

Artificial Face and Transhumanism in Contemporary Art¹

SILVIA BARBOTTO^{*2}

TITOLO IN ITALIANO: *Il volto artificiale e il transumanesimo nell'arte contemporanea*

ABSTRACT: The article deals with the macro concept of visage: the generation of signs from gestures and interactions, its rhizomatic and multimedia narrative, its artistic representations, its origin and background for a new rise of perceived and perceptual signifiers in which human action, together with natural and machined action, become the co-authors of such articulation. The transhumanism issue concerns not only hybrid representations and perceptions but also all attempts at modalizing incarnation.

KEYWORDS: Art; Artificiality; Transhumanity; Digitality; Faces

* University of Turin.

1. This article results from a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No 819649 - FACETS).

2. The first version of this article was presented during the Congress "Transhuman Visages: Artificial Faces in Art, Science, and Society" ERC Symposium and Meeting of the Senior Advisory Board, PIAST, Polish Institute of Advanced Studies, 28 January 2020. In that occasion the speech was dedicated to the memory of Isabel Cabanillas de la Torre, a young artist and activist, woman and mother. Ciudad de Juarez, 18 January 2020. On that occasion, 28 of February 2020, the text was amplified and presented as part of "Deep FACETS", Meetings on meaning 2019/2020, University of Turin. Due to the onset of COVID19, the presentation was held virtually as an experimental video available at the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7pmDDV3bewU>.

...Tu rostro es la vanguardia
tal vez llega primero
porque lo pinto en las paredes
con trazos invisibles y seguros.
No olvides que tu rostro
me mira como pueblo,
sonríe y rabia y canta
como pueblo...
(M. Benedetti, *Bienvenida*)

1. Initial evocations

In this text, as in the others of this volume, we deal with the theme of the face, its generation of signs from gestures and interactions, its rhizomatic and multimedia narrative, its artistic representations, its origin and background for a new rise of perceived and perceptual signifiers in which human action, together with natural and machined action, becomes the co-author of its articulation.

In the proliferation of meanings that attempt to offset the uncertainties of the vast uncanny valley, the human being tries to reduce its magnitude in order to achieve greater intelligibility. The semiotic approaches put into play here are, above all, orientations of everyday signification, a scenario in which the narrative is “the study of a totality of actions and situations taken themselves, without regard to the medium, linguistic or other, through which knowledge of that total comes to us” Genette (1980, p. 25), and largely vanishes to the point where it is not restricted to the narrative category alone, but open instead to hermeneutics, *ekphrasis*, criticism, interpretation.

We will therefore refer to the paradigm of art, as a privileged parasocial order in which it is not only the logical-syntactical resolution that governs, but rather the orchestral, experimental, paradigmatic, heterogeneous exquisiteness that directs its becoming. «No es arte lo que nos cae del cielo en el canto del un pájaro, y si lo es, en cambio, sin duda alguna, la más sencilla modulación conducida correctamente» Strawinsky (1940,

p. 16). Or as the artist Sebastien Bourg³ says, “Art is totally *proteiform*, in connection with design, industry, society, economy” and has strong links with semiotics that acts as a transversal connector.

«Un eslabón semiótico es como un tubérculo que aglutina actos muy diversos, lingüísticos, pero también perceptivos, mímicos, gestuales, cogitativos...» Deleuze and Guattari (2004, p. 13): in fact, we will not go into a specific semiotic imprint, but rather we will try to combine extracts from assonant traditions so that, together, they are conspicuous producers of meaning. The semiotics of culture, starting with one of its leading exponents, Juri Lotman, places a privileged emphasis on art, considering it a kind of alchemical option capable of transforming and creating new realities: «Art creates a fundamentally new level of reality [...]. The non-alternative achieves the alternative». Lotman (2009, p. 51).

Art is at the etymological root of the key word of this text: *artificiality*, as well as the fortifying columns of a superimposed building, is the lexeme on which the intriguing theme of the dynamics of the face treated here is grafted. Artificiality, which sometimes intersects with digitality, becomes a very proliferous, as well as controversial, terrain for new productions, but also for the spread of a mediatized aestheticization of any audio-visual construction. In fact, the digital medium offers not only an infinite platform for the dissemination of artistic work, but in some way propitiates an extension and interaction of any doing, facilitating networking: from a plastic-visual point of view the accentuated proliferation of images of these epoch is sometimes denoted with a degenerative meaning, defining the present situation as bulimic, as a connotation of quite a saturated area.

