the lockdown period for the SARS-CoV-2 emergency, the «onlife» as an overcoming of the distinction between online and offline, has come to a complete fulfillment in the most economically and technologically developed countries, with the consequent proliferation of net-self and their forms of representation and expression in the immune digital space.»

NET-SELF — DIGITAL PERSONA IN A TIME OF EMERGENCY

Chiara Davino, Lorenza Villani

Chiara Davino, born in 1994, and Lorenza Villani, born in 1993, are architects who investigate the socio-spatial reality of Europe in the context of states of emergency and crisis. They studied at Universidade Automa de Lisboa and the American University of Beirut, respectively. In 2019 they graduated together with the urban research thesis *Panic. Readings of camps after 9/11* at Iuav University of Venice, where they were awarded a research grant to investigate the use of digital platforms in the Italian political context. Their current work is at the interface between architecture and sociology, with heterogeneous languages. They are among the co-founders of the sharing and debating project *Assembramenti*, born during the Covid-19 emergency, to reflect on the short and long term socio-spatial transformations triggered or accentuated by the pandemic.

«I choose a good hiding place and keep an eye on the entrance to my house ... for days and nights. ... I feel like I'm not in front of my house, but in front of myself while I'm sleeping and I'm lucky enough to be able to sleep hard and at the same time watch over myself carefully.»⁽¹⁾

«Then life is intolerable for me. How can I keep on living in the torment of seeming to be with Faustine when she is really so far away? Where can I find her? Away from this island Faustine is lost with the gestures and the dreams of an alien past.»⁽²⁾

The *Ausstellungswert* (exhibition value), identified by Walter Benjamin in the first half of the 20th century with the metropolitan city, is referred by him in particular to the commodity which, as such, realizes its own nature only by exposing itself to the metropolitan gaze.⁽³⁾ This concept was subsequently evoked by Giorgio Agamben to identify the condition of objects and bodies in the age of accomplished capitalism: «exposition» value that fits in between that of «use» and that of «exchange», avoiding both.⁽⁴⁾ According to the Italian philosopher, this condition finds its topical dimension in that of the «museum», which, par excellence, escapes the possibility of use and experience in favour of pure exposition; in fact, what was once felt, unlike now, as «true» and «decisive» is transferred to the museum.⁽⁵⁾

The process of museification, which has so far mainly concerned the territorial and urban scale, affects today, more than any other area, the sphere of individual digitization. The subjects are thus tied to the continuous and pure exposition of themselves and the collection of their representations is bound in a dimension that is increasingly crystallized and detached from concrete experience.

Today's paradigm of transparency imposes the continuous exposure of the self to the «other» through heterogeneous forms of representation of one's own person and the realities that this «inhabits». By «inhabiting» we mean a vast set of contemporary social practices, both individual and collective, in which the physical and digital dimensions as well as reality and its representation follow one another without interruption. The resulting social space⁽⁶⁾ is characterized by the atomization of the self and therefore by the co-presence, in both physical and virtual spaces, of multiple and heterogeneous personalities. The latter prefer the digital exposition of intimacy and tend towards the continuous evaluation of what is exposed, considering it indiscriminately a product that can be «capitalized». The result is a more or less marked alienation of the individual from reality through forms of representation of reality which are strongly tied to «transparency», «exposure» and «evaluation» of oneself and the other — the latter a constant parameter of self-evaluation.

In this sense, the aptitudes of two of Franz Kafka's and Adolfo Bioy Casares' literary characters, respectively, an indistinct creature between man and animal and Morel, are extremely topical. The former, engaged in the continuous and endless construction of his burrow, ends up feeling safe only outside of it, feeling pleasure in the conviction of observing his own

image from the outside and self-representing himself safe and protected inside the burrow. The second, through the construction of a machine inside a space emblematically named Museum, reproduces incessantly images lived so as to crystallize those of himself, his friends and the woman he is in love with, so that they can live together eternally. Involved in observing the images reproduced by the machine there is an anonymous character, tormented by the incessant vision of the crystallized representation. The two spectator-characters, the creature of Kafka and the anonymous one of Bioy Casares, respectively, feel pleasure and torment for their own or others' crystallized images; the former, like Morel, exercising forms of control over the images of themselves, others and space. Kafka's creature creating fictitious images of himself in real time, the character of Bioy Casares perpetuating real images in a crystallized time, both bound themselves in a dimension of separation from reality, of alienation from it and of pure «collection» of imagined and perpetuated images. The collection, devoid of an end, submits to continuous torment; describing the figure of the collector Susan Sontag identifies her character of the Knight as «someone whose joys are never unalloyed with anxiety. Because there is always more. Or something better. ... But this ideal completion for which every collector hungers is a disappointing goal».⁽⁷⁾

