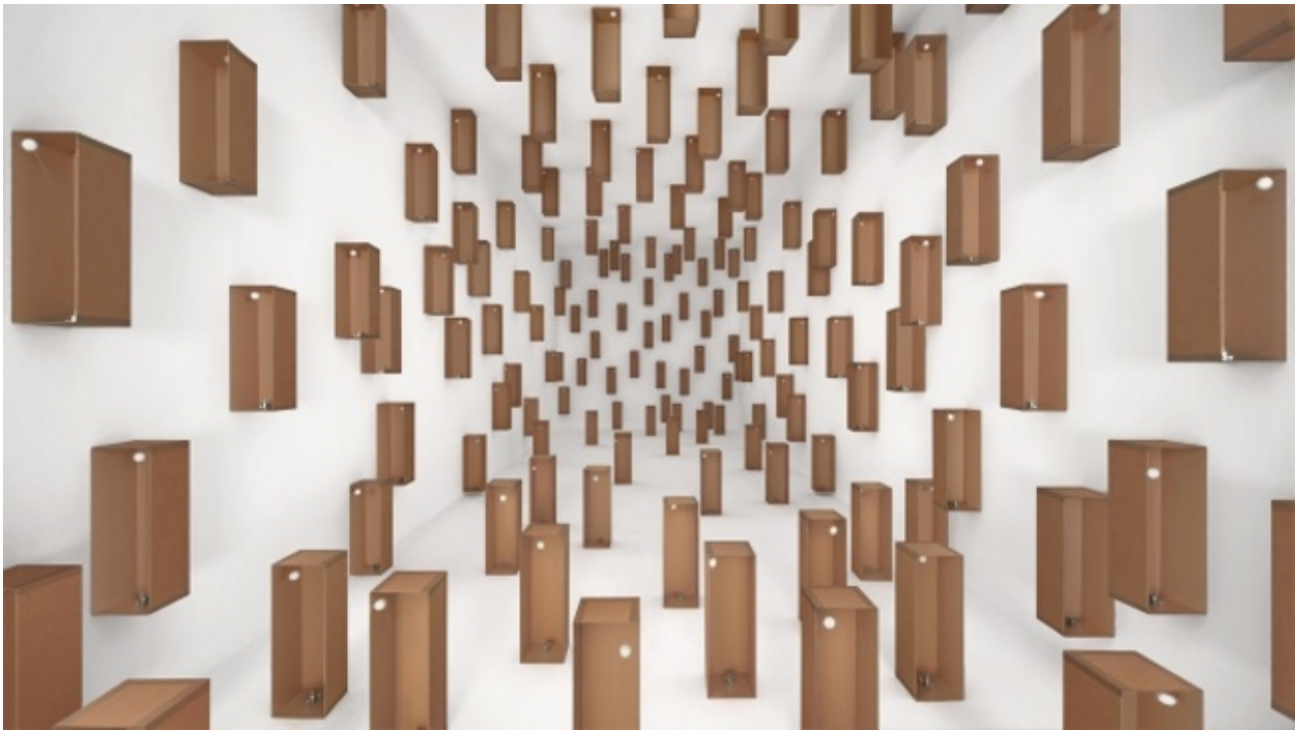
Marco Mancuso and Filippo Lorenzin:
**The art of difference. New self narratives in Expo 2015 Italy**

[http://blog.goethe.de/streamingegos/archives/59-The-art-of-difference.-New-self-narratives-in-Expo-2015-Italy.html ]



*"Art [...] aesthetically reproduces the illusions and mystifications which make up the real essence of this civilisation, in order that Difference may at last be expressed." (Gilles Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1968, p. 293)*

*"A fragile art comes into being when remaining still to not determine this hostile world, or to make it faster than it has ever been, opening it up to the possibilities of a life that is formed. We must give a voice to the surge of our minuscule lives." (Roberto Ciccarelli, "L'emergenza delle nostre vite minuscole", published in "aut aut", n. 365, 12/04/2014)*

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One of the most interesting aspects of our relationship with technology and how we communicate with other people through technology is the way we build up meaning around the narrative of our identities. The internet, social networks and p2p structures have boosted this phenomenon, facilitating the creation of increasingly large networks built around individuals and their personal narratives in relation to virtual (and real) audiences – which are selected on the basis of personal relationships but also increasingly by taking into account social, economic and professional processes.

