

Spatial Landscapes

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"We are surrounded by modern technological informational tools that incessantly inundate, astonish, and pique our curiosity, and these are much closer to us than the sky over the countryside, than the rotation of day and night, than the habits and customs of our home town." So wrote Heidegger in 1959,¹ stressing "the decline of contemplative thought in contemporary man" who, instead, should "know how to wait, like the farmer, for the seed to grow and reach maturity".²

What would Heidegger say about the stimuli of the computer and the constant "movement" it allows us? "What is really disquieting isn't that the entire world is ruled by technology. What is much more disconcerting is that we are no longer capable of reaching, through contemplative thought, a reasonable position on what is taking place in our era".³

Today, the immediacy of information technology intensifies "the collection of everything that touches us closely, that can be personalized to suit our own individuality, here and now",⁴ and yet, our one-on-one relationship with the computer, where near and far are simultaneously present, can create the opposite effect, erasing the need for contemplative thought, since potentially everything can be gathered here and now without having to wait for "the seed to reach maturity." But it is also true that the physical space, and simultaneously intangible, of the computer opens up a dialogue between a given reality and the one that manifests itself through the computer itself, radically altering the contact between the user and the world. If we consider the computer to be merely a technological tool, we can associate its function solely with its role in completing a particular task. If, however, we see the computer as a space in which thought itself can grow, we open up questions which touch one's own individuality in the here and now. This requires further effort to define what contemplative thought means, and this goes beyond merely calculating the functions needed to complete a given task.

Flavio de Marco takes his theme not just from the visual-linguistic system of information technology, but rather from the primary computer's space, that space that exists prior to our use of the computer's functions to personalize the screen. This is the space that watches and symbolizes through pictures how a landscape might be.

In De Marco's screens, where windows have lost their name and function, we make contact with a space that is in proximity to the person standing before it yet simultaneously way beyond his reach.

De Marco, through his painting, makes visible that which comes before the appearance of the computer's functions and windows. This is a space that doesn't exist in the computer: if it isn't turned on, the screen stays black; if a function isn't selected, the window doesn't open. The term "window" brings to mind not only the natural way in which we frame what we see, but also the landscapes that we see through the windows of our actual and metaphorical homes. In this case, too, we only need to click to cut, or enhance, details that recall that particular landscape, which is never the same twice. It depends on the light, the seasons, who is passing through. We recognize it only when we have framed it from a particular point of view.

Computer windows, however, are a diaphragm having nothing to do with perspective in architecture or roads, nor with the tangible nature of a white sheet of paper on which to make marks and

drawings. The computer window holds within itself a type of three-dimensional state which manifests itself through the continuous exchange between one place and another, between words and pictures, between passive reception and active response. This is an anomalous three-dimensional state, because it appears as a surface, related to the flow of time related to a non-habitual movement which depends primarily on the configuration selected.

It is therefore a screen which interacts in a direct way not only with the technological action of the tool but also with the emotional and perceptive dimension which governs the creation not only of the technical actions, but also of the intellectual and psychological ones required to execute a function.

According to Flavio de Marco, “from conventional physics we have moved on to a perception of a continuous overlapping of screens from which things surface to influence knowledge and subjective memory”.

Can the computer help us to regain contact with contemplative thought? Some fear that it cannot, because of the great flow and breadth of information it carries. However, in comparison to press releases, advertising, television broadcasts in which we are in front of the final product, the computer requires us to become aware of not only the information received but also of the limitless potential for connecting to what is at hand, the entity that governs the roots of thought, to what is remote, to that which is contemporaneous to our experience in the here and now.