Therefore, it is necessary to rethink the production, archiving, diffusion, tracing of digital material in order to reconsider tracks, traces or apparently empty plots.

2. Face and twist

It is interesting to understand how the face is conceived, represented, modeled, experimented in contemporary art, but also how artistic tools are potentially *democratizing* through the network, allowing the spread of

3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bAZFlRtNOI>

certain aesthetic criteria previously belonging exclusively to the artistic sphere. An example are the very easy editing programs now present in all smart phones: with a few steps our photos are “improved”.

But what is relevant here is not only the intervention of human *agentivity*: we have always appealed to the instrumentation, technical and technological supports in favor of a greater constructive and experimental possibility, but in recent decades these technologies have undergone epochal upheavals, until we enter a *digital age*, thus stimulating the need to devote an important role to the agentivity of machines. We are thus moving in a tripartition between the natural, human and machine cosmogony and agency.

This will have to do with imbricated regimes of enunciation, with the cartography of saying, perceptive synergy, rhizomatic spatiality and with intersubjectivity, otherness. The identity created digitally and spread on social networks, is the result of that permeation in a continuous influenced process, constituting a hybrid in which what is shared and therefore travels on the net, conditions what we are and what we become. It is, somehow, *matter*, subject to proprioceptive agents.

It is quite well-defined that the use of computation, digitalization in *art* can go from the very common use of modest devices such as cameras to record, to the closest interaction of digital devices and the human body until their interpenetration.

Digitalization, as (among other demarcations) the transition *from continuity to discreteness*, naturally implies a new phenomenal horizon which in turn becomes — because it already is — full of interconnected and dynamic implications.

Overlooking the exclusively analogical step and focusing on artificiality/transhumanity in art concerning the *visage*, we wish to explore its life up to contemporary times and, when necessary, go back to the oldest specificities of the beginning of telematics before the common *usages of bits*. Christiane Paul, in her book “Digital art” (2003), furnishes quite a complete panorama of this kind by introducing exciting examples of relevant works.

Some artists, through performances or video installations, work with real or metaphorical artificialities but still maintaining human faces and bodies. Many of them project a prediction of how the world will be in a few years or centuries, a visual exegesis of latent texts or, more simply, a

description of the actual situation. For example, the artists we will present below employ artificiality as a simple digitalization or a constitutional part of their production, ranging from the widespread utilization of digital photography to the complexity of managing big data or inserting technology into their own bodies.

Their works represent in some cases an archival digital body, and in others *an increasing artificial embodiment*; we aim to understand how the art system is increasingly incorporating digitality, thus integrating a *semi-sphere* with new characteristics. We assume that the artistic sphere is a secondary modelling system, “which is characterized simultaneously by practical and conventional behavior and constant awareness of the possibility of alternate meanings to the one that is currently being perceived” (Lotman, 2011, p. 1) in the continuous game of resignification.

Digitality carries an assorted configuration combining an infinity of elements needed for the production and the interpretation of heterogeneous practices and scenes with predicative functions and *actantial* rules and their combination into strategies, particularly that of combining but also that of excluding.

It is quite different to say that something is communicated as opposed to created digitally: both are impregnated with a strong semiotic profile and sometimes the distinction is not so clear, connoting the digital sphere of ambiguity and charm with a big hybrid area in-between. Both involve practices in a larger dimension, a valorization of strategies including also places, routes and critical zones, and not only practices. Fontanille (2008 p. 20-9).

Certain contemporary artists use a digital narrative as a vehicle to speak about themselves, evocating, transmitting, confirming, showing their art by means of a digital medium and strategy. It is as if the face were therefore treated as an initially analogical landscape, a tactile prodrome which then becomes a derived morphology and a corresponding numerical coacervus resulting from an alchemical operation.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, for example, with her pieces “Painting infinitude” in 2019, paints “Possibilities of blackness”, inventing people that seem real but are not, and declaring: “Those are not portraits, but they are endless opportunities⁴.”

4. Available in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDJHy-YokLU>

A few other artists, do something similar, using different techniques, such as embroidery, collage, oil painting, drawing, sounds, installation and performance to represent semi-figurative faces, in an increasingly artificial arrangement. The face is presented here as a figurative drama, a haptic and somatic body arranged in the digital arena to spread and share, speak and recreate in a different format.