When interacting with other people on the Net, individuals reflect more and more on themselves, carefully choosing contents (whether personal or not) which others may see. This leads to a self-discourse which redefines the whole notions of identity, repetition and difference.

The **aim of the Italy Group of the Streaming Egos project**, promoted by the Goethe-Institut and taken care of by Marco Mancuso and Filippo Lorenzin at Digicult, is selecting a group of artists to reflect on the representations of the Self on the Net in Italy in the '10s of the new millennium – which for the country is a time of severe economic crisis and deep changes in the political, cultural, economic and work sectors.

Although the Italy Group does not intend to provide a detailed account on such a complex and multifaceted topic, it rediscovers narrative critical aspects in the artistic and cultural fields – which traditionally reflect the context of a country and are actively involved in it, revealing its moral condition, acting as a guide and influencing the critical thought of its inhabitants. Throughout the past five years, these processes have become increasingly complex due to the fact that Net structures are becoming more fluid and unstable with time – because governed by complex social structures involving ambiguous behaviour and narratives which are often representative of a shared perception.

The Italy Group urges arts and culture to critically reflect – in an independent and objective manner – on the society we live in. Such reflection should be able to talk about differences and not only identity mechanisms. Such reflection should respect complexity and not leave behind independent thinking. This intention came into being following the inauguration of the **Milan 2015 Universal Exposition on May 1st and the No Expo protests** surrounding it which resulted in protests also on the Net. This has led to a clear perception of the gap between cultural avantgarde thinkers, who are struggling to identify and express themselves effectively, and the bourgeois framework, increasingly narrated through the political superstructures governing the country more and more strongly due to the economic crisis.

Repetition

**The representation of self, from static image to narrative**

Matching the complexity of this historical period, the representation of self is not only carried out through a single moment in time during which we show ourselves, but is expressed throughout a whole narrative made up of several moments. This is done by means of accurate production and management of public contents (images, videos, articles, links, etc.) that model and shape the perception that others have of us. The tough challenge is building up an image of ourselves on the Net which is complex and multifaceted – a personal narrative which can tell our story. Our goal is creating a "specific" individual, although this individual is inevitably locked up inside a network of individual definitions and behaviours in which one can perceive copying and repeating of other individual features – which are representative for us.

According to **Erving Goffman**, a key figure of symbolic interactionism, identity has a drama feature. The self is the consequence of a performance act – that is to say the way in which we present ourselves in everyday life. Identity is basically projected onto an audience, which is the audience of our theatre play in which we show ourselves to others. On the one hand, the performer is thoroughly involved in his/her performance and is confident that the projection of oneself onto others is genuine; on the other hand, he/she is aware that the actions they use to impress their spectator are nothing but an act. The Canadian sociologist highlights how often this process is put into practice not only out of personal interest but also following the conviction that it may be useful to the audience formed by one's peers.

*"When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the tasks that he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be." (Erving Goffman,The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, 1969, p. 28).*

The narrative of every individual is therefore equivalent to some type of game, in which participants do not question the rules. If they questioned the legitimacy of such process, they would undermine the whole system underlying it. The story of individuals is therefore a social one, an external and perfect representation of us, sometimes a follower of common values, often dogmatic and influenced by complex interests. This does not necessarily match the internal representation, but is an image built up to be effective in the development of private and professional networks. The perceptions of needs, hopes and ambitions are shaped by an "algorithmic society" made up of friends, acquaintances and colleagues who are identified and determined by complex series of codes.

