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NUMBERING FACES

«*Col tempo. The W. Project*» and the ways of pre-vision



The installation *Col tempo. The W. Project*, presented at the last Venice Biennale (2009) by the video-artist Péter Forgács is so complex that it can be studied from many different perspectives. The first is certainly a political-sociological one (the treatment of the other according to the ways of reclusion/exclusion as a prisoner of war or individual of a discriminated race; presence of control mechanisms of the dominating political structure, here the Third Reich). We can adopt the point of view of the used techniques – the found footage or the use of video-testimony, video and morphing – or the perspective of art history – the links with the portraiture tradition, especially with Rembrandt and Giorgione.

It is presented as an apparently eccentric work in respect to the main thematic axes of Forgács's production, based on the topic of private and familiar memory¹. It is possible anyway to track inside *Col tempo* an identical aim of subtracting the image to a precise context of the original use and re-locate it in the dimension of an installation that gives it a new meaning by the attribution of a different semantic value. The materials on which the work is based come from a series of research projects by the Austrian doctor Josef Wastl (1892-1968)² made between the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s.

Among the material that was produced in this scientific researches, found in 1998 at the Department of Anthropology at the Museum of Natural History of Vienna, we can find many 16mm colour film reels – whose length is between 6 and 12 seconds each. Forgács represents the images of the Wastl archive through the predisposition of new vision contexts and creating *tonalities of gaze* far from the original ones.

¹ For a panoramic on Forgács's work, see www.forgacspeter.hu/english [Accessed April 2009]; Radics, V., 2009, "Bespoke Time. Péter Forgács's Private Hungary", in Rényi, A., ed., *Col tempo. The W. Project*, Péter Forgács's installation, curator András Rényi, 53rd International Art Exhibition, Venice, Giardini di Castello, Hungarian Pavilion, 7th June – 22nd November 2009, Budapest: Múcsarnok Non-profit Ltd., pp. 96-117.

² Berner, M., 2009. "The Nazi Period Collections of Physical Anthropology in the Museum of Natural History, Vienna", in Rényi, A., ed., Op. Cit., pp. 34-47.

1. Structure of the installation: for a topology of the gaze

The typology of the gazes – the way in which we look at things – traces a topology, meaning a geography of the other – object of observation – that is developed in seven different settings.

Such complex work cannot be analysed in detail in this context. What is interesting here is underlying the way in which Forgács has used the technique of *found footage*³ making it speak with other forms of visual art (the video-testimony, the photography, the sculpture) for the constitution of a *multiple vision* based on the model of an enormous *gazing device*. Forgács's production holds together a refined reading of the tradition of classic portraiture (Giorgione and Rembrandt, both present at the entry of the installation) and the topics connected to it (the inter-subjectivity, the Me/You recognition), a new proposal on the topic of the face and its possibilities of meaning, a deep reflection on the tie between time, gaze, death and memory, a work on the nature of identity of each single human being and on the attempts to dominate it, a meta-linguistic thought in the instruments of representation of the Other and the Self (the painting, the camera, the video, the mirror).

The work stands on these five thematic levels, but I will try to demonstrate that these levels are sustained together and crossed by a basic thematic axis: Forgács's work is also – one could even say, it is *mainly* – a work on the *conditions of possibility of the vision*. In the introductory paper *Time to Gaze. Viewpoints for exploring the exhibition*, the curator of the installation András Rényi says: «Péter Forgács COL TEMPO explores the blindness of sight»⁴. Such assertion is just hinted at by Rényi, but I think it should be made explicit, since it contains the deep and paradoxical meaning of the work.

2. History of the W. Project

The installation is based – as we have mentioned – on a set of materials found in 1998 during an inspection in the Department of Anthropology of the Museum of Natural History of Vienna. It is a heterogeneous collection that includes texts of different kind, measuring instruments, photographs, 16 mm film reels, chalk masks, hair samples, hands and feet fingerprints kept as material of anthropologic measurement.

