

Maps and legends: When photography met the Web

by Valentina Tanni

Dissemination of the Photographic

*“Free the camera from reality
and let one take Picassos
directly from nature.”*

(Ezra Pound, 1916)

The historical period in which the daguerrotype was invented was marked by an exponential expansion of the field of the *visible*. Enlargement, slow motion, frozen frames, microphotography and aerial photography enabled humans to multiply their visual range and permanently modify their perception of the world.

“Photography is at once the eye’s triumph and its tomb,” writes Jean-Louis Comolli, summing up the paradoxical relationship that forms between a “mechanized” view of reality, which enabled an ever more massive invasion of images, and the natural gaze, simultaneously usurped and enhanced.

Since then, there have been a great many radical technological and cultural changes. The whole *visual ecosystem*, where photography plays a decisive role, is still changing. The introduction of digital language caused an explosion of the *visual universe*, making images ever more malleable and encouraging their creation, manipulation, sharing, recombination and storage. If some of the consequences of this process (the loss of *immediacy*, the waning of faith in the photographic image as *evidence*, the dissipation of technical and linguistic know-how accumulated over the decades) have led to a crisis in photography as we know it, depriving it of many traits that have historically constituted its “specificity,” at the same time they empower it beyond imagination.

In fact, the encounter with the new media corresponds to an unstoppable dissemination of the *photographic*. Images appear on a myriad of supports and cameras are incorporated in dozens of different objects: computers, cellphones, smartphones, mp3 players. The malleability of digital photos – a nearly sculptural quality – has swept open the doors to a prolific and exciting phase of experimentation that spurs artists and image professionals to create new styles and languages.

Just as the advent of photography freed painting from the fixation of realistic representation, the digital era and the advent of the Internet seem to have brought to an end a similar process of liberation in photographic practice, which opens up to infinite interpretations, reinventing itself in contact with video, cinema, computer graphics, interaction systems and the whole connective universe of the Web.

Nor should we forget the central role of photography in the formation of the new languages. To increase the degree of “realism” and immediacy – what is known as *photorealism* – digital graphics use the same criteria as photography: a single viewpoint, the arrangement of light sources, framing.

What we are witnessing is a process of “remediation” (as defined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin): new tools remodel old ones, and old ones reinvent themselves to respond to the challenges posed by new ones.

Paraphrasing Comolli (as quoted above), we might say that the digital revolution “is at once the triumph of photography and its tomb.”

The most striking example of the omnipresence of photography is Google Street View, the online service that makes it possible to “stroll” virtually through the world thanks to panoramic 360° views made up of photographs. To create the images, Google Street View uses special cameras fitted with multiple lenses and installed on automobile roofs.

The Canadian artist **Jon Rafman** (from Montreal), author of a project called *The Nine Eyes of Google Street View* (2009) has collected a series of snapshots taken from the immense “carpet” of shots assembled by Google’s neutral and mechanized lens. The resulting photographic series, accompanied by a significant essay, focuses on the tension between the unbiased vision of the technological mechanism – which doesn’t choose and doesn’t judge – and the tendency of humans to seek sense and meaning – or even will – in all images.

Maps and Legends

"Maybe he's caught in the legend,
Maybe he's caught in the mood
Maybe these maps and legends
Have been misunderstood"

(R.E.M., *Maps and Legends*, 1985)

The most frequent error in discussions about photography is the one that tends to treat it as a monolithic entity, neglecting its flexible nature as a *language*. Ever since its invention, photography has had multiple and very different identities and social roles, just as the subjects and objects that appear behind and in front of the lens from time to time are different, which makes the stream of images that flows from the camera changeable and multiform.

Curiously, the Web suffers from the same distortion of judgment. We think of it in the singular, but it's more and more clearly the place of diversity, the *realm of alternatives*. Far from being merely the latest in technology, the Internet has assumed the clear outlines of a culture. It's more a *place* than a *tool*: a place inhabited by many communities, large and small.

The encounter between photographic culture and Web culture is thus an encounter between two diversified and unstable realities. That's why tracing its outlines can be an insidious exercise, and why the mapping that this show proposes has the merits and flaws of snapshots: it's vital but necessarily transient.

The goal of the "Maps and Legends" section is to reconnoiter a territory that's constantly evolving, to produce a cartography in progress on the relations that photographic practice is establishing with the world of the Internet: its culture, its language and its imagery.

