

## The Authorless Work as an anticipation of collective virtual spaces

by Luca Panaro

From the beginning, Franco Vaccari's artistic exploration has paid particular attention to anonymous communication, especially when spontaneous. This peculiarity of his work makes him one of the precursors of modern relational technologies. We live in a period characterised by a compulsive urge to share knowledge and experience. The Web is teeming with examples of this trend, epitomised by the widespread sharing of amateur videos on the YouTube site, an inexhaustible source of video material used extensively by the world's most authoritative newspapers. The online encyclopaedia Wikipedia, written collaboratively by volunteers, also offers anyone and everyone the chance to write about what they know, sharing it freely to whoever has the inclination and time to read it. This spontaneous communication involving thousands of people interested in the co-creation of a collective project also characterises other web communities such as Flickr, Second Life or MySpace. This latter is one of the most popular websites in the world, providing a virtual community that offers its users blogs, groups, photos, music, video and anything else that they want to show to others. The *MySpace generation* is no longer interested in the act of watching, but rather in being watched, thus reversing the voyeuristic impulse of previous perceptive generations: voyeurs observe a situation without showing themselves, whereas 'MySpacers' deliberately show themselves to millions of users in a potentially interactive context. As Paul Virilio puts it, "our contemporaries *no longer want to see* but only *to be seen* by all possible means of audio-visual tele-perception."<sup>1</sup>

Participation in a collective project presupposes the absence of a guiding figure responsible for the running of a shared space, thus favouring the surrender to chance and the renunciation of foreseeable results. Already by 1972 Franco Vaccari had realised that he had to hide himself as author if he wanted to reverse the normal roles of artistic appreciation, bringing into play unpredictable forms of relation. In his LASCIA SU QUESTE PARETI UNA TRACCIA FOTOGRAFICA DEL TUO PASSAGGIO (LEAVE ON THE WALLS A PHOTOGRAPHIC TRACE OF YOUR FLEETING VISIT), the people (visitors) who were supposed "to see" were invited "to be seen" while the person who was supposed "to be seen" (the author) chose simply "to see". "And so, after works of art *without figures*, and paintings *without images*, the time has come for artists *without works of art...*"<sup>2</sup>, and, we might add, for works of art *without authors*.<sup>3</sup>

After the success of this operation, Franco Vaccari involved all the automatic photo booths in Italy in his next project, posting an announcement on every one of them to recruit new faces. This led to the creation of FILM DISSEMINATO (FRAGMENTED FILM, 1973-76), an unedited work made up solely of the single snapshots left by the improvised actors, each of whom could only see their own contribution to the film. This collective work is reminiscent of the artist Perry Bard's current project, involving an unspecified number of participants in his remake of *The man with the film camera*, a film by Dziga Vertov. Anyone interested, in any part of the world, can contribute video fragments, photographs or texts over the Internet.

Following the same kind of logic, in 1996 Franco Vaccari assembled a collection entitled ATELIER D'ARTISTA (ARTIST'S STUDIO), using the Internet, a work which was made up of volunteer contributions invited by Vaccari. Twenty years before this work, entirely anticipating the spread of the Internet and its related virtual interaction, Vaccari had

<sup>1</sup> Paul Virilio, *L'Art à perte de vue* [2005], Italian edition *L'arte dell'accecamento*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milan 2007, p. 64

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* p. 61

<sup>3</sup> Luca Panaro, *L'occultamento dell'autore. La ricerca artistica di Franco Vaccari*, APM Edizioni, Carpi (MO) 2007

conceived and carried out a project called AZIONE A DISTANZA (ACTION AT A DISTANCE, 1976), where he sent typed invitations to various people to “move an object, or a plant, or an animal, or a person, that is nearby you, to a different place, documenting this transposition photographically”. The two before-and-after photos were to be glued to the letter in specified places and then posted to Modena to Vaccari’s home address. This returned material, sent by deliberately stimulated participants, was proof of the artist’s long-distance influence, a practice which today is an everyday event thanks to computer and Internet technology.

If on the other hand we analyse the research contained in Vaccari’s book LE TRACCE (THE TRACES) – photos of words and images found on city walls – we can see how this 1966 work anticipated today’s mushrooming phenomenon of collective blogs, the virtual spaces where personal opinions can be freely expressed and which collect *traces* of a community’s thinking, expressed in *real time*. What was missing, on the walls of subways, barracks or public lavatories explored by Vaccari forty years ago, was the authors’ sense of being part of a collective work, so apparent on the Web today, where contributors’ identities, although not hidden, are background aspects compared to the importance of the collective project. The wall scribbings collected by Vaccari are poems by non-poets, just as MySpace displays stories by non-writers, photos by non-photographers, music by non-musicians. This focus on spontaneous artistic expression – yesterday through urban graffiti, today through the Internet – favours the suspension of judgement, the neutral recording of that which has been generated by a community of individuals who ask not to be judged by the subjective gaze of the author (who wants “to be seen”) but simply recorded by the objective instrument of the artist (who wants “to see”).

Through the use of photography, and thanks to the medium’s “technological unconscious”<sup>4</sup>, Franco Vaccari has been able to analyse what would happen in the absence of his authorial figure. It is easy enough to make out this aspect in his more well known works, but more challenging to find it in the earlier works presented for the first time in this exhibition. Some of the works displayed here at first sight resemble straightforward *reportage* photos, but are best appreciated as automatic, objective records. They are interesting not only as rare period documents but as open records, the product of a technology characterised by its own *unconscious* and therefore capable of surprising with unexpected details. It is of little consequence that on this occasion Vaccari took his own photos – instead of trusting in the automatism of a photo booth or the collaboration of people contributing their own photos – since, as he has stated of the photos he took at the famous Isle of Wight concert, these were records taken by shooting every hundred metres from left to right, without aiming the lens at specific subjects.

Text published on the book

*Franco Vaccari. Fotografie 1955/1975*

Baldini Castoldi Dalai Editore, Milan 2007

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<sup>4</sup> Franco Vaccari, *Fotografia e inconscio tecnologico* [1979], Agorà, Turin 2006