Virtual

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It. *Virtuale*; Fr. *Virtuel*; Germ. *Virtuell*; Span. *Virtual*. The expression "virtual" refers to an interactive digital image, the self-phenomenalization of an algorithm in binary format in interaction with a user-consumer. This involves something definite, that international aesthetic experimentation has been working on for years, namely all those computational object-environments that a user can interact with by means of computer peripherals which can assume the form of bio-robotic prostheses that allow for very high degrees of "immersion". The user sometimes interacts with these computing environments (usually developed not by single individuals but by a team) through his or her *avatar*, the virtual alter ego that appears to act within those environments, producing transformations, while at other times his or her spectatorial function coincides with being an actor in the situation. Now, the "aesthetic" transformations or modifications produced by users in computing or virtual environments are made possible by the fact that images (visual, auditory, tactile, etc.) that they perceive/produce are nothing but different phenomenalizations of an algorithmic matrix, thus understandable as different possible aesthetic actualizations allowed by the program. However, the degree of interactivity of such computational objects changes according to the interaction that takes place on the basis of "rigid" algorithmic matrices – which predetermine the interactive possibilities – or on the basis of "flexible" matrices that can "learn" and also modify themselves through the interaction.

The Aesthetic Debate

The "virtual body" in the aesthetic sense is evaluated as a structurally relational environment; in short, we can list the following essential characteristics: *intermediarity* and *virtuality* – characteristics that are closely connected. Specifically, virtual bodies are *intermediary* realities (see above all Queau 1989) for two fundamental reasons:

a) they disrupt the dichotomy between "internal" and "external": they are neither a simple cognitive product of consciousness, images of the mind – because the user is aware of experiencing a *different* reality – nor simply "external realities" to the mind – because they always depend on the user's actions.

The virtual body is therefore "external-internal": contrary to what happens to external objects, which are "unamendable" by a pure act of volition, it is amendable, at least in theory, thanks to its connectability to the seat of the nervous impulses: however, one cannot for this reason think of it as internal, because it is not a product of the imagination or of oneiric activity, but is intersubjectively experienceable. Consequently, virtual bodies are neither simply images, nor simply bodies, but rather image-bodies. It can perhaps be said that the virtual body elides, in its capacity as an emerging hybrid structure, the two sides of the interactive relation: both the merely physical-material meaning of "external" and the merely cognitive-personal meaning of "internal". The virtual body is therefore configured as a subjective-objective chiasm. In a virtual body-environment, in which space itself is the result of an interaction, the world does not occur in terms of a process of distancing, but in the sense-feeling of immersion, and the body, inasmuch as it is perceived as other, takes on the sense of its reality, of its effectuality, as a pathic and imaginary incision. Thus the virtual body-environment is primarily an intermediary between inner and outer experience, a place in which the border becomes territory;

b) evading the distinction between "objects" and "events," because, together with objects that we suppose to be external to us (considered as "material objects", but not solely), they (i.e., the image-bodies) appear to be relatively stable and to abide in time, but like events that happen to us (or appear to happen to *us*), they exist only in interaction. The resulting individual is concrete, as a perceptible subject-object of action, but "thin" precisely because it is interactive. It is therefore a hybrid with an uncertain ontological status. We can even call it a thin body of a non-continuous world, composed of point-data that manifest themselves as fluidity and density and that saturate perception: a body which is rendered light through digitalization, a body whose condition of manifestation is interaction.

Some clarifications: the virtual environment that is perceived by the user as an object is the temporary actualization of a virtual, existing only, in its actuality, as a function of the interactive relation. The virtual body, although not reducible to a representation, does not exist as body if not in interaction, actually it *is* an interaction, an object-event: an action (relation of interaction) that is a body (virtual body) because it possesses the characteristics that we typically attribute to bodies. The virtual body abides in time through changes of position, dimension, form, and colour, but only under certain conditions regarding its interactive nature, for which virtual bodies are (relatively) monotonous events. A virtual body occupies (assuming that these words may be intuitively understood and hence still prove useful in such new or even unprecedented contexts) a certain portion of space-time, but in a non-exclusive way, because the virtual body occurs in the space-time of a non-virtual body. Furthermore, it multiplies its temporal forms: what is its time? To be sure, it unfolds in the moment of interaction, but among its conditions of possibility, even in its being a real body, is that of being written or inscribed in a computer memory. It must be emphasized that in the case of the virtual body interactivity is not exhausted in the interaction understood as an action between two elements, but interactivity (conceived of as the mutation of a matrix that is itself not the virtual body) is that which allows the virtual body to exist. Now, this notion of interactivity does not imply a subtraction, but an accentuation of unrepeatable characteristics, and therefore the uniqueness of the virtual body. In fact, the specific *virtuality* of the virtual body makes evident the fact, already implicit in the initial definition of virtual body, that the interactive digital image-body never completely actualizes the

virtuality of its algorithmic matrix, for reasons internal to the concept of the virtual, configured as a problematic complex, a node of tendencies that call for a process of actualization.

Differently from the traditional spectator of the pictorial or filmic device, what is given to the subject-spectator-actor as induced by any virtual device is an incentive of motion rather than its suspension; it is a super-commitment of kinesthetic functions, a feeling of inclusion within the scene and in relationship with the characters involved, a feeling intertwined with a feeling of distinction, because the scene would not exist without his/her action. The voyeuristic drive is replaced by a drive of insertion, of limitless intervention, of omnipotence inhibited only by the limits of the program run. Thus the metapsychological regime of immersion, the processes of identification, of imaginary constitution and distinction of the self, radically change. We should think of the aesthetic fruition as deprived of that *distance*, which has been a condition of possibility of an artistically relevant form; we should try to think of the function rather in the form of a *backwash*, that is, of the interpenetration of the body of the user into the body of the work and, vice versa, the work into the body, or the imaginary. This implies an emphasis on the pathic and panic dimension of the relationship: being one with the work, which undergoes the effect of my presence and modifies my feeling, through the change caused by that undergoing.

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