Our route starts symbolically from a project that's implemented on a map, Google Earth's digital map. *Remap Berlin*, by the Italian **Marco Cadioli** (Milan, 1960) is a cultural virus capable of blurring the borderlines between the real world and the virtual universe (in this case, the replica of Berlin built on the Twinty mirror world). At the same time, though, it's a pure photography project, the outcome of an exploration of a territory still under construction, a digital world whose borderlines are always temporary.

Photo-addiction

"Why is it drug addicts
and computer aficionados
are both called users?"

(Clifford Stoll, *Silicon Snake Oil*, 1995)

Photographic images circulate on the Web in infinite versions and different formats; they're compressed, cut, sent, downloaded. The information of which they are made decreases and changes, the colors change, the details vanish. The photos are no longer objects of contemplation; now they are used compulsively in a *constant consumption* that seems almost to deteriorate them (as early as 1984, Frederic Jameson, in his famous essay on postmodernism, spoke of a "growing dependence on photographic images"). In a recent article titled "In Defense of the Poor Image," the scholar and filmmaker Hito Steyerl well describes one of the main characteristics of the visual culture linked to the Internet, the predominance of a *low-resolution* aesthetic:

"The poor image is a rag or a rip, an AVI or a JPEG, a lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearances, ranked and valued according to its resolution. The poor image has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited. It transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction."

Initially, the loss of definition and "richness" seemed to be simply the price one had to pay to enable images to circulate around the world. In reality, though, *transmission* is only the beginning: the embryonic phase in a process that has far-reaching effects on contemporary visual culture. In fact, easy image exchange and modification leads easily to *appropriation*, a condition that determines *affection* in the first place, and *reinterpretation* in the second.

These dynamics have led very quickly to the rise of a true aesthetic. A visual universe made up of fuzzy, distorted and manipulated images that's influencing a whole generation of artists and photographers. A generation that's partial to speed and intensity, doesn't fear *interferences* (visual and cultural) and looks with growing curiosity at the world of amateur creativity, at the *values* and *moods* expressed by a new popular culture (some call it *digital folklore*) that inhabits the Web and builds its visual culture day after day.

The instability of digital images and their role in the media system are central topics in the work of **Martijn Hendriks** (Eindhoven, 1973; lives in Amsterdam), who is represented at this show by a work entitled *Found Image of Michael Jackson Downloaded From the Internet and Uploaded to a Free Online Age Processing Website, Printed Once in Black and White and Once in Color* (2009). The procedure used to produce the work is easy and the tools are accessible to anyone; the title is nothing but a set of instructions.

In this case, as in many others included in this exhibition, photography is found material picked out of a sea of possible alternatives, but its recontextualization adds many levels of meaning. It abstracts and standardizes the manipulation process, and simultaneously intervenes in the *temporal* dimension, showing the viewer a future that never happened. The Jackson's image was aged from a photo of him as a young man, before he underwent the many plastic-surgery operations that transformed his aspect. The face is at once familiar and eerie; it's a distorted, disturbing, *genetically modified* icon.

Deconstructed, hackerized, literally dismantled photos underlie the research of the other Dutch artist present at this show, **Harm van den Dorpel** (Amsterdam, 1981), who reflects in his works on the visual grammar of media images. The semantic structure of the photos he uses – again, the material is *found* – is dismantled to reveal its limits and paradoxes. His key reflection concerns visual perception, and secondarily the *truthfulness* of the photographic image. What distinguishes a *credible* manipulation from a clearly *incredible* one? Where is the borderline beyond which we cease to perceive a photo as a “quotation” from reality?

Nearly thirty years have gone by since the famous *National Geographic* case. In 1982, using digital technology, the magazine moved the Giza pyramid a few yards away from its real location so that the view of it would fit into the vertical format of the cover page. This touched off a hot debate, still in progress, on the appropriateness and even the “morality” of such operations. Today, in one of his best-known images, van den Dorpel transforms the pyramid into a surreal curved monument (*Swing. Ancient Modeling, 2008*). Looking at it, one wonders whether a walking pyramid is really more plausible than one which twists around itself.

The work of **Justin Kemp** (Wisconsin, U.S.A., 1982; lives in Northampton) is marked by irony. Using video clips downloaded from Getty Images, he recounts what is now a new genre in photographic portraiture: photos of *profiles*. *Perfect Profile Pic* (2008) is a sequence of very short segments that show people of different ages and social classes intent on the same operation: taking pictures of themselves for online publication on social networks. Armed with digital cameras and cellphones, they're all looking amusingly at the lens, which is habitually positioned above and slightly to one side. In search of their “best profile.”

