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MANIPULATING REALITY ***How Images Redefine the World*** **at the CCCS Florence**

In ***MANIPULATING REALITY. How Images Redefine the World*** on view at the CCCS - Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozzi - Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, from **25 September 2009 to 17 January 2010**, 23 international artists will explore new ways of depicting reality with photographs and video-art which will reveal just how much, or how little, truth there is in what is seen and what is depicted.

The concept for the exhibition resulted from a CCCS project which involved Brett Rogers (director of the Photographers' Gallery, London), Luminita Sabau (director of the DZ Bank Art Collection of contemporary photography, Frankfurt), Martino Marangoni (director of the Fondazione Marangoni, Florence) and Franziska Nori (project director, CCCS). The show will focus on the meaning of the term "reality" in the context of contemporary art as it explores the different ways of representing the world and the ambiguity that lies between the real and the verisimilar, the concrete and the apparent, the present and the past.

Various disciplines have already signaled a paradigm shift when they contend that the "real world" does not exist as an independent category, merely as a projection or a construction by the individual. Actions and beliefs are then based on this "reality".

Photography and video art may not only record reality, they may, at the same time, falsify it. Today, with the spreading popularity of digital technology and the widespread dissemination of images through the mass media and the internet, this ambiguity has if anything increased, pushing the conflict between appearance and reality to its limits and demanding that the spectator play an active role in defining what he or she is seeing as real.

The exhibition presents the work of 23 international artists: Olivo Barbieri (Italy), Sonja Braas (Germany), Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin (South Africa), Gregory Crewdson (USA), Thomas Demand (Germany), Elena Dorfman (USA), Christiane Feser (Germany), Andreas Gefeller (Germany), Andreas Gursky (Germany), Beate Gütschow (Germany), Tatjana Hallbaum (Germany), Ilkka Halso (Finland), Robin Hewlett & Ben Kinsley (USA), Rosemary Laing (Australia), Aernout Mik (The Netherlands), Saskia Olde Wolbers (The Netherlands), Gwon Osang (Korea), Sarah Pickering (UK), Moira Ricci (Italy), Cindy Sherman (USA), Cody Trepte (USA), Paolo Ventura (Italy) and Melanie Wiora (Germany). All use photography and video-art to manipulate our perception of the visible world and build new models of reality.

The exhibition includes work by **Cindy Sherman** (USA, 1954), who conducts her exploration of the manipulation on her own body, transforming herself into affluent middle-aged women at the height of their social status and power yet feeling the onset of their physical decline. Despite the protective shield of their clothing, the camera and the spectator's gaze reveal them in all the crudeness of their naked reality.

Andreas Gursky (Germany, 1955) juxtaposes and merges pictures of existing landscapes to create totally new and imaginary scenarios. **Thomas Demand** (Germany, 1964) creates the illusion of real spaces by photographing paper models constructed using pictures taken from the media. The same is true of **Sonja Brass** (Germany, 1968), who photographs

miniature reconstructions of natural phenomena, such as the flow of lava or a tornado, highlighting their aesthetic and formal aspect and deceiving the viewer with the appearance of reality.

Defining a new reality is an integral part of the philosophy underlying the work of **Beate Gütschow** (Germany, 1970), who uses a computer to reconstruct imaginary architecture; while for his part, **Andreas Gefeller** (Germany, 1970) forges impossible visions of ordinary spaces such as rooms, flats or places of work by resorting to the unusual juxtaposition of several different photographs taken from above. The human body, too, can be recomposed, as in the case of **Gwon Osang** (Korea, 1974) whose sculptures consist of hundreds of photographs mapping the entire surface area of his model. Reconstructing history or rethinking topical issues such as war, either as a direct critique or as part of a temporal and philosophical overlap, are some of the issues that characterize the work of other artists whose work is on display in the exhibition. The work of **Paolo Ventura** (Italy, 1968) focuses on the painful memory of the recent war in Iraq, reconstructing wartime scenarios using puppets and dummies dressed as soldiers. He uses ambiguity and the alteration of reality to comment on the real manipulation of "truth" in reports and pictures of the war carried in the media. **Maira Ricci** (Italy, 1979) inserts her own picture into portraits of her mother as a young woman, thus manipulating the past to build new memories of encounters that never took place.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue with contributions by James Der Derian (Watson Institute research professor of international studies and professor of political science at Brown University, USA), Harald Welzer (director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Memory Research, University of Essen, Germany), Elena Esposito (professor of Sociology and Communication Sciences at the University of Modena, Italy) and Maria Janina Vitale (art historian, with a specialization in contemporary photography).