This "algorithmic society" is the result of economic and political interests of multinational companies, that have the ability to monitor our narratives, share them and shape them in relation to our virtual circles – and therefore the ability to transform our narratives into a marketing item to be sold to who offers more

Paolo Cirio, Alessandro Ludovico - Face to Facebook, mixed media (2011). Mixed media installation at Artists as Catalysts, 2013 exhibition at AlhÃ³ndiga, Bilbao - Spain

**The distorted representation of self – in the relationship between private life and work life**

At a time of economic crisis and lack of good work conditions, individuals need to define their own professional identity. The representation of the self on the Net is conveyed through the wish to tell one's own story, making activities and personal interests known – the goal being the ability to create a profile that stands out and that can potentially influence others.

This process is supported by the current IT systems by means of tools quantifying such potentiality with numbers, lists and tags. Before our eyes we have the opportunity to trigger professional networks which may overlap with private ones, telling the story of our individual interests that not only reflect those of a broader community but also match the expectations of our professional field. Undoubtedly, many of us grasp such an opportunity.

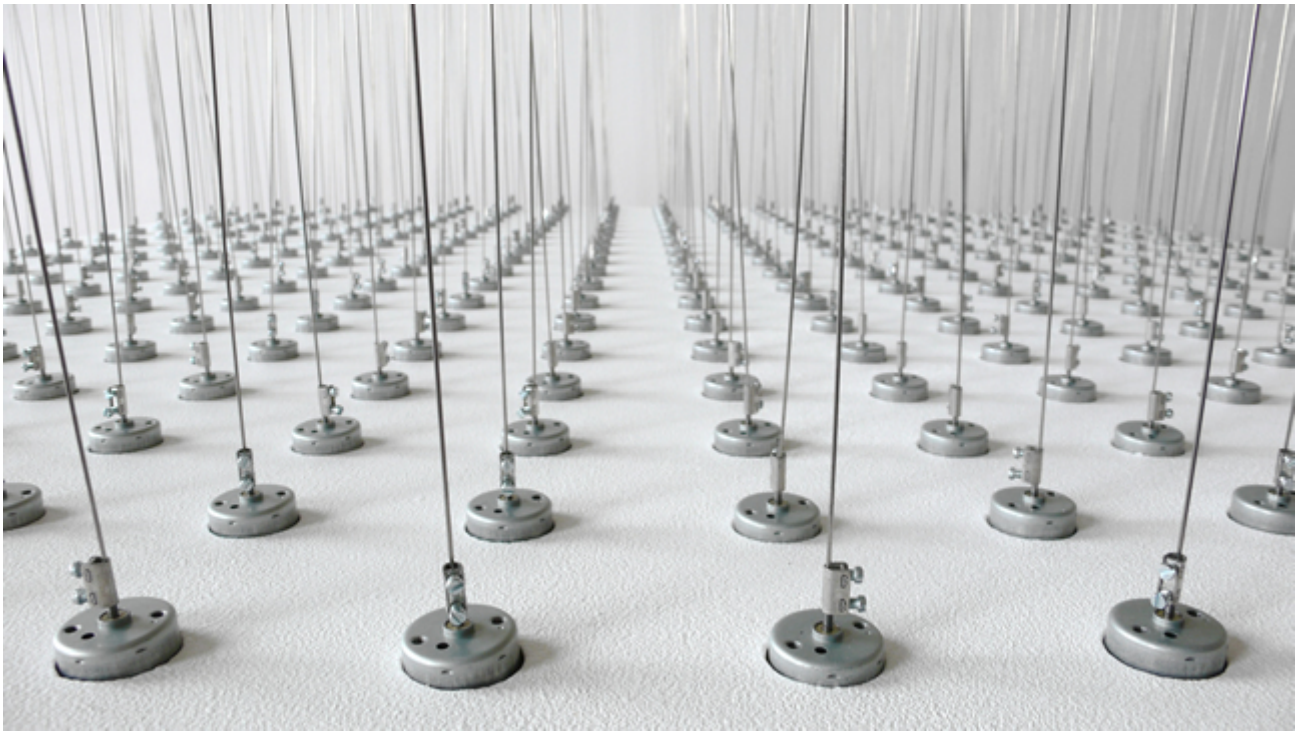
*"[...] the arts of existence [...] those reflective and voluntary practices by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make of their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria'." (Foucault, Michel, The Use of Pleasure. The History of Sexuality: Volume Two. Vintage Book Editions, translations copyright 1985 by Random House, pp. 10-11)*