The advanced geometry of Internet takes to extremes the process of museification — emblematic is the face framed during video-conferences and video-calls, topical to lockdown, during which users have become «pieces of art» alienated from direct contact with other bodies and experiences. In this geometry, there is total exposure and visibility — the immediate distancelessness conceptualized by Jean Baudrillard in the «obscene».⁽⁸⁾ As a transparent permanent archive, both its own and others', the digital produces forms of increased nostalgia, «morenostalgia», inducing to process experiences mediated by the screen as life; perception of a painful and envious lack, whose reference is the experiences of others shared online.⁽⁹⁾

In digital platforms, architectures of mutual visual surveillance, individuals, spectators of themselves, await evaluations to the representations that they build on their own, exhibited and profoundly private.

In the lockdown period for the SARS-CoV-2 emergency, the «onlife» as an overcoming of the distinction between online and offline⁽¹⁰⁾, has come to a complete fulfillment in the most economically and technologically developed countries, with the consequent proliferation of net-self and their forms of representation and expression in the immune digital space. The momentary crystallization in the collection of present selves, engaged in multiple and heterogeneous capitalization activities, and of past ones, reproduced and displayed, has brought to the extreme the process of detachment from the concrete collective experience and use.

The lockdown, chronotope of the alienation by SARS-CoV-2, has made images the only possible representation of self and the other. Within a collective dialogue, conveyed by representations and slogans promoting social change, the absence of biological bodies has, however, renewed



Screenshot from COVID ROOM (c) 2020. Created in March 2020, this digital platform has exploited those of video-conference of telework and distance learning to bring people together.



FFIXV: Zalera/Facebook, 2020. Virtual funeral and memorial march organized in April 2020 by gamers in memory of a player who died due to Covid-19.



Screenshot from OOPS, Not Here – part.1 Nirvana, 2020. The limits of the body and the perception of the environment are expanded by virtual space in a fantastic place.

their need to define themselves as political bodies — evident in the recent demonstrations of the BLM movement. Even more so during the SARS-CoV-2 emergency, the paradigms of transparency and information that characterize contemporary society, have structured the everyday life of individuals who, thanks to mobile digital devices, have been able to remotely manage and share the multiple spheres of life, both public and private.

The contemporary capitalist regime, according to the Korean philosopher Byung Chul Han, imposes the «evaluability», the «taxability» and the «equiparability» of «things» which thus become constantly illuminated and transformed into images to be exhibited⁽¹¹⁾; the human «visage» itself becoming «face» dissolves in its value of exposure, abandoning every «aura of the gaze» in favour of obscenity.⁽¹²⁾ Within this regime, users subject to communicating and showing themselves extensively, thanks to digital devices that make the collection of data and information easy and immediate, consolidate the society of transparency that presents more and more structural analogies with a widespread and capillary surveillance society, spatially referable to the *digital panoptic*. The latter, during the SARS-CoV-2 emergency, was consolidated through social processes of exposure, control and transparency in favour of «functionality» and «effectiveness».

Some hashtags — thematic connectors — in the foreground during the Covid-19 emergency in Italy will be examined below, in order to investigate the possible ultimate purpose of sharing specific images.

#iorestoacasa [#istayhome]

On March 10, 2020, the Prime Minister's Decree *IoRestoACasa* was published in the Official Gazette of the Italian Government in an attempt to prevent the further spread of the virus, to which was added the homonymous initiative, in the form of a hashtag, launched by the Ministry of Health to raise awareness of the new directives. The campaign involved both the physical and digital dimensions. In the first case, citizens were invited to download a tag and print it, fold it, glue it, cut it and then hang it on their door, thus informing their neighbours of their compliance with government directives.⁽¹³⁾ In the second case, a campaign was launched involving social platforms in the structuring of quarantined self-exposure spaces.⁽¹⁴⁾ An example of this is the #iorestoacasa box opened on Instagram to collect the «stories» of all those who, using this hashtag, shared their home experiences. This campaign, along with others such as #iolofaccioacasa [#idoitathome] and #mysweetquarantine, involved different profiles, all engaged in providing advice and suggestions on how to spend and organise the quarantine period, from child management at home to sport. Within this «chronotope» of images, each individual is both body on display and voyeur.