Many findings of this collection were produced and archived inside the projects started by Josef Wastl (1892-1968), director of the Department of Anthropology at the Museum of Natural History of Vienna from 1941. Strictly related to the Nazi party and the anti-Jewish ideology, Wastl considered his scientific research as a valid instrument supporting the racial thesis and he dedicated scrupulously the

³ For a first introduction on found footage, see Farinotti, L., 2009. “Memorie di copertura. Il cinema di Yervant Gianikian e Angela Ricci Lucchi come catalogo dell'orrore della storia”, in Grespi, B. (a cura di), «Locus Solus. Memoria e immagini», Milano: Mondadori, pp. 49-66; Brenez, N., 2002. “Montage intertextuel et formes contemporaines du rempli dans le cinéma expérimental”, in «CiNéMAS», vol. 13, nn. 1-2, pp. 49-67; Wees, W., 1993. *Recycled images : the art and politics of found footage films*, Anthology film archives, New York City; Basilio, S., 2004. ed., *Cut: Film as Found Object in Contemporary Video*, Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee. Peterson, J., “Making Sense of Found Footage,” in Hausheer, & Settele, C., 1992. ed., *Found Footage Film*, Viper Press, Luzern.

⁴ Rényi, A., ed., 2009. *Time to Gaze. Viewpoints for Exploring the Exhibition*, in Rényi, A., Op. Cit., p. 11.

application of his own knowledge to the realisation of projects demonstrating such thesis. The archive found in Vienna witnesses the achievement of a series of surveys: the first was made in September 1939 on 440 male Polish Jews, imprisoned in the soccer field of Vienna, which were submitted to a series of measurements of body data. From 1940 to 1943 other surveys were conducted on war prisoners in the camps of Kaisersteinbruch and Wolfsberg, on the inhabitants of the Austrian village of Hinterstoder – North Austria – and in the forests of Bohemia.

Wastl acquired for the museum also a series of skulls and funerary masks of concentration camps victims. Wastl's "scientific approach" dates directly to the practice of anthropological measurements put in place by Alphonse Bertillon (1853-1914), creator of the anthropometry. His method remained effective from 1882 for about thirty years, substituted by the survey method using digital fingerprints. Bertillon's method identified the prisoner through the survey and the recording of body data which were considered important: height, arm length, measure of the trunk, measure of the right ear, measure of the head, lengths of the middle finger, left forearm and foot, observation of the face (ear, forehead, nose, eyes), of the hands and the naked body (to signal the presence of tattoos, scars, deformation of the vertebral column and so on). The prisoner's form contains also a front and profile photograph of the prisoner.

The elaboration of a measurement system to classify the individual based on the body data is rooted to a wider cultural movement that from Bertillon dates its origin directly to Cesare Lombroso, Franz Joseph Gall, Pierre Camper, Johann Kaspar Lavater, Charles Le Brun, Gianbattista Della Porta, very different personalities that take upon the same theoretical background: the physiognomic perspective⁵.

The scientific activity of data gathering as anthropologic practice, as Wastl himself realised it - that is, a meticulous inspection of the individual to research signals indicating the race or a congenital inferiority - is rooted in the ancient idea that the body could reveal the character, the personality, the inclinations of the human being. No other body part is more appropriate than the face in order to show the singularity of the human being and to allow social identification: it is not by chance that Wastl – and Forgács afterwards, working on his material – concentrated so much on the shootings of the faces of the prisoners in foreground or very tight foreground, in front and in profile. Such judiciary practice inherited from Bertillon comes from a necessity to classify by type and measures each individual that, if taken singularly, in their specificity, would escape any attempt of classification.