In digitalization, it is as if access to these same texts, albeit changing with respect to their originality because they are ultra-mediated and therefore transformed, acquires a more widespread and suffused dimension, paradoxically less tangible and at the same time *more* accessible⁵. Consequently, their life, that of works which are now virtual travelers, is constituted in a multiplication whose factors are still partially unknown: are they transhuman faces? Some of them are exponentially identifiable in viral speech, lucidly recognizable in the study of virality, in the analysis of supreme dynamics on the web, in the rhizomatic study of big data and their world, but also inevitably in the recognition of an object of value and valorization, in the inter-subjective micro displacement which condition both the original work and the way it comes into contact with the new formula.

The narration of the material art that takes place in a numerical version will tend to interpenetrate this binary function until it contributes, even if crosswise, to the initial structural aggregation and its signification.

Certainly, when not speaking of a painting, a drawing, a representation, but of a real face, then carnality is not understood in its broad sense, but in its *strict sense*. Performance, dance, and all the techniques whose sources are rooted in the sensory qualities of an artistic work, and therefore also the echo of a material that is no longer substantial but traced and indicated, take on an even more transmissive role of sensitivity in the artificiality, becoming a vehicle of a presence elsewhere or a *presentification* of an identity process rather than a pre-established identity.

5. With reference to the very recent article by Leone (2020) in which the author argues not only accessibility, but connection (including digital connection) and its nature.

3. Artistic praxis

The face, but especially one's *factual facade*, is a prodigious source of self-knowledge, as well as a powerful aesthetic self-representation (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Zanele Muholi (2019) *Somnyama Ngonyama*, Series “Hail the Dark Lioness”, photograph by the author, Biennale of Venice.

Zanele Muholi's recent self-portraits are expanded in size, intensity (skin color) and materiality (using daily objects in a subversive way): the incrementation of artificial value increments also their evocative function. Is this a transhuman visage? We will see better later. The artificial face depicted, one's own or someone else's, in a mediated or veiled and barely recognizable entirety, is a recurring theme in contemporary art.



Figure 2. Mino Pasqualone, *Toxic Love*, digital photograph printed on satin photo paper, 30 x 30 cm, by concession of the artist.



Figure 3. Giorgia Zoe (2019) *No•Body*, digital photograph printed on fineart inkjet Hanemuhle Photo Rag Pearl paper on d-bond, 110 x 110 cm, by concession of the artist.



Figure 4. Saggion Paganello (2018) *Fammi una domanda. Del blu e di altre storie*, digital photograph (Krk island, Croatia), printed on fineart, 100 x 150 cm, by concession of the artist.

The three Italian artists propose different frames with something in common: a blur, a veiled sense, a kind of covering, but also of vagueness based on the reduced *figurativity* of the image. The objects and subjects in *Toxic Love* are photographed in motion, unfocused, in *No•Body* there is a kind of transparent covering and in Saggion-Paganelli's work there is an overexposure that prevents the face from being visible. The images appear rather diminished, and this could be due to different cultural and/or aesthetical reasons⁶. All the artists use a *communicative device* of covering up the face, partially or totally: “the *protensivity* of the covering veiling pen-

6. Selected from Artists interview: “This work is a long-term project composed of several photographic chapters, born from the selection of photos that are part of our private archive. [...] By tracing portions of journeys, reflections of time and different places, we create synesthesias that tell us starting from partial signifiers. We have always been and without being time. We are images that are presences of us. We are beyond what we compose. Of why. And now? [...] Del BLU: In around the infinite, if there is such a man who opened it, it contains all the blue. A wonderful pain. How to change after the disturbance. There are just residues. Crowded residues. We erase ourselves only in some isolated points. Like the flight. Which then rains”.

