Digital and/or Analogue?

From *Post Zang Tumb Tuum. Art Life Politics: Italy 1918-1943* to *1923: Past Futures,* Notes on Exhibition Display

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The gradual expansion of the exhibitionary complex,[1] according to Tony Bennett's well-known formula, to the digital universe had clear but equally problematic evidence in the first twenty years of the new millennium. In recent years, thanks to the lesson offered by *New Museology* and *Radical Museology,*[2] and up to the more recent reflection of *Critical Museology,*[3] the conception of an exhibition space intended as a critical device has developed.

> [A space that] does not necessarily correspond to a single physical place. The seat of which cannot and must not be located exclusively within a museum. By its very nature – that nature capable of relating, of creating bridges between different disciplines, different traditions, different passions – the critical space is projected outwards, towards a network of places, a network that is always expanding and never stable of sites. (Ferrari 2021, 78)

This condition, due to the *digital turn*, has led to an opening to flows and mixes that have questioned the materiality of the museum – a museum without walls was the utopian perspective drawn by André Malraux in his *The Imaginary Museum*[4] – suggesting the hypothesis of cyberspace for the present and the future of the institution. This locus would be made up

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[1] All quotations are author's translations unless stated otherwise.
For Tony Bennett: "the opening up of objects to more public contexts of inspection and visibility: this is the direction of movement embodied in the formation of the exhibitionary complex" (Bennett 1988, 85).

[2] With *Radical Museology,* Claire Bishop proposed a vivid manifesto advocated the contemporary as a method rather than a periodization, as well as the importance of a politicized representation of history in museums of contemporary art (Bishop 2014).

[3] The concept of *Critical Museology* was proposed by Jesús Pedro Lorente as a method of reflection on the museum and museum disciplines (Lorente 2022).

[4] The term is closely associated with André Malraux's *Musée imaginaire*, an essay from 1947.

of contaminations and nourished by transmedia plots that reflect a new episteme of the spaces and times of narration, of chronology and historical periodization, of the artwork and its context, of documentation and the enjoyment of the artistic experience.

Due to its complex nature, the museum and, in particular, the field of temporary exhibitions have become a space for experimentation, a device that never stops producing discourses and disciplines – as Stefania Zuliani observed, suggesting the image of the *machine à penser* for the future museum.[5] Yet it is also a laboratory and arena to verify the digital horizon as a medium/register for narrating the art history and the history of exhibitions.

Starting from this orientation, determined by an increasingly fluctuating chronology in the scanning of history and the art history – as Nathalie Heinich also recently noted when addressing the *paradigm of contemporary art* (Heinich 2014) – and by the solicitations produced by the encounter with the archipelago of digital humanities, we find in the present time a growing intersection of analogue and digital exhibition projects. The exhibition frame therefore offers a cross-analysis perspective, allowing a double check that simultaneously highlights the physical space and its virtual projection, questioning the mechanisms of showing in the intersection and transformation produced by these two stages. Significant in this sense are the observations of Pierre Lévy, cartographer of the virtual map since the 1990s, who indicated in the virtual the uninterrupted transformation from one modality of being to another, first of all by denying "the simple and misleading opposition between the real and the virtual" and pointing out how the word *virtual*, from the Latin *virtualis* (from *virtus*, that is, strength, power) "should be compared not to the real but to the actual: since virtuality and actuality are nothing more than two different ways of being" (Lévy 1998, 23).

Therefore, if one of the questions that concern the space of art and of the exhibitions is the analogue or digital question, Lévy's reflection proposes a simpler model of dialectical coexistence between virtual and actual that shifts the focal point of the discourse toward a space-time frame. So not only is opposition eliminated but, from our perspective, the union between virtual and actual reflects a temporal complexity that crosses the

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[5] The image of *machine à penser* is suggested by Stefania Zuliani: "I don't think there is any other possible definition for the museum, a device that never stops producing discourses and discipline" (Zuliani 2022, 9).

contemporary exhibition field increasingly marked by vital anachronisms, stratifications, and chronological leaps. This condition seems evident in two recent exhibitions, based in Milan, that also marked an interesting observation point of the digital dynamics in the array of Italian exhibitions of the last several years: *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum. Art Life Politics: Italia 1918-1943*, curated by Germano Celant at the Prada Foundation in 2018, and *1923: Past Futures* at the Milan Triennale in 2022. Although the two exhibitions differ greatly, they are close in terms of a historical methodology aimed at re-reading a portion of the history of art and the history of exhibitions in Italy in the twentieth century, which move among analogue tools, proto-digital forms, and virtual technologies.

The different historical perspective of these exhibitions offers a further element of reflection, so as to consider the distinction between virtual and actual made by Lévy. The French philosopher pointed out how a productive exchange takes place between the virtual and the actual that involves the past, present, and future. The virtual elevates the actual to power, redefines its initial question, "reorganizes a previous problematic and is susceptible to being interpreted in various ways" (Lévy 1998, 24). The intersection between analogue and digital, between actual and virtual, therefore opens up a gap for problematization and re-reading of the historical processes that are also at the center of these two exhibitions.

