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Web art

Lecture 3 – Class notes

The PASSAGE Project (1997-1998)

The idea for Passages came to me while I was looking for a type of interaction involving at the same time literary and artistic imagination. As I was saying, it came to me when I was reading Gianni Actis Barone's book "Antropoeccentrico". I will say a few things about the book.

It is a novel consisting of twelve chapters, six unchapters, and five sub-chapters. The language used in this book is non-consequential, I mean not coherent with the structure of the novel, and full of the same outputs the net is full of.

Therefore it was an ideal novel to be interpreted also from an artistic viewpoint. As confirmation, the year after the book was published, it was used by Roberto Pasini as post post-modern text at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna. Paolo Fabbri, while introducing it at the Feltrinelli bookstore, defined it as a text worthy of being part of a hypothetical Universal Enrhyzopedia (which is a subject, by the way, that I am studying in depth nowadays)., Among the speakers at that introduction was also Paola Segra Serra Zanetti.

So, I had at my disposal 23 between chapters, unchapters, and sub-chapters from which to extract a passage and, after translating it into English, have it reinterpreted by artists with both a linguistic contribution (re-translation or summary in their mother tongue) and a figurative interpretation of the same. To this project participated 22 international artists (I was the twenty-third), an art critic, expert on the new technologies (Daniele Perra), and an Italian-English translator (Bruna Brylawski), who had the grueling task of translating text at the very last minute (as often happened), and never complained, remaining a friend of mine to this day. To be truthful, Also Daniele Perra's task wasn't very simple, because

the new passages had to be online each Monday, for the duration of 23 week and a total of 92 Web works. Therefore the schedule that Daniele and myself had imposed on ourselves was exhausting. Among the many feelings I had during the development of that project, there were some that were really funny. One has to do with the psychological state of some of the artists. Four or five of them, after a few weeks, asked insistently that I help them work on the text, because they were feeling depressed by the rush. So I had to act like an athlete's manager, and I had to motivate them with reasons and arguments which I now don't remember, but obviously worked. Another unique event was the number of visitors for some passages. My server identifies not only the number of visitors, but also their percentage in terms of country and city. Well, after passages having to do with war, for example, or those mentioning weapons or killings, the percentage rose remarkably, mainly for Western countries (including Italy). With the exception of those peaks, however, the number of visitors was about 20,000 in 23 weeks. A separate topic will be "La coscienza luccicante" (The sparkling conscience), a multimedia show curated by Paola Segra Serra Zanetti and Maria Grazia Tolomeo Speranza for the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome in 1998, to which I participated with Passages.

As I was saying before, each week four artists, including myself, gave their interpretation of the passage I decided to analyze.

The first observation is the comparison between artists, for instance Asian, that had lived a long time in English-speaking countries and artists whose mother tongue was English, and were living in the same county or state as the others. As an example, Paulus Trisnadi's (a California transplant) language was very different (as far as the rendition into English) from the Californian Bruce Powell's, and from that of another artist, an Italian living in Santa Monica (Daniel Alegi). The language used by Trisnadi is not in any way violent, either in his re-translation or in his graphic interpretation. He always tries to insert a sort of super Ego in presenting his work. I mean a composure which certainly derives from his original culture. Powell, on the contrary, goes straight to the literal interpretation of the text, without going through any sublimation. The result is much more immediate and, in my opinion, powerful. Alegi, a movie director, produces a cinematic and narrative interpretation which inserts the passages in a climate far from

Italian, but rather belonging to “on the road” culture, made up more of images than of text.

In addition to figurative artists, also visual poets were part of the project. One that I remember fondly is Fabio Doctorovich, from Argentina, who works with text and assembles it in a rather unusual graphic form. His contributions allowed me to study also the representation of language, and showed how words can intersect and superimpose, giving a reading that sometimes does not even require understanding of the text. I’d like to add, as a matter of curiosity, that Fabio Doctorovich comes from the same linguistic school that provided people such as Casares and Borges, who rediscovered the basic themes of existence in the structure of language. The New as perception of the Self, then, but also as perception of the About Self (a perception that is formed as subject and as object, as belonging to and belonged).

Among other things, these new structural forms are perfectly in harmony with the use of new technologies, given their hybridization capability and belonging to different levels. Other artists simply preferred to substitute some names within the landscape. These names or these situations represent different realities in a physical and spatial sense (see for example Robin Benson).

Passages, as I said, consists of 92 graphic and literary presentations of short concepts. Actually, as I later said to the artists participating in another project, the Grey Project, the possibilities of contribution should have been infinite. In other words, I had asked the artists to step in at any time and in any way they deemed appropriate to change their previous contributions, or even just modify them. This aspect of my project did not really develop because artists (and I can understand them) tend to forget what they have already done, or else, because of passivity, they do not think it worth to go over their works once more. It is possible that, one of these days, I’ll start warning them that their works are beginning to decompose because of excessive stagnation, and I should have a good time finding out their reactions after I delete or modify their works (after saving them, of course!). In fact, interactions also work like this. In the past two years, though, I’ve had confirmation of visits, by experts as well as not, who then made a link to Passages, which keeps on going through side streets, and just like an out-of-control spaceship keeps on visiting new worlds (and being visited by them).

When I say that Web art is self-making, I mean to say that it contains within itself the very mechanisms for its own growth. Web art, in this sense, can also be seen as a dialogue between data being entered and pre-existing data, which can interact in a totally random way. That is to say that it is never possible to know how and how strongly the work will be modified not only by observers, but also by search engines that can delete, add, and highlight some aspects rather than others. The enrhyzopedic message of the Web must also be understood in this sense.