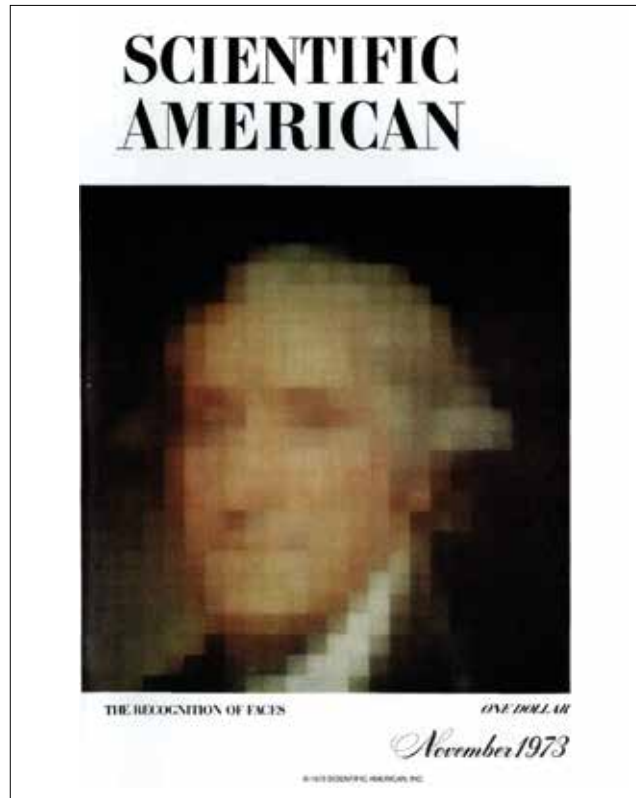


Figure 5. Harmon Leon (1973) *Front Matter*, “Scientific American”, 229, 5; <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24923235> (19 September 2020).

etrates the visual spectrum on both sides” (Barbotto Forthcoming, p. 7).

The image is deviated from its exactness and rhetorical clarity, thus perhaps causing confusion in the observer, who is instead made an accomplice in the phenomenological *observation*, but also a co-participant in the media game. The digital situation creates this kind of *ontic* indeterminacy, in which the presence, albeit virtual, is somehow embodied. It is instead, the shared physical space that is not.

The construction of metamodels and interpretations, together with the semiotic pluralism of each text, artist, storytelling implied, co-participate to construct the polyphony of cultures: “Establishing matches between artistic texts and their translations is quite impossible, because those matches presuppose choices: so this translation of the untranslatable appears as a “mechanism that creates a new thinking”. Lotman (1980, p. 41).



Figure 6. Oscar Nin (2019) *Portrait*, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 cm, Barcelona, by concession of the artist.

Among the first artists to clearly represent this dialogue between pixels and matter, which later became the foundation of facial recognition, we see Leon Harmon whose work was on the cover of the *Scientific American* in November 1973: “The recognition of faces” showed the facial mosaics (pixels) at the basis of studies conducted within the Bell Labs group. Helfand (2019, p.181).

Oscar Nin, on the other hand, incorporates the same icons in some parts of his paintings: the faces represented seem to merge with the series of small squares in a sort of new hybrid, disconcerting and confusing landscape. We can see the realistic appearance of the face, but the *pixelated* sector makes the image ambiguous, sunk in the paradox between anonymous loss and detailed recognition.

Contemporary technologies that favor facial recognition are undergo-

ing great changes and innovations, becoming more and more detailed and meticulous: their first step is to capture the image. “Facial recognition is the first step in automatic face recognition and has applications in biometrics and multimedia management. Due to the complexity of facial and non facial collectors, highly accurate facial detection with a high detection rate and a low false alarm rate has been challenging [...]. Each weak classifier is trained to minimize empirical error for a given weighted distribution based on classification errors of previously trained classifiers (Stan and Anil 2005, p. 24).

Scientific innovations are becoming more and more detailed and artistic experiments are forward-looking, predictive, critical. In this possibility of detecting, understanding, analyzing, there is also the artificiality of hiding, concealing, or simply veiling. As well as the translating intentionality of otherness, there is the intrinsic textual and narrative disposition to find oneself as the subject of reading oneself and others: «not only the bodies of the others, but also one’s own body is the source of a quotidian experience of otherness» (Leone 2019, p. 2).

From the advent of digitality, art has taken several possible nuances in the use of artificiality and interpreted them in constructive, provocative or disruptive forms. A large revelatory and analytical area, specific to this medium and connected with the above considerations about covering/showing the face, concerns surveillance.

In this sense, one of the first and most representative artistic works of the XXI century is Manu Luksch’s *Faceless* (2007). This film was made with closed-circuit television cameras (CCTV) for public surveillance and in an article Luksch writes «*Faceless* is a CCTV science fiction fairy tale set in London, the city with the greatest density of surveillance cameras on Earth»⁷ (Luksch 2007, p. 73).

In her “Act to Manifesto”, she claims: «I wish to apply, under the Data Protection Act, for any and all CCTV images of my person held within your system. I was present at [place] from approximately [time] onwards on

7. 4.2 million CCTV cameras in place, its inhabitants are the most watched in the world (*A Report on the Surveillance Society for the Information Commissioner by the Surveillance Studies Network*, September 2006, p. 19; available from www.ico.gov.uk; last accessed 16 September 2020). Many London buses have five or more cameras inside, plus several outside, including one recording cars that drive in bus lanes. Luksch also shares the script given to the authorities under the DPA (Data Protection Act Law of 1998) to access the recordings in which she was present.