That the exhibition field can become the subject of this comparison is a hypothesis that Jean-François Lyotard, with the seminal exhibition *Les Immatériaux* at the Centre Pompidou in 1986,[6] had already formulated by examining the possibility of experimenting with a form of knowledge that is analogue yet also "a more plastic and more immaterial system of organization of space" (Lyotard 2023, 74).

For his part, Celant designs the exhibition *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum. Art Life Politics: Italia 1918 - 1943* as a non-definitive reading of a complex period of Italian political, civic, and artistic history. Celant designed an exhibition display that addresses a problematic knot of trends and tensions. Thus, the story of a restless segment of Italian art, that is, post-futurism and dictatorship, is related through a precise critical and formal choice that relied on re-creating period rooms that reconstruct, after a careful historical study of the photographic sources of the time, large spatial environments, which,

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[6] On the deconstruction of the exhibition medium as applied by Jean François Lyotard in the exhibition *Les Immatériaux,* which prefigured a space for visiting much like browsing on the Web, read the essay *Les Immatériaux. Un percorso di Jean-François Lyotard nell'arte contemporanea* (Gallo 2008).

taking advantage of the possibilities of digital, present an immersive display produced by the analogue expansion of the photographic documents (Figure 1). Celant notes in this regard:

> Is it possible to produce an active synthesis that, in the exhibition, takes into consideration not only the incoherent distribution of the artworks – even when arranged on the basis of linguistic affinities and links – but aims to construct a spherical totality of historical and social, poetic, and esthetic material, made up of documents of the real, that serve to forge a cultural understanding of the complexity of the constellations of an era? Is it possible […] to offer the public an all-embracing view of the moment in history? (Celant 2018, 30)

Figure 1. Exhibition view of *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum.*
Art Life Politics: Italia 1918-1943

Source: Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti, February 18 -June 25, 2018, Fondazione Prada, Milano. Courtesy Fondazione Prada.

Questions that mark the urgency of making the exhibition an all-encompassing and immersive space that offers the viewer a spherical vision which, as Maurice Blanchot had already intuited, is the bearer "simultaneously of all the powers of duration" (Blanchot 2003, 21). Thus, the exhibition device imagined by Celant searches for new spaces of vision and produces new meanings even as it follows the analogue path, holding to reasons for the virtualization processes already identified by Lévy, "to

invent, on expenditure and risk, it creates qualitatively new velocities, mutant space-time systems" (Lévy 1998, 33).

Celant indicates this operation as a synthesis of "documents of the real" Yet we have seen that the opposite polarity to the virtual is not the real but the actual, so Celant's hypothesis can be inscribed in a proto-digital field. In fact, the process of constructing of the exhibition passes through works and documents, materials and videos, which punctuate environments made from images originating from renderings of original photographs. This confluence tend toward an osmosis, which interposes different times and places, making the boundaries between concrete presence and deferred presence evanescent. Through a leap of scale, the *White Cube* (O'Doherty 2000) leaves space for the traces and data of a context with a complex texture – "from photography as document to the dimension of an internal architectural space to make the image spill over in relation to the site of its communicative use" (Celant 2018, 40).

This exercise re-proposes the writings of the biennials and quadrennials of the arts of the 1920s and 1930s. Their exhibition installations, by Giorgio Morandi (Berlin, 1921) and Felice Casorati (Venice, 1924), Carlo Carrà (Milan, 1926) and Gino Severini (Rome, 1935), among others, alongside architectural sections by authors such as Edoardo Persico and Giuseppe Terragni, exemplify Benjamin's concept of reproducibility and of documentation: "By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced" (Benjamin 2008, 22).

Yet the unavoidable knot that Celant's re-reading calls into question remains that of space: Szeemann remarks, "[W]hen the exhibition closes, space becomes a dimension lost forever. [...] What remains is a two-dimensional documentation that cannot in any way render the third (Szeemann 2021, 109). Here, Celant's challenge is to recover the lost dimension in his spherical vision, that third dimension that virtual reality has been trying to capture for at least twenty years in the curvatures of 3D. Celant's vision is nourished by the escape from the two-dimensional representation and the total gaze of the avant-garde, by the abandonment of "the one-sidedness of seeing" in favor of "a spherical perception" (Celant 1982, 9). Ultimately, Celant observes that it is a matter of "playing a critical role against the decontextualization of the exhibition" (Celant 2018, 45), which produces only mercantile and economic values.

Therefore, the need to rediscover the three-dimensionality of the lost exhibition space and, with it, the network of the Italian art scene

of the first half of the twentieth century is one of the objectives pursued by Celant in the fluid passage between analogue document and digital technology, a transformation of scale that yields the complexity of a system and produces new readings.