Location: Centre for Contemporary Culture Strozzi (CCCS)
Palazzo Strozzi, 50123 Firenze, Italy

Opening hours: Daily: 10.00 to 20.00; Thursday: 10.00 to 23.00
Closed Monday

Admission: €5.00 (valid for 5 visits in a month, including lectures)
€4.00 concessions, €3 schools

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FRANZISKA NORI

Project director

Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozzi CCCS

*Manipulating Reality**

The central theme of the project *Realtà Manipolate / Manipulating Reality* is the critical analysis of the concept of reality in relation to its possibilities of representation. Above all as a result of the "digital revolution" and the upheaval it has caused in lifestyles and perception of the world over the last twenty years, images have become such an all-encompassing means of universal communication as to provide the basis for a new type of society. The mass media, sciences and everyday life make use of a form of non-verbal communication that is now indispensable. Recent developments in digital technology have given rise in particular to a different relationship between image and beholder at the level both of use and of production. Those who were once the targets have today become the creators of a certain type of visual communication. Never before in fact have such huge quantities of photographic images been produced and put in circulation on a daily basis. Webcams, cell-phone cameras and digital cameras have become omnipresent accessories in everyday life, requiring no great degree of technical expertise and hence readily available for use by vast numbers of people to document moments of private or public life. A key element of dissemination is the Internet, where photographs and videos are uploaded and downloaded, often circulating under no control and at the mercy of whoever might wish to appropriate them for purposes of manipulation or insertion into different contexts. This content is frequently posted on digital platforms such as blogs, social networks and personal websites, which have now become just as important as the traditional channels of information and mass media, especially for the young. We are living in an "image society" where communication no longer takes place primarily through the written word but through images that can be produced and circulated by anyone, anywhere, anytime.

The recent events in Iran after the presidential elections – with censorship imposed on the official media and the grass-roots reaction through the massive dissemination of video messages and reports on blogs, Twitter and Facebook filmed by people intent on providing first-hand documentation of the repression underway in the country – offer an emblematic example of a revolution that is not only technological but also political, historical and cultural. An understanding of online networks and digital technologies has enabled thousands of Iranian citizens to get round the information blackout imposed by the regime. While the Indymedia network of independent journalism based on user participation was still one of the few global channels for the dissemination of alternative information in 2001, the year of the Genoa G8 meeting, users have now developed a culture of direct participation as an omnipresent principle on the Web.

The circulation of visual messages is used as a tool of social protest in both cases, but Indymedia constituted an alternative to the official sources of information, whereas blogs have been the sole source of information in Iran also for professional journalism, thus fuelling the already open debate on the authenticity and accuracy of the information often provided anonymously on the Web.

During the war in Iraq it was the US government that tried to obtain a monopoly in the production and circulation of images of the conflict by placing embedded journalists and photographers in fighting units but requiring all footage to be submitted to the prior selection and hence control of the military press office. The power of images was thus highlighted in all its crucial importance and the situation is currently reversed in Iran, where the population has turned to the production and circulation of photographs and video material as the only tool at its disposal to break through the blockade imposed on the media and hence the country's isolation from the outside world.

Alongside the evident opportunities arising from the expansion of the power to produce images and the possible channels of circulation (from one-to-many to many-to-many), critical examination of the relationship between digital photographic images and what we define as "real" thus appears indispensable.