Figure 7. M. Lucksh (2007) *Faceless*, screenshot from the film, London, by concession of the artist.

[date]. (From the template for “subject access requests” used for *Faceless*)» (Luksch 2007, p. 73-4). Luksch started this process in 2002. She had to be visible in a specific space/time to be able to ask for permission to get the recordings and had to overcome a long series of obstacles and impediments that met her requests. For example, this is one of the answers she received: «I can confirm there are no such recordings of yourself from that date, our recording system was not working at that time. (11/2003)» (*ibidem*).

Currently some artists are also studying ways to alter appearances: for example, Jin Cai Liu has invented the “Wearable face projector”, a small beamer that projects a different appearance on the face of whoever is wearing it, giving them a completely new façade. The construction of the story, the signified portion, the content of the research and the internal discussion is partially showed; the narrative as a text of and in time, the artistic statement and discourse with a specific format and structure is part of the signifier portion; all the contexts and situations of producing narrative actions, their presentation, reproduction and reception are part of the narrating process (Genette 1983, p. 25-7). And this process is changing radically with the advent of the pandemic of 2020, but we will not approach this delicate issue in this article.

4. Transhuman directions

From both sides, digitality is entering the human body metaphorically or physically, and humanization and artistry are being introduced more and more into machines such as robots or androids: the issue concerns not only hybrid representations and perceptions but attempts at *modalizing* incarnation.

In the second half of the twentieth century digital works began to appear. Among the first contributors was the “Liquid Views Virtual mirror” of Narcissus Research⁸ Intelligent Multimedia Systems: “By touching the water surface (sensitive glass) he changes his image by haptic control, like image change in floating water. The innovative interface allows an intuition-based interaction with the computer. (...) Different methods of digital image synthesis are used for interaction and image processing supported by special hardware algorithms. Embedding video into virtual environments in real time shows the wide possibilities of digital interactive television.” It is a suggestive work in the tactile imbrication of a body that becomes diffused.

The instrumental hybridization of machine agency and human action, with its experimental and intellectual purpose, brings us back to the work Duchenne Smile and seems to indicate the path that unites the artificial-digital binomial in a staging of the transhuman paradigm. Before going into the next works, let us look at the origins of this word: according to some authors, transhumanism was coined by Julian Huxley, for whom “It is the idea of humanity attempting to overcome its limitations and to arrive at fuller fruition [...]. Man remains man, but transcending himself, by realizing the new possibilities of and for his human nature”. According to others, such as Peter Harrison and Joseph Wolyniak, it has, instead, a much more remote origin, whose traces are recognizable in Dante in the Italian version *trasumanar* (a sort of deification — of Glaucus — that in turn goes back to the Christian tradition, according to St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians): transhumanism is for them a «movement that seeks to promote the evolution of the human race beyond its present limitations through the use of science and technology» (Harrison and Wolyniak 2015, p. 1).

8. From ADA, Archive of Digital Art www.digitalartarchive.at Fleischmann/Strauss (last accessed 16 September 2020).

A common denominator among the various versions, is certainly the complementarity between natural *limitation* and the possibility-necessity of artificial overcoming. But what happens if the overcoming becomes effective and man does not find himself again after having overcome himself? That is, “the human being who loses himself, overcoming himself” could be the title of a story of degenerate post-transhumanism. Perhaps close to the cases in which the perception of the distinction between two faces (one real and the other completely elaborated by algorithms⁹) becomes almost impossible; or the case of a machine that through deep machine learning reaches the human quantity and cognitive and expressive quality, another emblematic example even if still fictitious.

At this point, we would like here to restore the prefix *trans* to its basic etymological version, which indicates from the Latin *crossing*: somehow the most contemporary and tangible aspect of trans-humanism, made evident in every interaction between human beings and other species, objects and, certainly, machines. The close link with the artificial/digital/virtual aspects examined earlier is underlined, but it also concerns the mutual man-man interrelation. Let’s see some forms in which this reciprocity comes to life, with examples of how the instance of the face is shown, transformed, invented, represented in art.