Walter Benjamin wrote: “If we compare the canvas on which a film is projected to the canvas of a painting, the latter invites the observer to contemplative thought. In front of a painting, the spectator can give free rein to associations. He cannot do this when watching a film image because as soon as he visually captures that image, it has already changed. It cannot be pinned down”.⁵

If we transfer this analogy to the computer screen, it no longer holds true. What we see or read can be changed but the original can always be recalled, therefore, contemplative thought is possible, and can even take place at a distance from the original painting without the viewer having to move physically. We are not looking at the original, however, and according to Benjamin, this changes our relationship with the aura of the painting. We are in front of the moment in which we simultaneously experience the reproduction of the work and the thought that led us to seek it, all of which can be done on a screen activated by ourselves. In between observation and the object observed a third space opens up, that of the interaction. This always happens when one observes a work of art but here it is supported in a visible and tangible way, in which we can participate; it calls forth memories which we can save, lose, find over and over again. The work of art, in fact, although remaining the same, changes depending on the perceptions of the viewer and of the emotions evoked, which can in turn change depending on events in the life of the viewer.

The computer screen allows us to make visible and tangible these perceptual passages, which begin in the intuition and materialize through the flow of associations, in the same process as described by Benjamin about paintings. Once, notes had this function, but they did not allow a synchronous exchange between the process of viewing and the image of the work of art. Now, that we can place canvas and screen on the same level, intuition has access to a form which maintains mobility even though it's fixed. This determines a new synergy between the view of the dynamic movement of cinema and video and the static view of drawing and writing.

From the moment in which Flavio de Marco selects from the primeval space of the computer screen the view which he wishes to depict in his paintings, he offers not only a new anchor for contemplative thought but also a reproducible dialectic with the work of art; which today has at its disposal a technology which takes the relationship between original and reproduction beyond its usual borders. Since the computer became part of a daily linguistic construction of dialogue, it has

profoundly altered the concept of original. To what extent do I perceive the original in the message I receive and in the screen which presents it to me? Is it more exciting to read handwriting on paper or to experience the simultaneity between he who receives a message and he who sends it? How does this change Heidegger's concept of vicinity? And how can we represent this immaterial space which is so much a part of our daily activities? Does this unlimited spectrum of combinations modify systems of interpretation, or do we believe that the computer is merely a tool that increases our associative capacity?

When I first saw Flavio's paintings I wasn't immediately aware that they were not abstract compositions, but the landscapes that I saw on the windows of my computer screen every day. I had to distance myself from the traditional landscape painting, and even though I felt that those geometrical figures were related to the screen, I wasn't able to recognize them or identify them. Then I realized that Flavio had depicted the landscapes that exist before the use of the computer.

The void which Flavio has transformed into painted surface makes apparent the exchange between visible and invisible behind the screen, and succeeds in making the canvas an anchor for the contemplative thought of which Benjamin wrote, and that makes the observer aware of being behind the canvas/screen.

Malevic said that in his *Black Square* he wanted to represent "the silent worlds existing behind the sunlight". We've been on the moon, and both rationally and scientifically, we feel that the sky is closer to us. We know that people are investigating it with instruments that can cross these vast distances. Contemporary technology, however, also poses questions about the ordinary universe that lives within these instruments and which, poetically and metaphorically, interacts with thought.

De Marco asks himself "How can I represent the breaking down of walls once Fontana's slash has been closed? How do I represent this idea without the gesture? Can a symbolic discourse be constructed around the image?" To follow the quest for a form that is no longer connected to the illusory nature of classical perspective but to the multiplication and reproduction of images requires the artist to delve into the depths of the mind and treat the canvas as a field of creation. Here not only the finished drawing is called forth but also the landscapes that, through the computer, are part of the final image.

In his landscapes, De Marco often brings to the foreground the key to interpretation which indicates new dialectics between the originality of the work, the figure taking shape on the canvas, and its intrinsic reproducibility. There is only one picture, but, by maintaining the visibility of the process through which it was conceived and constructed, we can see how it may be reproduced, not in the sense of a physical reproduction, but in a speculative and perceptive way. The computer landscapes, which are essential to the definition of the image, are all there. There is no need to debate harmony of colours but rather the selection of windows which are associated one with another, without function, representing the movement of the screen and its never-ending reproducible combinations.

