ITALIANS ON THE JOB: Inside and Outside an Anarchival Impulse
Curatorial text by Monica Bosaro

Introduction

An-archiving Game is Italian artist Emilio Vavarella's second project in his series "The Italian Job," a collection of conceptual artworks ("jobs") that seek to highlight hidden structures behind themes of originality, legality, artistic authorship, collective processes, digital labor, and the artist-curator relationship in the age of the Internet. The title is an homage to the Italian Theory, a political philosophy rooted in collective processes and theoretical practice.

Specifically, this second project reconsiders the relationship between art production and reproduction in the era of digital technology, in line with the never-ending philosophic debate over concepts of "originality" and the transformation of the "aura" of artworks, as posited in Walter Benjamin's famous dissertation *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936). It focuses on the notion of "job" from the perspectives of the artist and the curator, and it questions the meaning of artistic production today. Examining an historical overview of the material-to-immaterial labor tendency of the last century and the transformation of production into enjoyable activities, this second project imagines a kind of "game" for workers (artist and curators) who have become users. These concepts are intertwined in the project both methodologically (*in*) and theoretically (*out*) before and during the production, as well as in the further consideration here presented.

The process

For *An-archiving game*, two curators were invited by the artist to find and select photographic material drawn from the National Stolen Art File (NSAF)[i], a free-access archive of stolen artworks hosted by the FBI. Using both physical sources (libraries, magazines) and digital sources (Google, online galleries), the curators and the artist established a shared research methodology in order to find quality reproductions of all 155 stolen photos listed in the NSAF. While the archive did not provide all the information (images and key data) that the artist and curators needed to appropriate, it served as the central starting point of the job. This process inverted the traditional curatorial direction and artist-curator relationship; the curators were free to make their own selection, and Vavarella delegated the artistic content of his exhibition.

The resulting project, a new digital artwork, is an animated GIF consisting of 17 selected photographs temporarily exhibited in various ways. First, the work will run as an

online exhibition in the Widget Art Gallery. Second, the single images that are part of the GIF were selected with the intention of being transformed into physical artworks, photographs printed and signed by Emilio Vavarella to be presented in the "Deep Web," the non-indexed portion of the World Wide Web often used to buy and sell illegal goods. The artist, in appropriating the images as if they were his own creation, would sell physical prints to collectors in a manner respectful of the concepts of anonymity, illegality, and collaboration that remain the basis of the project.

On November 7th, 2014, after having worked for several months on the launch of the project using the Deep Web site Silk Road 2.0, something unexpected happened. The Silk Road was closed by the FBI, ironically by the same law enforcement agency whose archive was the starting point of the project. Artists like Emilio Vavarella, who relies on open-source, alternative, and sometimes illegal cutting-edge technologies, are used to these kinds of unexpected issues. Fortunately, soon after the FBI shut down the Silk Road, a new marketplace opened. OpenBazaar, a decentralized network created for direct economic exchanges without any brokerage by companies, promises to be censorship-resistant because of its peer-to-peer structure. The photographs of The Italian Job n.2 – An-archiving Game will therefore be the first artworks available for purchase on OpenBazaar, traded for bitcoins, a global cryptocurrency, and sold directly artist-to-collectors in an open source and independent digital space.

The Artist-Curator Relationship

In this project, Vavarella's "job" was an act of re-appropriation of other artists' artworks, rather than an act of first-order creation, or even first-order appropriation. Inspired by and interdependent with "illegality," the one-year long project attempts to demonstrate how an artist can be, thanks to technology, an active agent in finding new ways to break down the traditional categories of artistic work. The project helps redefine the artist's role as experimenter inside the current art world's economic and political structures, especially within the global and advanced capitalist society the Internet describes.

Vavarella chose to work with a medium that constantly plays with the tension between widespread, indexed censorship and the very impossibility of such censorship, and from platforms known for their volatility. Additionally, Vavarella's choice to work specifically with the photographic section of NSAF is not incidental. The archive proves an interesting starting point for questioning the artistic significance of using and reproducing images at this time of digital hegemony. More than a production intended as a "creative act," Emilio Vavarella is interested in those forms of collaborative projects aimed at presenting and diffusing artworks, in this case photographs, in spaces where forms of hierarchy and power are horizontal.