Identifying science and technology in favor of human enhancement, and not necessarily *overcoming*, invites us to know its materials and functioning, interpositions, competitiveness and internal as well as functional meanings. Among the most emblematic and recorded moments in the history of the face is certainly the operation carried out by Dr. Duchenne, in the middle of the 19th century at the Salpêtraine Hospital: «J’ai réuni dans neuf tableaux synoptiques, sous forme de petits médaillons, les têtes des 82 figures qui composent la partie scientifique et la partie esthétique de l’album». He focuses on particular cases, on the experimental, direct arrangement and says in his writings: «Il m’est permis d’affirmer que ce mode d’exploration électro-musculaire n’a pas été appliqué avant mes recherches expérimentales. Il n’est venu certes à l’idée de personne d’attribuer à un but d’étude de myologie ces expériences grossières d’un physicien qui, à l’origine de l’électricité, provoquait par des décharges électriques des convulsions sur des têtes de suppliciés Duchenne» (1862, p. 15-16).

9. <http://whichfaceisreal.com/index.php>.



Figure 8. Duchenne (1862) *Smile*, Pl. 7, p. 298.

While for years the focus was placed on Dr. Duchenne's discoveries as a scientific success, Duchenne's Smile even being defined as authentic, later this emphasis was shifted to the nature of the experiment, the inhuman use of the available artificial instrumentation, the authenticity and reliability of the information obtained. This is the focus of the work on Duchenne's Smile by Anna Muster and Michele Barker who, through the installation based on a double channel video, relate the nature of the experiments to the new techniques of digitalization and surveillance. They do this to make explicit "how we imagine identity today at the intersec-



Figure 9. Judith Egger (2020) *Dämmerung*, videoinstallation, media player, wooden base, digital photograph, by concession of Aural Galleria.

tion of expression, technologies and securitization [...]. In this video installation, we explore the heritage and legacy of what is now known as the Duchenne smile — the staging and construction of ‘genuine’ expression in the genesis of neurological science and psychology via the work of Darwin, Duchenne and others — through to the contemporary capture of facial expression in face recognition software” (Barker and Muster 2009-2010, p. 101-4). Each medium has its own constitution, capable of treating objects and experiences in a different way, also according to its technological features. Video, *the audiovisual union*, with its ability to

capture and transmit fine motor skills, plays a fundamental role in the in-depth study of the face. Among the greatest exponents of Video Art, the voice of Bill Viola tells us how the moment of his mother's death, and his living and treating it deeply, made him understand the essence of video: "This medium, these machines we have right now, they are recording, they are keeping each other's souls, they catch, they hold souls, and you are going to keep this playing back, if you want, and you will take care of it, technically, you are going to play back 5, 10, 20, 50, 100 years from now, because this medium is going to continue to evolve, and will go on (...) This medium has life, it holds lives, it is not the real, it is not the actual person, but it holds enough to understand that, like a photograph, we have some feeling, so the feelings don't die, they don't go away, they are here right now"¹⁰.

Is the act of approaching death, and the signs left in recording this moment, part of an inevitable transhumanity? In the piece "The passing, 1991" he features the dying mother's face, her last breaths, the tubes channeled into the orifices, the *Hippocratic gaze*, the raiment of announced death.

The introduction of various types of artificial devices has always been central to facial manifestations: the easiest way of articulating the face as a kind of a transhuman one, could be through the use of makeup, special masks, or through the implementation of sculptural elements as in Judith Egger's work, which reveals a kind of *scalar hyperbola*, but also a strong autobiographical study starting from experimenting *with*, *on* and *inside* the face. In *Dämmerung* there is an expressive expansion towards the outside, and at the same time an inner contemplation accentuated by the semi-open eyes and the presence of the gushing water.

In her recent performative series there is an interpenetration of a digital apparatus inside her body and at the same time outside, through a video projection on a big screen: contraction and expansion, the haunting opening towards the interior of her mouth, the connective channel through which the face becomes voice, absorbs and expels, mutes and speaks¹¹. An

10. Extract from the interview "Camera are soul keepers", available at the website <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3VfWLlkuRI> (last accessed 16 September 2020); min. 22'.

11. Description by Aural Galeria: "Judith Egger establece escenas tridimensionales en miniatura en su cavidad bucal, un lugar sensible entre el interior y el exterior dónde no solo la respiración y el sonido salen del cuerpo, sino que se genera comunicación. La boca abierta se convierte en un escenario, un teatro que revela varias escenas. Va acompañada en vivo por sonido e imagen



Figure 10. Judith Egger (2020) *Tv Night Green*, video installation, performance and digital photograph, by concession of Aural Galleria.

explanatory denunciation of this growing fusion through the tendency to *transhumanize* it.

From the most traditional portrait to the most innovating treatment of the face, contemporary art proposes a wide range of narrativities based on its *aesthetization*: starting with simple aesthetic additives, up to reflecting, then, on the wunderkind of artificiality as a sort of *embodiment* of both sides (machines and humans), leading to a proliferation of new hybrid signs.