Since its invention, photography has established itself as a tool capable of allowing us to see realities invisible to the naked eye. (Examples include the photographic studies of movement produced by Eadweard Muybridge as early as 1878, Nadar's photographs from a balloon and enlarged shots of microscopic phenomena.) It has therefore helped to expand and redefine our image of the world practically from the outset. Visual representation has, however, taken on everincreasing importance with respect to the written word in various disciplines, including the sciences, over the last few years. The philosopher and art historian Gottfried Böhm uses the term *ikonische Wendung* or "iconic turn" to describe this shift of interest, the phenomenon

whereby images have gradually taken over from words as a vehicle of flexible and universal communication. Hence the need for a "science of images" to undertake painstaking interdisciplinary investigation of the function of the image as a medium of information: "It seems obvious to us today that any part of the entire surface of the world, no matter how insignificant, can become an image. Anything that is visible can also be an image" (Gottfried Böhm, *Wie Bilder Sinn erzeugen*, 2007, p. 11).

The philosopher Vilém Flusser sparked off intense debate on the "technical images" produced in the ICT society with his "communicology" back in the 1980s. While Flusser did not use the concept of the *ikonische Wendung* at the time, his works – especially *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983) and *Universum der technischen Bilder* (1985) – paved the way for a new appraisal of the image in the postmodern era. The systems of which we are part – such as science, politics, finance and society as a whole – require visual representation and hence images capable of simplifying their networks of relations based on complex circuits of information by acting as analogical models or systems. "In the translation of the original into a secondary representation, it can generally be observed that the model is capable in turn of acting as a new original" (Böhm 2007, p. 116).

In his celebrated essay *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes described photography as the result of a chemical-optical impression through which reality is imprinted on a material support in the same way in which it presents itself in front of the camera lens. This referential relationship is, however, completely lost in digital photography. As production, post-production and distribution are digitized processes, present-day images lack the original reference linking the photograph to the reality out of which it arises. With the disappearance of the negative and film, there is no longer any way of ascertaining the original source of the image. Since this consists simply of a digital code, the photograph in the classical and material sense of the term can be regarded as definitively dead and buried. Paradoxically enough, the rules governing the functioning of digital photography are similar rather to those that characterize painting. While digital tools have made possible operations that we could describe as pictorial, however, the works produced can hardly be compared to paintings. Photographers today can project their mental images onto the photographic surface without leaving any trace of their intervention. They can make the viewer believe that the image is a reproduction of reality, given that he or she has no way of ascertaining the authenticity of the object represented. The reading, understanding and interpretation of the image depend totally on the availability of secondary information. What can be a problem in the mass media and the news services (retouching to correct blemishes, the creation of digital beauties and photographs for the press) becomes not only legitimate but also highly stimulating in the context of artistic creation. The photography of contemporary art can in fact become a tool that expands and enhances imagination and creativity.

"Reality deserves to be represented only where it is constructed." This challenging assertion is put forward by Andreas Gursky, the most celebrated representative of photographic realism in the digital era. New tools and media have always served throughout the history of art as stimuli for the birth and development of new artistic approaches and ideas but also as new ways to see the world. Reality has, however, never been defined through visual models and images (photographs and video) to the extent that it is today. It was as early as 1983 in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* that Flusser spoke about a society surrounded by a photographic universe for which "being in the photographic universe means experiencing, knowing and evaluating the world in relation to photographs".

In today's mass-media society, only what becomes image is considered real. In a process of reversal, the representation of the world comes to replace the world itself, a world in which the user operates digitally. Individuals post intimate photographs on the Internet, exposing their private sphere in a dimension accessible to all and thus developing a new, manipulated image of themselves. At the same time, as hypothesized earlier by Michel Foucault, the State has instituted the constant, widespread surveillance of public spaces, both real and virtual, and huge private-sector corporations like Google have filmed entire cities with special video cameras for the purposes of commercial exploitation. Mapping has become an omnipresent procedure, organizing individual pieces of information and photographic sequences into archives and databases that come to constitute a sort of "hyper-image" of reality. It is therefore clearly no longer possible to establish a sharp distinction between fiction and reality. One influences and helps to create the other and the elements of transition become increasingly fluid. Images are not "what some continue to think, namely something posterior, attached to reality with no consequences like a sort of mirror. Images hold instead the power to organize our approach to reality in advance, to define our modes of vision and hence to determine what the world *is*" (Böhm 2007, p. 14).