It is worthwhile to remember that the figure of the artist has been one of constant evolution since the emergence of the avant-gardes, continuing well into the twentieth century. The art world has moved from acts of re-appropriation and delegation following the work of Marcel Duchamp to the emergence of new methodologies in the late '60s derived from the conceptualization of artistic work (art as process, attitude, or language), and more recent practices of "postproduction"[ii] have grown popular largely thanks to the rapid diffusion of technologies. As much today as in any other century, if not more so, artists should be considered social agents that use art as a particularly global language, inspiring redefinitions of politics and inviting reflection on topical social issues.

Beyond this, Vavarella, as artist, collaborated with two curators as co-authors. *The Italian Job n.2* deconstructs the boundary between artist and curator, distinct "jobs" coined by the "Artworld"[iii] that cannot be kept discrete in such a fluid collaboration. Here, the curator is called upon to find and choose the visual content of the artist's artwork as opposed to selecting already created artworks or delegating the direction of an exhibition.

The distinction between artist and curator has been an inexhaustible source of debate since its first appearance at the time of the Impressionist movement, when curators at the side of independent artists faced the proliferation of agents of cultural economy in the form of merchants, galleries, collectors, critics, and museums. We passed from the curator as a purely economic agent to an increasingly self-referential curator, focused on his overall "exhibitionary" project to which artistic works adapt. This attitude emerged markedly in the late 1960s with the figure of Harald Szeemann. As art historian and critic Terry Smith pointed out, beginning in the 1960s, collaborations between artists and curators "are second only to those between artists themselves" and can be considered even "more generative"[iv] than artist-to-artist partnerships because they contribute to the change of the contemporary art world (singular) into a collection of temporary art worlds (plural). The artist-curator relationship progressively drew closer to the artists, from "outside" to "inside" the projects, sharing with them research, interpretation, values, and behaviors.

An-archiving Game, where curatorial practice melts into the artist's intent, exemplifies especially well the behavioral aberration of the traditional artist-curator relationship. Here, not only does the artist delegate in full to each curator the research and selection processes, but in his nearly complete control of the project, he goes so far as to propose a kind of exploitation of their working activity. Here, the artist-curator collaboration generates economic value inside the digital art market, using the traditional channel of the gallery alongside the unexplored sphere of distribution represented by OpenBazaar. This second part of the project would explore, critically, the role of the artist as somebody able to generate economic value from re-appropriation of photographic

material, demonstrating the economic divide between original work, appropriation, and re-appropriation. The traditional gallery is, in this case, not the final place of exhibition but again one of exploitation. Mediation of the art by the gallery would likely increase the artwork's value, inflating Vavarella's sale of the final artworks in an anonymous and non-centralized marketplace. This constant flux between traditional "jobs" and the bending of artistic roles renders *An-archiving Game* as fluid as the media with which it works.

Playing with the NSAF

As a curator of the project, I constantly considered a question central to the process: What role does a particular kind of archive play in the artistic-curatorial collaborative process? The NSAF was used as a track more than a proper source, the starting point for a series of circumscribed data that referred to unknown material, to be found somewhere else. We had a frame, but not its content. For this reason, it was not possible to consider the archive a "ready-made exhibition," as artist-curator pairs often confront, because much research and selection were necessary to continue. And it was research, but on the basis of what criteria? And by what methodology? It was not easy work.

Playing the role of curator, I believed that a well-framed selection was possible only after having collected the totality of the material listed on the NSAF. We started researching the photographs in the fall of 2013, simultaneously from Venice, Gothenburg, and New York, using the web as our main source with the exception of a few physical records. We built our own private database on Dropbox. The collaborative process, far from being systematic (in spite of my attempts) was closer to a game.

The subtitle of the project is, importantly, An-archiving Game, referring to a sort of "anarchival impulse," a particular feeling identified by Hal Foster in his examination of the various approaches that artists undertake when dealing with different forms of archives. Archives have inspired artists for decades, but their use, strictly connected with artistic and curatorial practice, has exponentially increased in the last thirty years, during which the term "archival art" was coined. Archival artists confront historical, categorized, and lost information – from pre-existing archives to mass culture comprehensions – in order to craft new stories. But because not all archives can be defined as databases, archival artists just as often stumble upon archives that "call out for human interpretation, not mechanic reprocessing,"[v] as Foster states. To the critic, the distinction between archival and database art lies in this dilemma. Archival art fascinates artists precisely because its content is fragmented, indeterminate, and originates from a "preproduction" operation rather than a "postproduction" one. That's the "anarchival impulse," wherein artists try to understand the boundaries of the archive, which presents itself sometimes as an unknown totality impossible to delineate, before giving final shape to their project.