This program, even if differently calibrated, also takes shape in the *1923: Past Futures* exhibition at the Milan Triennale in 2022 curated by the Triennale and VIVE Arts. This exhibition retraced the history of the Triennale by proposing a fascinating space-time journey generated by the creation of virtual environments that reproduce the main international exhibitions that took place over the course of a century. Organized on the occasion of the celebrations for the centenary of the Triennale, the *1923: Past Futures* exhibition also starts from archive documents – photographs, projects, works – for the construction of virtual environments that can be used through the "room scale" technology that allows the public to experience an immersive walk through the exhibitions at the Triennale. The exhibition/ installation *1923: Past Futures* was part of the XXIII Triennial Exhibition entitled *Unknown Unknowns - An introduction to the Mysteries* and returns to the spaces of Giovanni Muzio's austere and neoclassical Palazzo dell'Arte in a non-chronological sequence accompanied by narrative voices and records of some of the crucial passages of the institution's long history. Through VR technology, the history of the Triennale appears as a cinematographic montage that joins space and time, bringing the public in front of the large and now lost impluvium of the Palazzo dell'Arte with the *Statua della Fontana* by Mario Sironi and Leone Lodi; into the large archive rooms during the bombings of the Second World War; under the extraordinary installation *Struttura al Neon* by Lucio Fontana (Figure 2); during the protests of the students who occupied the Palazzo dell'Arte in 1968, and up to the exhibitions of the new millennium.

By crossing documents and new technologies, this journey evokes a spherical perception through virtual reality, as Celant suggested, and reflects the effervescence of a museum space that is crucial for understanding the history of art in Italy. As Celina Yeh observed:

> The virtual reality can be used as a time machine, enabling viewers to see and experience significant pieces such as Vittorio Gregotti's *Kaleidoscope* and Lucio Fontana's *Neon*, as if they were there and in the moment. It can really bring the past to life, engaging audiences with Triennale Milano's important role in the world of art and design, in a way that can go beyond a display of texts and photographs, immersing them in the virtual world. (Yeh 2023)

Figure 2. *Struttura al Neon* by Lucio Fontana, VR still from *1923: Past Futures*
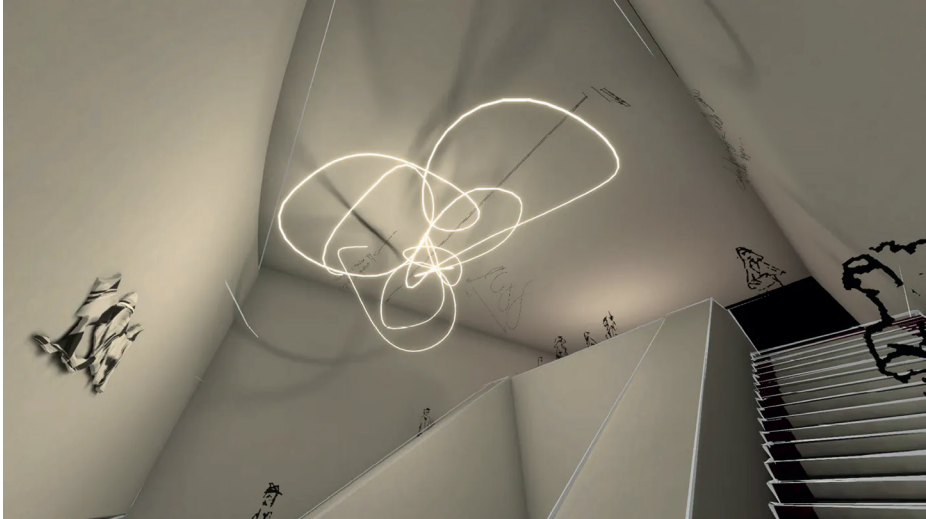
Source: Reframe Productions, 2022,
courtesy of VIVE Arts and Triennale Milano.

Thus, the three-dimensionality offered by virtual reality allows a different use of documents and the archive, allows the recovery of lost units, and simplifies the reconstruction of complex historiographical segments. At the same time, it opens up future perspectives. Therefore, the transition from analogue to virtual is not a derealization, but "a change of identity, a displacement of the center of ontological gravity of the object considered. Rather than being defined principally through its actuality, the entity now finds its essential consistency within a problematic field" (Lévy 1998, 26).

Observed from this perspective – certainly, partial and in progress – the *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum. Art Life Politics: Italia 1918 - 1943* and *1923*: *Past Futures* are proofs, even if differently calibrated, of an unstoppable convergence between analogue writings and digital devices, aiming at the construction of exhibition displays that in their interaction with space have the possibility of developing a different interpretation and narration of art. Reflecting on *Art and Space*, Heidegger recalled that "so long as we do not experience the special character of space, even the discussion about artistic space is destined to remain obscure (Heidegger 1973, 8-9), a question that remains a problem, which, however, finds a new nourishment in art

exhibition space marked by the constant and necessary dialogue between different times and spaces produced by the experimentation of the virtual.

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