It is the task of art to consider these different forms of representation, separate them from their specific context, reorganize them and investigate their nature and content. Rather than set itself the impossible goal of finding the answer to the question of the nature of a reality reproducible in image form, the exhibition *Realtà Manipolate / Manipulating Reality* presents a selection of artistic approaches that work through photography and video to develop possible models of reality. Its aim is not to understand *whether* photographs can convey reality but *how* this can occur. The works exhibited represent different artistic strategies addressing the construction, reflection or distortion of reality in images. In addition to investigating the value of documentary photography today, many of the artists featured reflect in part the conditions of the tool of photography and adopt known artistic techniques such as collage, presentation in model form, abstraction and the assemblage of different elements. These works can be included among the classic photographic genres – like photographs of buildings, portraiture, landscape and press photography – but seek to confound the expectations they usually arouse.

Visitors find themselves faced with different constructions of reality, thus being prompted to reconsider their criteria for what is real and subject them to critical reappraisal in the light of the works exhibited. Like all of the exhibition projects devised by the

Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozzi (CCCS), *Realtà Manipolate / Manipulating Reality* is divided into the three clearly distinct but complementary phases of a show, a publication and a series of lectures, thus making it possible to examine the subject in greater depth and enhance its range of potential.

The catalogue contains essays by international authors of different backgrounds. James Der Derian, professor of political science at Brown University, Providence, in his essay *From Images of War to a War of Images* focuses primarily on images of war to examine the relationship between the presentation of reality and the manipulation of photography, video and film in the mass media for the purposes of a representation of power. Harald Welzer, professor of social psychology and director of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Memory Research at Essen University, discusses in *The Mediality of Human Memory* the autobiographical memory as a set of rememberings composed not only of individuals' biological and neuronal reactions to lived experiences but also and to a great extent of external elements such as written information, images, music and stories. Elena Esposito, lecturer on sociology and sciences of communication at Modena University, contributes to critical analysis of the correlation of reality, representation and fiction, above all in the light of possible manipulation, with an essay titled *The Reality of the World and the Realism of Fiction*. Janina Vitale, an art historian specializing in contemporary photography, provides in her essay *From Image to Reality* an overview of the historical evolution of photography focusing on the complex relationship between object represented, author and user in the construction of possible models of reality. The series of lectures continuing throughout the exhibition will feature a range of experts and professionals with different backgrounds, including Roberta Valtorta, director of the museum of contemporary photography in Cinisello Balsamo, the publisher and critic Gianni Romano, the critics Claudio Marra and Marco Senaldi, and the journalists Mimmo Candito and Michele Smargiassi. One special event will be an Artist Talk by the Italian photographer and video artist Olivo Barbieri, who is also included in the exhibition with one of his celebrated works. Crucial importance attaches to our collaboration with the two Florentine festivals of documentary films held during the same period as the exhibition, namely the "Festival dei Popoli" and "Lo Schermo dell'Arte". The film *Ceský sen* (Czech dream), to be shown at the Strozzi in October, is provided by the archives of the former, and we thank its director Luciano Barisone as well as board members Maria Bonsanti and Alberto Lastrucci for their kind cooperation. It is in collaboration with Lo Schermo dell'Arte, an international programme of films on the visual arts organized by Silvia Lucchesi at the Odeon cinema, that the CCCS will be presenting a documentary film dedicated to the celebrated American artist Cindy Sherman, another figure featured in the exhibition.