In his works depicting solely computer windows, an analogy can be seen with the void created by Malevic in his *Black Square*, in that De Marco was able to breaking through the surface of three-dimensional perspective. On the other hand, he succeeded in closing Fontana's slashes by depicting that which lies beyond the configuration of the screen. Flavio de Marco's work establishes a theoretical analogy with the gesture used by Fontana to delineate the *Spatial Concept* in painting as well, and so we can call De Marco's paintings *Spatial Landscapes*.

This exhibition of paintings dedicated to the cycle of months in Palazzo Schifanoia has moved on to an even further level with the introduction of a figurative reciprocity between the functions of the tool and the historical memory recorded by the Schifanoia frescoes.

Beginning in the Sixties, Gerhard Richter transferred in his paintings the transversal relationship with photography, most powerfully in 1989 with his cycle dedicated to the deaths of the members of the Baader-Meinhof group (*18. Oktober 1977*). In the composition of his *opera omnia*, *Atlas*, he puts together a discontinuous array of unrelated photos, visual memos, personal memories and sequences of colour to suggest the reciprocity between the flows of life and creation. De Marco is a child of the age of information technology, and takes this as the basis on which to amalgamate painting, image composition theory and the reproducibility of memory.

In recent decades, photography has found its own way of representing visual art, Gerhard Richter and Richard Hamilton being two sensational practitioners, incorporating photography and painting to find a new technique with the palette. They declared that everything involved in the definition of an image went beyond the use of specialist techniques and became part of a pictorial analysis in which ideas found an equilibrium between common perception and artistic creation.

What had been glimpsed by the historical avant-garde groups at the beginning of the 20th century is today part of our daily lives: we use the classical disciplines and those which have developed through the enormous technological leap of our era to organize our knowledge. All this opens up a whole new relationship with the reproducibility of images, as De Marco's work masterfully shows. This relationship has been highlighted recently with the placement of the computer copy of Veronese's *The Wedding at Cana* in the island of San Giorgio in Venice.

Much has been written about the importance the connection between the exhibition site and the picture which, even if it is only a copy, enormously increases the likelihood of fruition. This wouldn't be possible without the advent of information technology.

We well know that not all works of art are portable and that much art was destroyed in various wars, not only literally, but also by being separated from the site for which it was created. Today, we have become used to observing not only a work of art but also its relationship to its surroundings and the changes that that brings. We are aware that this relationship influences perception and we were delighted when the original relationship between the work of art and its space was re-established in Venice after so many centuries. This emphasizes that the original isn't defined only by itself, but that a work of art is a holistic concept incorporating that which precedes the image, i.e. the specific limits of the space for which it was created.

If in the art of the past, these limits were essentially linked to religious and political architecture, today, they are part of the "baggage" of every work of art and become part of the "show," in the sense that they determine the interaction between image and the place in which it is shown, which in itself has the potential to change every time the work of art is shown in a new site. Contemplative thought on contemporary art arises from this interaction.

The memory of the work of art doesn't focus solely on its features but also on its manifestations. The aura of originality extends to the relationship with physical space and to the experience of seeing deriving from it, which becomes the primary reference for authenticity in the here and now. The placing of the Veronese copy is further proof of what contemporary art has set into motion recently.

De Marco creates a reflective progression by incorporating in the primeval space of the computer not only photographs of the Schifanoia frescoes but also the process which he used to create his original painting, which is the result of the copy itself being broken into pieces and the various details of the fresco inserted into the windows, that is the drawing of the spaces in the computer that correspond to the functions he used to create the composition.

The fresco occupies the whole screen and takes on the physical boundaries of a painting but it is never visible in its entirety, because of the overlapping windows De Marco uses to represent the space separating personal memory and photographic reproduction, between the mobility of the screen views and their translation into pictorial physicality. The photograph, printed on canvas, is painted using transparent glazes which accentuate the blurriness and which alternate with monochromatic painting, sometimes flat and sometimes in light relief, of the sections representing the computer functions. The colour blue colour, taken from the section of the frescoes with the decans, becomes the pictorial background, which in turn surfaces in various areas of the painting. The movement of the overlapping images, fluctuating between visible and invisible, takes shape.