A Contemporary Portrait of the Internet Artist - African artist with paintbrush and ease, 2014. Commissioned oil on canvas copied from digital image downloaded from Getty Images archive, 38 x 28,5 cm

While, on the one hand, this mechanism works for many people, on the other it may reveal critical aspects and ambiguous representations of the self. As we cannot and do not wish to observe the phenomenon within its social complexity, we may also observe how some "intellectuals" who are in contact with markets such as contemporary music, art, start up culture, design, the maker world – who often use common networks, overlapping market structures, selected meeting points, shared narrative styles – talk about themselves emulating specific avantgarde and counterculture language codes. This appropriation constitutes a dystopic and harmful mechanism both for those "knowledge workers" who represent them independently when they work and in their lives in general and for the creation of a new system of social values and professional opportunities that – in a priviliged relationship with banks, companies and art patrons – repeat the classical capitalist pattern of "a-lot-given-to-few".

*The horror of the "intellettuale di se stesso" ("self intellectual") – as defined by Roberto Ciccarelli in the article "L'emergenza delle nostre vite minuscole", published in "aut aut", n. 365, 12/04/2014 – as opposed to the notion of "lavoratore della conoscenza" ("knowledge worker") "could be explained as the wish to be recognised as a distinct subject, made strong by their "symbolic character", independent from the "community" of the "unworthy". This distinction can be obtained through election, or cooptation, by the State. And when this is not*

*possible, this distinction is seeked on the market. In both cases, the "unworthy" do not hold citizenship except in the pathetic, compassionate and paternatistic narrations outlined by social-liberal culture.The average attitude of the "self intellectual", through the grotesque display of their good will, reveals the authoritarian impulse of who intends to reestablish the "normality" of work, family and nation in a common world which cannot be governed under these rules."*



361 prepared dc-motors, filler wire 1.0mm (detail), Zimoun 2010. Motors, steel, power supply, wood. Installation view: Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, USA. Dimensions: 59 x 59 x 59" / 150 x 150 x 150cm. File size (photo.jpg): 4224x2376px. Photography by Zimoun ©

**The representation of self as a belonging mechanism**

The fragility and concern caused by the economic condition of our country have given rise to new representations of the self on the Net. These dystopic forms on the one hand observe the key issues of our country's markets and political and cultural structures, while, on the other, they respect a logic of "belonging" to specific socio-economic classes according to which one's social networks are modified to satisfy mechanisms of benefit and new representation. In other words, what we are looking at is a shift from an old narration of the self to a new one, which selects some of our experience and changes it into something more attractive, efficient and in contact with the contemporary market and political organisations.

For this purpose, **Gilles Deleuze** puts forward the post-modern idea according to which our lives have to be thought of like a game of differences, therefore breaking off with traditional mental mechanisms based on the principle that we behave and act according to similarity, analogy and identity. In Difference and Repetition, Deleuze urges us to learn to treat ourselves, our lives and events which occur to us as external representations (dressing up, moving, "dressed" repetitions) which are possibly unique given their differences. Otherwise the risk is that the "assimilation machine" – the machine of copy and analogy – may crush our

identities carrying them into a fictitious and illusory world made up of automatisms and so-called “nude” repetitions.