To humanize androids and to digitalize humanity is one of the tendencies of the last few decades and the production of sense that results from this interaction is shocking and quickly changing, maybe risky, but nevertheless approachable in a dynamic process of semantization. We would like to move towards the conclusion of this essay by submitting some

transferida a la pantalla grande, además de los sonidos del interior de la boca del artista se integrarán en la performance”; available at the website <https://player.vimeo.com/video/62514147> (last accessed 16 September 2020).

artists who make their body a transhuman body by definition, as well as mentioning the presence of cyborgs and humanoids as the apotheosis of the contemporary artificial landscape. There are a few examples of artists that re-create their faces by resorting to tattoos as a cultural tool, assuming an extra human appearance, like Eli Ink; while Olivier de Sagazan's performances stand among the most beautiful artistic acts of the expression of transhumanity through the use of such a simple element as clay, emphasizing the importance of considering the *modus operandi* as well as the *materiality* itself. Artists like these are characterized by a sort of physical *presentiality*: without digitality their work would still exist. The variety of materialities employed is combined, in that *embodied* digital and analogical contents are mixed. Digitalization as a narrative process assumes what a subject is in a *path of pertinences* that has already been tracked in materiality. This materiality has then been recorded by creating a new *archival body* to be presented, virtually, wherever there is a technological device: in these cases, the digitality is a strategy of communication.

Other examples of transhumanity touch entities of uncertain definition: the artist Orlan, for example, performs live surgical performances for galleries and museums: during the operations she shows how different types of materials become part of her face and then remain there, in a sort of permanent prosthesis, in a challenging and continuous contractual pact with the natural body. For her the interaction between surgery and art began out of need for health to reasons, then become an artistic practice. Rob Spence, a camera eye cyborg, following an accident to his right eye, decided to make a retinal implant consisting of a receiver and video camera, as well as a sophisticated electronic-informatics network, able to film and record everything he observes.

Different is the transhuman conception that leads to humanoids, whose root seems to go back to the human but which refers to robots with human features. The first robot with citizenship, Sophia, is a passionate attempt to shift a kind of subjectivity from the machine to humanity through the anesthesia of her body-face and the modalization typical of generative semiotics¹² (Calabrese 2010, p. XVII). The algorithms inserted into Sophia's

12. This modalization can be divided into 3 parts: 1) Virtualizing modality: makes possible the beginning of an action through will or necessity; 2) Actualizing modality: makes possible the progress of an action through power and a knowledge; 3) Achieving modality: this doing and being

mechanism have tried to equip her with wishes, possibilities to acquire knowledge and power, acting ability; she has been equipped with *intentional* skills, and is being able to produce objects and art products.

In this dynamic process, naturality and artificiality are outward dichotomies of the same compendium of texts and textures, acts and actants: multidimensional spaces and wire speed connections for stasis and potential turning points where the binomial itself peels away to become a mesh rich in modalities that we need to read and interpretate: "Being unable of reading the signs of reality, and reality as a sign, means being unable to predict what reality still is not, but might be in the future" (Leone 2014, p. 113).

It is inevitable to contemplate our contemporary entangled field as a contorted but extremely organized (also) digital and artificial one: one of the rules of contemporary semiotics is to consider the immanence of this diffuse ambience, its fast evolution and its intrinsic relationship with daily practices and speeches. The ambiguity of effects is well described by Marsciani (2013, p. 138): «di fronte a me, nel mondo, abitano soggetti e oggetti, oggetti che sono soggetti e per i quali io sono soggetto e oggetto».

We move in this constant *resemantization* not only of our own and other people's faces, but of the spaces in which we travel, supported by bodies sometimes only virtual, without a tangible response. The instance of the enunciation is digitalized: in its production, reception and in the area in-between, fields of knowledge and action are formed with repercussions we can only imagine or predict. Even the identities, with the latest examples shown, are translated into a hybrid possibility for the future, as well as the already tangible present.

Art as human activity researching freedom, based on rituality and spirituality has the privilege of anticipating and somehow delineating this trajectory, being founded in its great humanity history and tradition, but at the same time opening its abductive doors to the most innovative and experimental programs. The discernible void but also the subtle embodied tangibility are prodigious aspects of a significant process all in the making. Art, having undergone enormous changes on every scale, is of its own character predisposed to contribute to meaning, methods, spatiality and temporality in order to retrieve old narratives and, at the same time, to build new ones.

define the same action, in other terms, the action is defined by doing and being.