The images produced by **Filippo Minelli** (Brescia, 1983) are likewise paradoxical and ironic. He uses photography to document his actions in public space. In the series titled *Contradictions* (2008-2010), Minelli juxtaposes the logos of some of the best-known social networks (Facebook, Flickr, Myspace, etc.) over pictures of poor or desolate places that seem light-years away from the economic and technological frenzy evoked by these brands.

A Moment in Time

*“The enemy of photography is the convention,
the fixed rules of 'how to do'.
The salvation of photography comes
from the experiment.”*

(Laszlo Moholy-Nagy 1947)

Animated GIFs (Graphics Interchange Format) are the emblem of a certain kind of vintage aesthetic applied to the Internet. An old-time visual style made with simple forms and a limited palette, with the pixel

grid well in sight. The format, one of the first to enable animated elements to be inserted in Web pages through the successive assembly of multiple frames in a single image file, has been in use since the earliest days of the Internet. Though outclassed by more advanced systems such as Flash, GIF never disappeared altogether, and it is now the protagonist of a movement of recovery and reevaluation. This movement includes a huge complex of forms and formats that are now considered obsolete: frames, 3-D fonts, midi files, buttons. A simple, amateurish-like lexicon, far from the sophisticated terms of contemporary web design, that the Russian artist Olia Lialina calls “vernacular.”

The Mexican photographer **Jaime Martinez** (Monterrey, Mexico, 1978; lives in Mexico City) experiments with a surprising and elegant blend of GIF and photography. A minimal cinematic effect injects life and three-dimensionality into his shots, bringing them closer, from the aesthetic standpoint, to old 3D postcards and 19th-century stereograms, which gave the viewer an illusion of movement by juxtaposing two or more photos of the same scene. Like scratched records repeating an endless loop, Martinez’s animated photos represent a series of moments frozen in time, stopped for now but always on the verge of starting again.

Another way of introducing the temporal dimension in the language of photography, reinforcing its narrative dimension, is the now widely used slideshow format. It has been used for decades, and many artists have placed it at the center of their research, investigating its aesthetic and linguistic possibilities. On the Web, it takes on new connotations. The slideshow, no longer simply a sequence of images, is often only one of the options available for enjoying or using photo albums. There are many intersecting ways to navigate through images, flanked by multimedia elements and sometimes entrusted to choices made by the user, who can steer through the story in his own individual ways.

Carlo Zanni (La Spezia, 1975; lives in Milan), for instance, presents what at first glance seems to be simply a slideshow of photos accompanied by music. If we look more closely, though, the images reveal their *instability*, their changing and “live” character. In *The Fifth Day* (2009), the shots are influenced by information taken from the Internet in real time, and they turn into sculptural-quality visual material.

In the case of *Days With My Father*, a photo series signed by the American artist **Phillip Toledano** (London, 1968; lives in New York), the slideshow format merges with that of the photo essay. Text and images flank and support each other in a website that’s simple but very powerful. A touching story – the artist documents his daily life with his elderly father after his mother’s death – that Toledano decided to share on the Web through a site with the same name as the series: www.dayswithmyfather.com. To date the project has been visited by more than a million people, and around two hundred thousand comments have been entered in the artist’s guestbook: a collective reflection on the subject of death and on relationships between parents and children.

A totally different way of interpreting photography as a shared social practice capable of establishing strong interpersonal ties is represented by the *Buttons* project created by the German artist **Sascha Pohflepp** (Cologne, 1978; lives in London). This work, a camera with no optical parts, is an object designed to enhance the temporal component in the act of taking a photo, and to highlight the process of continuous sharing of images on the Web. Capturing images and sharing them is more and more often a single act comprising two actions in rapid succession. *You shoot a picture so that you can share it.*

Rather than freezing an image so that it will remind us of a given moment, the *Buttons* camera simply records the exact time when someone pressed its shutter button. After a variable stretch of time, a photo appears on the display: a photo shot by someone else at the exact same instant and published on Flickr, the famous online photography publishing and storage service. This camera can’t see but it does register the passing of time: time measured by millions of shots. Buttons pressed every second, all over the earth.

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