*“All identities are only simulated, produced as an optical 'effect' by the more profound game of difference and repetition. We propose to think difference in itself independently of the forms of representation which reduce it to the Same, and the relation of different to different independently of those forms which make them pass through the negative.” (Gilles Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1968)*

Gilles Deleuze

A web page in which every user can look at materials posted by others is a space in which two selection modes come together. On one hand, there is a subjective mode as we decide which personal information to publish and therefore make available to our contacts. On the other hand, there is the selection mode carried out by the online platform, that analyses posted materials and shows us only contents that are potentially interesting for us. This mechanism is put into practice based on several parameters, such as the temporary number of communications between the user and his/her contacts, the potential coverage of the content itself and all the topics which interest us more. Therefore, it appears clear that the setting-up of these materials is not free from external intervention – it is, on the contrary, strongly influenced by the quantifying logic of online services. The two types of selection we have outlined often lead to a flattening of signifiers: most of the materials which are looked at share communication codes and modes, because they are produced to potentially go viral and because those that do are rewarded for it. By telling the story of our memories and existence, we take part in a chain of images (and therefore representations) similar to one another: the result is that although most users try to stand out by posting original materials, this actually

leads to a flattening of signifiers.

**Michel Foucault** himself was in favour of undoing the concept of identity, rather than maintaining it or, even worse, creating it. He considers identity a form of subjugation and a way of exercising power, put into practice to prevent the individual from moving out of the limits fixed by customs, society and the dominating social and political context.

*"[...] technologies of the self permit individuals to carry out - by their own means or with the help of others - a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.". (Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self. A Seminar With Michel Foucault", edited by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton, p.18. Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1988 - Lectures at Vermont University in October 1982)*

MayDay NetParade 2005, Molleindustria and Chainworkers

**Rappresentazione come nuova espressione di divisione sociale**

As we mentioned above, this year Milan is hosting the **Universal Exposition –** one of the biggest cultural and commercial events around the world. The event was inaugurated on **May 1st – International Workers' Day – on the same day as the May Day Parade**, which has been taking place in Milan for over 20 years now and is the national event representing Italian counter-cultural, opposing and artistic movements. The fact that these two events took place on the same day had immediate repercussions: accounts of the protests and devastation, together with consequent reflection and criticism, constituted the trend topic on the Net for

over 72 hours.

May 1st this year represented the beginning of a new era in the political and cultural history of our country. Following the May 1st events, we have become aware that a new type of social division exists in Italy – which is not connected to traditional political oppositions such as "right" and "left", "poor" and "rich", "people" and "bourgeoisie", but refers to the narrative, repetition and homogenisation identity processes and the fluid socio-economic models we mentioned earlier on. This division has also involved those who come from the art world or experimental or counterculture milieux and who are now selling such status for the best offer on the marketplace, talking about themselves according to a reward logic and not a difference logic.

The most recent theories on identity study individuals as part of a community of equals and clusters. The focus is moving from personal processing, typical of narrative procedures, towards broader perspectives in which relationships strongly determine the construction of the identity itself. For this purpose, in their essay "Identities and Interactions: An Examination of Human Associations in Everyday Life", Free Press, 1978, **Georgie J. McCall and J.L.Simmons** state that *"roles ranked higher will be those supported not only by the individuals but by the surrounding community of reference, providing more significant intrinsic and extrinsic rewards."*

L'autore della foto è il giornalista e scrittore Ivan Carozzi, che ha poi raccontato qui http://www.rivistastudio.com/standard/storia-di-una-foto-virale/ le circostanze in cui lo scatto è nato

The way a share of the population narrates the protests (and talks about itself, interpreting the topic) has turned out to be inevitably different from the narration of those who tried to understand the reasons of the protest itself, accepting its consequences and grasping its complexity. The art world did not – shamefully – take a position: actually, by not openly expressing strong criticism against the economic and political system which supports it, it committed the worst crime.

Finally, we should not overlook the aesthetic aspect of the representation (for instance, a girl posing for a photo while leaning on a burned car turned upside down, or the youngsters dressed in black with hoodies and photographed while throwing objects). The symbols and icons on the Net from this day provide an account of opposite forces coexisting in our country today. But this is material for another chapter, maybe less interesting, maybe more. Only if we observe carefully we will be able to tell.