The memory of the unity of the fresco, its real and virtual invisibility, complete with the decay it has suffered, appear in an alternating structure composed of reproductions and fragments. Fontana said that every work of art moves towards its inevitable physical destruction, while the “gesture of their creation” is eternal. That is the gesture De Marco expresses in the *spatial landscape* of the computer, where the breaking is achieved through the mobility of the reproduction, which in turn recomposes a new interpretation, and returns to the eternity of which Fontana spoke. Fontana saw this breaking behind the painting itself, whereas De Marco creates it using a synchronicity of windows, buttons and post-it notes, alluding to the void but also to his gestures in composing the work.

In addition, he also establishes a pact between the physical space of the frescoes and his own exhibition at the PAC, which though the buildings are not far apart, there is distance between them. A real exchange arises between one place and the other, between the physical void of this distance and the void implied in his paintings. There is a single cycle in the Schifanoia frescoes, which at the PAC has been broken up. According to Flavio: “There, the seeing is simultaneous, while here it is fragmented, dismembered, as if to say that that wholeness cannot be repeated. For an instant, the Schifanoia frescoes are in front of us but then we lose them, in the way we have today in which we sometimes see, sometimes don’t. The dream of unity has been lost. Today, we can’t but put the Schifanoia frescoes next to billboards, yet in the 15th century, they saw only the frescoes. Today, my memory leads me to the betrayal of those images, by representing the empty spaces on the plaster, the loss suffered in the space between what we see now, and what they saw in the past.”

De Marco’s intention is to show something beyond the depth. By putting us in front of his identityless screens, he provides the key to entering into the space that he has already entered, and to cross the emptiness that he himself has designed and modified, there within, all the positions of the images until the point in which he stopped, transferring them to the canvas in paint. In this way, we are able to perceive the deposits of time in each image. They are in harmony with the frescoes, which is a sort of calendar, and with the creative processes, both of mind and body, found in his work.

A further weaving of the spatial relationship between De Marco’s art and the Schifanoia frescoes is found on the second floor of the PAC. Here Flavio has reproduced in scale the architectural surveys of the cycle of the Months including the lost portions, the whole of which has then been projected onto the wall and reworked, creating another kind of emptiness. Scraps of wallpaper and a series of De Marco’s paintings from 1999 to today are interwoven onto this structure. The various materials on the walls create alternating depths, giving the idea of screens, accentuated by the rigid geometry of a checkerboard which alludes to the absence of images before they are created with the software of the computer. In this installation, everything is on the surface. Architectural surveys, one of his paintings on the wall, partially covered by another leaning against it, others laid out and overlaid, jumbled together, the *leitmotif* of the colour blue, the chessboard... all flowing across surfaces divided into bands and sections like the frescoes.

The actual physicality connected to the idea of the screen is evoked by De Marco's *spatial landscapes*. Their biographical and historical narration interweaves with the accumulation of knowledge and its aptitude to remain in the depths, like an archive waiting to be accessed, or a storehouse of knowledge which unites what has been seen with the intimation of things still to be seen. These landscapes are to be seen one by one but, collectively, they evoke the rhythm of a slideshow. The dream of perceiving profundity on a single surface re-emerges, to be seen as a whole. As De Marco says, "In mixing together layers of the Schifanoia frescoes with layers of some of my paintings, it's as if they, too, are already ruins, an archaeological find, but I wish to add, let's begin at the beginning to show them!"

The notion of archaeological finds affirms its opposite: the visual speed of today, and the desire to make opaque and to distance the vision so as to savour the moment, to struggle against the losses time imposes on us, and to the risk of acknowledging, admitting, confirming, accepting enjoyment in the present.

Note / Notes

1 M. Heidegger, *L'abbandono*, ed. it., Genova 1983, p. 32.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

5 W. Benjamin, *L'opera d'arte nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica*, Torino 1966, p. 43.