To confuse identity with body features is a hard-to-die dream that Forgács tells us through an overturning of the ideological thesis implied in Wastl's archiving practice, according to whom «only the pre-set parameters of comparison and the numerability of samples makes "sense" of the individual case»⁶. Wastl's perspective aims at *canonising individuality*: the single case only *signifies* through the application of general rules or parameters previously given by the observer. The anthropometric lookout uses a criteria

⁵ For a first look on this topic, see Gurisatti, G., 2006. TI, *Dizionario fisiognomico. Il volto, le forme, l'espressione*, Quodlibet, Macerata.

⁶ Rényi, A., ed., 2009. *Time to Gaze. Viewpoints for Exploring the Exhibition*, in Rényi, A., Op. Cit., p. 16.

in which the visual experience of the Other needs to take place: the Other does not have access to my experiential horizon by *unpredictable* and unique modalities, but it is from the beginning (since before) *pre-seen* by my gaze. The vision is involved in a double process of canonization, passive and active at the same time: on one side the observing gaze produces a rigid interpretative grid (rules of measurement/observation) that informs the apparition of the Other (prisoner of war, inmate of prison, etc.); on the other side the body/gaze as an object of vision is deprived of the possibility of breaking the margins of the type-like representation in which it is constricted.

The gaze only sees what it has pre-seen, since the individual signifies only as numerable and 'sampleable'. The apparition of the *Titan* presents more clearly the overturning of such pre-vision strategy (and of bringing back the individual to a canonized type).

3. Three stages: Titan, the Museum-hall, the Mirror

Through the exposition in blown up picture of the prisoner of war Marceau R. N. 26380 – camp of Wolfsberg, 1942 [Figure 1] – Forgács overturns the thesis for which the face only has a value as being paired to an archiving number, creating a wide format image addressed to the contemporary spectator, imposing its recuperated value, as a face, as individual, exposed to the possibility of a “re-semanticization”. We can see here the passage from an organic face – belonging to the dominion of the anthropometric researches – to the expressive face, space attributed to art and literature where we gather what the subject sees in himself and tries to pick in others (individual and intimate space). This is about trying to pass from the world of types into the world of individuals.



Figure 1. Titan



Figure 2. Gallery

The first hall [Figure 2] is constructed by Forgács with the same intention. It is presented as an accurate reconstruction of a museum-like environment.

In the first room [...] Forgács stages this aesthetic Utopia of dialogue. The room is homely and intimate. We are in an elegant, properly illuminated museum space with atmospheric slow, profound, full symphonic music, with portraits in glided frames hanging on the walls at comfortable eye level. Everything is lit by hidden reflectors, yet they radiate light from within. An almost solemn, noble atmosphere fills the space⁷.

The viewer, though, soon realizes that the present portraits are not quite the same as in a traditional art gallery: the faces are moving – more or less slowly, more or less gradually – until the movement becomes almost imperceptible, but all of them are “animated”. Like Rényi suggests, Forgács creates with this simple technical trick – the use of morphing – a slight uneasiness of the visual perception of the portraits, creating «uncanny the fictitious Humanist dialogue between the viewer and the subjects of the portraits. In doing so, he highlights the artificiality of the presence, which made these people pose for a camera»⁸.

⁷ *Ivi*, p. 14.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

The work of retrieving the images archived by Wastl goes in a precise direction: Forgács takes the photographic portraits of the prisoners of the camps from the context of classification and pseudo-scientific practices of Wastl and attributes them a new aesthetic aspect. The portraits are finally freed from their cataloguing function (finalized to the study of the race) and given to a totally new universe of aesthetic contemplation. In this way Forgács deconstructs the original gaze dynamic that had historically produced those photographic subjects, in order to create a new *gaze dynamic* and deliver it to the contemporary spectator. The artist creates an environment of vision that allows the viewer to have a contemplative look, enriched with a *museum-like tone*: the faces stop being numbers inside an archival/classification experiment and acquire the status of *object of art*.

It is not by chance that the installation at the entrance welcomes a reproduction of the painting by Giorgione *La vecchia* and Forgács's previous work *In/Between – Rembrandt morphs*: the artist ties since the beginning, with a refined intellectual operation, his own work to the most noble portrait tradition. Forgács removes the censorship applied by Wastl on the individuality expressed in every face.