Bibliographic references

- BARBOTTO S. (Forthcoming) *El rostro larvado*, in C. Galán and C. Perez (dirs.) *Estética y arte: Alteridad e identidades oblicuas*, monographic issue of *Designis*, FELS.
- BARKER M. and A. MUSTER (2016) *The Mutable Face*, in M. Hinkson (ed.), *Imaging Identity: Media Memory and Portraiture in the Digital Age*, ANU Press, Canberra.
- BROOKE W. (2014) *The Allure of the Selfie: Instagram and the New Self-Portrait*, “Notebook 08”, Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam: 24-30.
- BRUNER E.M. (1986) “Ethnography as Narrative” in V.W. Turner and E. Bruner (eds), *The Anthropology of Experience*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, IL.
- CALABRESE O. (2010) *Come si legge un’opera d’arte*, Mondadori Università, Milan.
- DELEUZE G. e F. GUATTARI (1980) *Mille Plateaux: Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, Editions de Minuit, Paris.
- DUCHENNE (de Boulogne) G.B. (1862) *Mécanisme de la Physionomie humaine ou analyse électro-physiologique de l’expression des passions*, Imprimerie Martinet, Paris.
- FINOCCHI R. (2020) “La profezia di Heidegger: *Ceci n’est pas un professeur*”, in *Diario semiotico sul Coronavirus*, monographic series in *E/C*, Rivista dell’Associazione Italiana di Studi Semiotici, 29 April 2020; available at the website http://www.ec-aiss.it/index_d.php?recordID=1032 (last accessed 16 September 2020).
- FONTANILLE J. (2008) *Pratiques sémiotiques*, Press Universitaire de France, Paris.
- GENETTE G. (1983) *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Engl. trans. J.E. LEWIN, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.
- HARRISON P. and J. WOLYNIAK (2015) *History of Transhumanism*, “Notes and Queries”; doi:10.1093/notesj/gjv080; advance access published 12 July 2015: 1-3.
- HEGEL G.W.F. (1946) “Necesidad y fin del arte”, in A. Sanchez (ed.) *Antología: Textos de estética y teoría del arte*, col. Austral, Espasa-Calpe, Buenos Aires.
- HELFAND J. (2019) *FACE: A visual Odissey*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- LEONE M. (2017) “Cultural Semiotics as *Fluxorum Scientia*” in K. Bankov

- (ed.), *New Semiotics, between Tradition and Innovation*, proceedings of the 12th World Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies (IASS/AIS), online, New Bulgarian University, Sofia; available at the website https://iass-ais.org/proceedings2014/view_lesson.php?id=55 (last accessed 16 September 2020).
- _____. (2019) "Introduction: Otherness, Extraneousness, and Unawareness in Inter-Cultural Semiotics", in M. Leone, B. Surace, and J. Zeng (eds), *The Waterfall and the Fountain: Comparative Semiotic Essays on Contemporary Arts in China* ["I saggi di Lexia", 34], Aracne, Rome, 9-29.
- _____. (ed.) (2020) *Volti virali*, FACETS Digital Press, Turin.
- LOTMAN J. (2009) *Semiotics, Communication and Cognition: Culture and Explosion*, ed. M. Grishakova; Engl. trans. W. Clark, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin.
- _____. (1980) *Testo e contesto: Semiotica dell'arte e della cultura*, trad. it. S. Salvestroni, Laterza, Rome and Bari.
- LUKSCH M. and M. PATEL (2007) "Chasing the Data Shadow: Filmmakers' Close-Up Encounter of the Data Protection Act", in G. Stocker and C. Schopf (eds), *Ars Electronica: Goodbye Privacy*, Hatje Cantz Pub, Berlin.
- MARSCIANI F. (2013) "Soggettività e intersoggettività tra semiotica e fenomenologia", in M. Leone and I. Pezzini (eds), *Semiotica delle Soggettività; Per Omar* ["I saggi di Lexia", 11], Aracne, Rome.
- PAUL C. (2003) *Digital Art*, Thames & Hudson, London.
- RICOEUR P. (1983) *Temps et récit* (tome 1), Seuil, Paris.
- RIVA G. (2016) *Selfie: Narcisismo e identità*, il Mulino, Bologna.
- LI Stan Z. and Anil K. JAIN (eds) (2005) *Handbook of Face Recognition*, Springer, New York, NY.
- STRAVINSKIJ I. (1940) *Poética musical: En forma de seis lecciones* Sp. trans. E. Grau, Ed. digital Primo, Lectulandia.