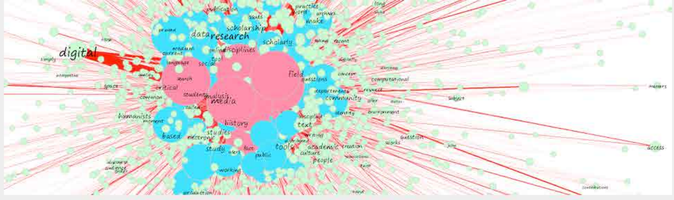

Putting the Humanities in Digital Humanities

Posted on February 14, 2013 by laurenrebecca — 2 Comments ↓

I'm writing a blog post that would have been better suited for the week we did our HTML workshop, but I think it is still worth sharing with the class.

Because I am working on the committee that is planning the EGSA conference and art show, I have had the opportunity to look at work by a number of artists. When I was sharing the images with the rest of the committee and beginning to describe the process of one artist, Ben pointed out that it might work for a post. So, thanks to Ben, here we are.

The artist in question, Emilio Vavarella, shared a number of images and a description of his project. Because of the private nature of the conference submission and the public nature of this blog, I'll only share images and information that I was able to find elsewhere online. I'll share his explanation of his process, available at Celeste Prize:

This diptych is composed of a traditional analog photograph and a digital elaboration. It belongs to a series of works that stems from my family's collection of photographs, many of which portray relatives who had died before I was born. I scanned the photographs and then substituted a part of the ASCII image code of each photograph with a story based on what I had come to learn about each person portrayed. The text is, in part, the memories that were passed down to me, and, in part, my own interpretation. Memory has the power to alter the past, transforming photographs in a subjective way. My alteration forces my memories to coexist with the image in an unforeseeable and new way.

I like this set of images for a few reasons. The first is simply that I find them visually compelling. I'm also intrigued by the way the first image's straightforward religious (and I assume Catholic) imagery is distorted by the alternation of the code. In the first, I interpret the Christ statue and the figure's white clothing and veil to signify that the figure made her First Communion, an important religious rite (no surprise that it is documented by a photo). Distorting the code distorts the images and its signification, turning an image that was meant to be read in a specific way (shades if McLuhan here) to something that is difficult to decipher: the Christ statue is fractured, the girl's white dress is red, the church steps are blurred. The sinister vibe the altered image takes on certainly contrasts with the unaltered image—at least at first. Interestingly, when Vavarella submitted his images to the conference, he only included the altered images. Only when I began to write this post did I search for his images online and come cross the juxtaposition of unaltered and altered images. Seeing them paired in this way leads me to read the distortion of the second image onto the first, causing the viewer (well, at least this viewer) to destabilize the supposedly straightforward and innocuous religious imagery.

So, what is the point of that ramble, in terms of our class? The point, for me at least, is that I was able to have a viewing experience that is not atypical in terms of the humanities. After two semesters worth of Renaissance art as an undergrad, I can say I'm no stranger to looking at and analyzing religious images. These particular images, and, therefore, my viewing experience, *were made possible only through digital manipulation*. Julia Maloney begins her ProfHacker piece from last week with the following: "An important part of the ProfHacker 101 Manifesto is that we want to foster change by teaching people bits and pieces of technology that we use every day but others find totally intimidating. Markup languages, programming languages, database schemas, and similar technologies are those things that I live and breathe but I know send others running for the hills." I don't think that viewing these images and telling you about them teaches you how to use the technologies and coding language Vavarella did (I experimented on my computer with no luck), but I do think it can help us learn how these bits and pieces of technology can influence and enhance our viewing experiences. Rather than create distance between image and viewer, I believe that Vavarella was able to use his knowledge of technology and code to create and encourage a dialouge.

This distinction between distance and connection is an ongoing debate in the digital world (for an interesting and non-academic discussion of this, check out Slate's recent article on "couples apps"). Of course, all technology creates distance; a drawing is an approximation and interpretation; reading a poem is a different experience than hearing one from a wandering orator. For that reason, I think that a lot of the anxiety, academic or not, surrounding the technology's potential dehumanization could be put to rest. Other anxities exist, of course, and I imagine we might discuss some of them today[1].

As an aside, in writing this post I realized that I might have an unconscious predilection for art that subtly critiques Catholicism. Some of you might have seen this image in the smaller conference room:

Lil' Miss

That was my contribution to Professor Brown's Visual Postmodernities exhibit two years ago, done by the lovely and talented Celeste Rapone.

[1] I scoffed when I read Gertrude Himmelfarb's lament about the unseating of traditional authority, but by the time I got to the fact that Google placed amuateur historian and Lincoln enthusiast Roger Norton above "the Pulitzer-Prize winning Harvward professor David Donald" in its search results, I felt a small pang of sympathy for poor Gertrude.

‹ Lab #3: Omeka The Flaws of Moretti's Argument; Or, I Really Did Not Like This Essay ›

Posted in Uncategorized

2 comments on "Putting the Humanities in Digital Humanities"

Kristi says:
February 15, 2013 at 11:01 am

I don't have anything really important to add to your discussion here at the moment, but I find Vavarella's art (and your interpretation of it) fascinating. I'm really curious about how you're going to showcase "digitally-created" art versus "traditionally-created" art at the conference: do you draw extra attention to the medium for people who might not understand it in the way we have general knowledge of "watercolors" or "bronze"..?

Reply

laurenrebecca says:
February 20, 2013 at 10:22 am

Thanks for the comment, Kristi! As I mentioned, Vavarella submitted only the altered versions of his images, so we will not get the side-by-side comparison, unfortunately. Each piece will have a small bit of artist info next to it… I hope that his will include something about how he created his work. Because the theme is "alt/" I think Vavarella's process is really important.