In organizing the *Manipulating Reality* project, the Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozzi was aided in the identification of artists for inclusion and development of the art-critical framework by a board of advisors made up of recognized international experts in the field of contemporary photography. These include Brett Rogers, director of the Photographers' Gallery in London, Luminita Sabau, director of the DZ Bank collection of contemporary photography in Frankfurt, and Martino Marangoni, director of the Fondazione Studio Marangoni in Florence, with which the CCCS has also collaborated on a programme of events parallel to the exhibition. Special thanks go to the German photographer Christiane Feser, who has been working for years on manipulation in the context of digital photography and hence on the associated problems connected with representation. While her deep understanding of the subject has enabled her to make a crucial contribution to the exhibition in theoretical and conceptual as well as practical and technical terms, her very special photographer's eye has also made it possible to go beyond the often unduly formalistic and historical approach of art critics.

The show is designed to provide an overview of diverse ways of manipulating reality from different viewpoints. One of these, and indeed the most important, is the viewpoint of the visitor who observes, analyzes and interprets, playing an active role with respect to the image. The photograph or video acts as a mirror of the world and simulation of reality that the individual can choose whether to accept or question. It is in this way that images redefine the world.

Florence, 24 September 2009

* From the catalogue "MANIPULATING REALITY. How images redefine the world" (Firenze, CCCS, Palazzo Strozzi, 25 September 2009 - 10 January 2010) – Alias, 2009



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JAMES M. BRADBURNE
General director
Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi

The mission of the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi is to revitalize the public spaces of the Palazzo, one of Florence's finest examples of Renaissance architecture, and to establish it as an exciting, dynamic and international cultural destination for visitors of all ages and interests. Already the exhibitions held in the palace's grand spaces on the first floor have attracted international attention. The Palazzo's courtyard now hosts a café, a shop and a permanent exhibition on its own history, as well as a varied programme of concerts, fashion shows and performances. From the outset, a key part of the Palazzo Strozzi project was to create a centre for contemporary culture at the very heart of Florence, and the Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozzi (CCCS) was created as a platform for the different approaches and practices that characterize the production of contemporary art and culture.

The centre is located in the beautifully restored spaces under the courtyard of Palazzo Strozzi – known as “La Strozziina” – that hosted Florence's most important international exhibitions in the years after the Second World War until the flood of 1966. The CCCS comprises twelve rooms of different sizes, approx. 850 square metres in total. The absence of natural light enables individual curators to interpret the space in new and exciting ways and makes it possible to reshape the entire environment in accordance with the requirements of each new project. The challenge posed by the Renaissance architecture of Palazzo Strozzi for contemporary art is a stimulus to treat each new event and project almost as a theatre, constantly pursuing new possibilities of artistic communication, presentation and mediation.

Philosophical idealism has a long history. In 1927 Alfred North Whitehead remarked that “the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato”: certainly Plato is among the earliest to have suggested that the world we see is not the “real” world, but merely shadows flickering metaphorically on the wall of a cave. In 1781, Immanuel Kant took idealist logic even further: “... if I remove the thinking subject, the whole material world must at once vanish because it is nothing but a phenomenal appearance in the sensibility of ourselves as a subject, and a manner or species of representation”.

The current exhibition tackles issues at the heart of contemporary culture. The show focuses on the meaning of the term “reality” in the context of contemporary art, and explores different ways of representing the world and the ambiguity that lies between the real and the verisimilar, the concrete and the apparent, the present and the past. We have already seen a return to a neo-idealist paradigm which argues that the “real world” does not exist as an independent category, but merely as a projection or a construction by the individual. Actions and beliefs are then based on this “reality”. Photography and video art may not only faithfully record reality – they may equally falsify it. The exhibition presents the work of 23 international artists including Thomas Demand, Elena Dorfman, Andreas Gursky, Ilkka Halso, Rosemary Laing, Gwon Osang, Cindy Sherman and Paolo Ventura. All use photography and video art to manipulate our perception of the visible world and build new models of reality.

Today, with the spreading popularity of digital technology and the widespread dissemination of images by the mass media and the Internet, this ambiguity has increased, pushing the tension between appearance and reality to its limits and demanding that the spectator play an active role in defining what he or she is seeing as real. Looking at the world is no longer an act of faith, it is an act of will, and the issues explored by *Realtà Manipolate / Manipulating Reality* are ones that deserve our careful and critical attention.

Florence, 24 september 2009