#iononmiannoio [#idontgetbored]

Parallel to the relationship of mutual surveillance and transparency, the neo-liberal regime's tendency towards self-capitalisation has given rise, in the context of lockdown, to a series of social campaigns focused on how to «invest» and «maximise» time within the home. An example is #iononmi-

annoio, an initiative launched on Instagram and TikTok by the Municipality of Rome and aimed at enhancing virtuous activities carried out in the afternoon through a «young» contest; the winners, those who accumulated more likes, were published on the social profiles of RomaCapitale and the influencer-coordinator of the contest Martina Gualtieri.⁽¹⁵⁾ However, the «like»-evaluation, which does not require accurate examination but is rather based on the pleasantness of appearance, has meant that the majority of the images collected under the hashtag were mainly about beauty and fitness as easy and immediate forms of self-capitalisation. The self-exposure and self-maximisation operation also involved various areas such as the SUS (Unique Reporting System) platform of the Municipality of Rome, activated in 2005 to collect suggestions, complaints and reports from citizens and which, with the emergency, was implemented to allow for reports of gatherings in contrast with the social distancing imposed by the government. The initiative, which was followed by numerous complaints from citizens for incitement to hatred, was announced to the population through the Facebook profile of RomaCapitale through a post: «Are there groups of people that you think are in opposition to the rules of the health emergency? You can report them directly to the competent Authority with the SUS active on the institutional portal of RomaCapitale. It's simple, just follow the instructions»⁽¹⁶⁾. In this case, the citizens themselves, in order not to get bored, become temporary guardians of the city as well as promoters of a «civic hyper-sense», which maximized and elevated to the extreme, makes every citizen a new, but inexperienced, force of order.

Permanent Archives

These forms of exhibition, capitalization and collection of new personalities were flanked by a massive operation of «transparency» of digital memory. Through the daily re-sharing, during lockdown, of posts shared on the same day during the previous years, a viral activity of publication of the infinite past selves, crystallized and perpetuated within the permanent archive, has intensified. In this melancholy operation of exhumation of the «ancient post», the exposed self retraces its memory which, made transparent in a past time, will yield to illumination in every possible future.

#andràtuttobene [#itsgonnaallright]

Digital individualities occasionally gather in ever-new formations, similar to the fleeting and unstable collective patterns of swarms of animals. An example of this temporary form of digital assemblage is #andràtuttobene, a slogan that has seen the different digital-self, socially distanced, in a temporary social community united in the fight against the biological agent and in a positive individual and collective perspective — almost completely vanished today.

However, the digital swarm is not coherent in itself and is incapable of pursuing a lasting political discourse.⁽¹⁷⁾ #milanononsiferma [#milanodoesnotstop] has been an example of how groups of people have moved relentlessly, pushed by the Municipality itself, to prevent the arrest of the city's economy because of Covid-19 in the week just after the discovery of the first infected in Lombardy.⁽¹⁸⁾ The swarm's impetus vanished in a few days in the gravity of the emergency situation.

At the same time as the beginning of the bathing season, the sudden conclusion of the health emergency, in the perception of the Italian population, has caused the digital swarm to dissolve, making the lockdown period appear as an isolated and now crystallized time whose repercussions, according to common opinion, are attributable only to the economic sphere. The lockdown chronotope, a museum of the net-self grouped in the thematic connectors investigated, shows itself in its alienated distance from the present. Moreover, it brings out a second alienation that concerns the further marginalization of those who, because of a digital divide, have not had access to the new social and collective virtual reality.⁽¹⁹⁾

However, there is no doubt that during the lockdown social sharing was, for those who had access, a playful alternative to isolation and domestic boredom. The assiduous frequentation of digital platforms, also induced by institutional and governmental communications conveyed there, recalls the story that in 1576 Étienne de la Boétie made of the conquest of the Lidos by Cyrus. Cyrus manipulated the free choice of the population, through the opening of places of leisure and imposing their frequentation by order, bewitched them and subjected them to his tyrannical government.⁽²⁰⁾ A «formula» potentially similar to the one accepted and shared by Italian citizens who, eager to escape from daily battle against the virus, have massively and care-free shared their private lives, thus allowing the collection of data careless of the profiling that follows by the owners of social platforms. During the Covid-19 health emergency, the willingness to donate data in solidarity with the community increased; with a view to strengthening the community, it goes «from a quantified self to a quantified community».⁽²¹⁾ If the observation of the other was until recently a voyeuristic pastime, today it assumes a character of active participation aimed at mutual control for health reasons.

The emergency, with its capacity to accelerate social processes, sees the net-self engage and mobilize in the production of continuous images of both exposure and capitalization, whose meaning, however, remains crystallized within the museum-chronotope.

The graphic apparatus presents heterogeneous forms of shared re-action and «inhabiting» developed during the pandemic. Voluntarily the subjects make themselves «other than themselves», from their biological bodies, to share collective practices.