Such value must necessarily be negated in order to adapt the human subject to an experiment of racial anthropology, since the singularity/exceptionality of an individual does not provide meaningful data for a similar object. The specificity needs to be reduced to nothing in the listing of traits and measures – height, weight, hair and eye colour, shape of the nose and mouth, etc.

The photographs and films that were produced as part of the Wastl project are therefore not portraits, not even if German thoroughness in recording data kept a full and accurate log of the personal identities and a long list of other attributes of its models. The original intention was that these should belong to a scientific data-gathering exercise, and they give no intimation of the presence or absence of the Other. *They are records of facial features, not of individuals*⁹.

Forgács's work seems to allow a different relationship between viewer and object of vision: the anonymous face of an individual, originally photographed only as object of scientific classification, enters the new portrait dimension and becomes – (thanks to the gathering and the exposition of the work) – worth of being seen as *himself*. Otherwise, in this operation, we don't have to look for consolation and reparation from an irrecoverable past of humiliation and deprivation of dignity that were undertaken by anonymous human beings, with which we, as spectators, are invited to construct a new, totally free, relationship. The author's intervention is clear: a new rhetoric of the portrait is substituted to the one of racial anthropology/physiognomy and *imposes* a new dynamic between observer and observed. In Wastl's project «only the pre-set parameters of comparison and the numerability of samples makes “sense” of the individual case», while Forgács tries to give back to each single case a different specific value. In both

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 16.

cases it is about a way of taking place of the Other inside the horizon of the gaze of the I. On what conditions the Other takes place in my gaze?

The installation points out and criticizes the possibility that the gaze opens itself to the Other firstly as a will of domination. The vision appears strictly tied to the theme of violence and power: the vision develops itself mostly as a modality of possession of what it is seen. Wastl's practice of measurement observes *classifying* and observing it controls the observed.

The vision can dominate the Other, because the dynamic between the gaze and the object of vision already and since always activates the primary structure of the opening of the Self to the Other. To look means to establish a contact between the subject and the real, the assignment of an eye to something that surrounds it and it is answer of the gaze which establishes that thing as such.

In this way, seeing never presents itself as a *neutral act*, able of picking the real and particularly the presence of something in its own Self. The supremacy of the vision inside the Western epistemological system is given, on the contrary, to the conviction that the vision can – differently, for example, from the hand – access a dimension of reality (the “real/true reality”) that otherwise would remain precluded. To think of the vision and the light as accessing the truthfulness of things – to see is not to touch, but it is to look from a distance leaving to be what is seen – does not correspond to the reality of the anthropologically lived visual act. Man does not only see, but he is open to what the light shows him, always on the form of the gaze, that is according to the measure of one's own experience. The entity's opening cannot always leave out of consideration a certain pre-determination, a certain pre-judgement of the eye open to the light, in a way that light can never show what is seen in a neutral way, but it will always show things in a *certain light*, a certain circumscribed *cone of light*, determined by the experience of the subject. The vision changes into an act of taking: seeing would always mean, in last instance, *to take*.

This dynamic is implemented by the use of the mirror [Figure 3] that becomes the symbol of the vision as power, or as the reduction of the Other to the Self. «We must sooner or later come to realise that it is our very own look that plays the role of the protagonist in this drama»¹⁰.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.



Figura 3. The mirror

Forgács works on the limit of the vision and the possibility of overturning it into blindness: the vision is always blind if it pretends to be pure. The route of the installation is a route of disillusionment on the true capacities of the vision and it ends with the addressing of the spectator to himself by the deforming mirror. Seeing changes into taking, because the Self always moves on the threshold between the opening of the Other and the risk that such opening closes in itself, including the Other in the form of the Self. I do not allow you to be what you are: you exist because I can reduce you to myself.