The form and the context of the archive are, in the case of this project, a consequence of an "anarchival impulse." The process leading to the creation of An-archiving Game would be experienced by artists and curators in different ways, so that, once realized, each became a "player" in the artist's game sprung from an anarchical research project.

The content of the GIF[vi]

The selection of the visual material was initially suggested by the massive presence of black and white photographs of faces and spaces in New York City at the turn of the century. Some of the most well-recognized and historically significant shots were collected here, each describing American society in the first part of the twentieth century. Many of these were already celebrated in exhibitions and publications, and they have since been reproduced across thousands of web pages. Precisely for their fame and their reproducibility, these pictures fit perfectly the theoretical premises of the project.

Our second step, to find the Italian immigrant "inside" the content of the project, was a coincidental but appropriate emphasis we decided to take as representative of our discourse. Some of the authors (H.C. Bresson, Lewis Hine, Alfred Stieglitz, Berenice Abbott, and Walter Rosenblum) belonged to a particular movement of photographers who, more or less consciously, documented the lives and work conditions of immigrants, and those of Italians in particular, with an eye to social reform. Italians in the states were a hot item in political address, especially as concerned their relation to criminal and illegal activities at the turn of the century. We hoped to find the characters and subjectivities – inside and outside the NSAF archive – at an unexpected point of convergence in our process, and we used this as a guide for our curatorial selection. Vavarella's GIF displays several images of immigrant workers, each with their particular subjectivity in the space of the metropolis. The interface tells the viewer, with a rhythmic, visual narration, the imaginary journey from their native land (Italy and Europe) to North America.

(89) Berenice Abbott, Penn Station, Manhattan, 1934
(118) J. P. Atterberry, Twilight Mount, South Dakota, 1985
(28) Nancy Ford Cones Cousins, 1912
(01) Lewis Hine, Man on Hoisting Ball, Empire State Building, 1931
(03) Lewis Hine, Powerhouse Mechanic, 1905
(05) Lewis Hine, Climbing Into America, Ellis Island, New York, 1908
(16) Michael Kenna, Matin Blanc, Blue Beach, Nice, France, 1997
(23) Michael Kenna, Supports de Jette, Rhul Place, Nice, 1997-99
(66) Michael Kenna, Whitewater, Whidbey Island, Washington, USA, 1996
(41) August Sander, Circus Artist, 1926-32
(78) Karl Struss, Nocturne, Brooklyn Bridge, 1909
(79) Alfred Stieglitz, Hand of Man, 1902

(07)   Paul Strand, Nicolas Mares, 1980
(82)   Walter Rosenblum, Flirting, Pitt Street, 1938
(75)   Walter Rosenblum, Chick's (Chick's Candy Store), 1939
(55)   Walter Rosenblum, Girl Playing Hopskotch (Hopskotch), 1952
(04)   Edward Weston, Half Shell Nautilus, 1927

    Pictures depicting Italian workers and snapshots of life in New York City at the
beginning of the twentieth century were metaphorically "stolen" by the photographers
from the world of reality, out of the factory and off the street, in the photographers'
efforts to shake the American public opinion of the time. These photographs were
literally stolen later, in their physicality as artworks, and subsequently recorded by the
FBI, which in turn made their disappearance public. Today, thanks in part to their
physical impermanence or displacement, and thanks in part to technology, these images
remain immortal, subjected to continuous transformations via the flow of digital reality.
Through the project *The Italian job n. 2 – An-archiving Game* they have been considered,
again, a source for consideration on the evolution of labor in western capitalist society
and on working conditions at present.

<u>Notations on the Selection</u>

    As was often the case with immigrant populations in the states during the turn of the
century, Italian immigrant workers, and often the children of these families, saw
themselves transformed from skilled workers and agriculturalists into industrial, working
class bodies. A resulting sense of alienation derived from long, forced relationships with
machines was prolific, especially following the diffusion of Fordism in the early 1900s, a
system based on the specialization of specific and repetitive tasks for the production of
goods (07).[vii] The Fordist model and its production line formed the basis of the
modern economic and social system of mass production, a system that radically changed
the working conditions in factories and the social experience at home. Its fundamental
model is utilized by (and exported to) every country seeking economic development
today. The alienation of the worker is explained by the Marxist vision of labor as an
activity that replaces the human "first nature." According to this concept, labor becomes
an inorganic extension of the human body, as explained by Karl Marx in *The Capital*;[viii]
body and machines join in the "second nature" offered by labor activities (03, 04).

    The particular feeling inherent to modern man in the factory and in the city was well
described by authors such as Georg Simmel,[ix] who examined its various social and
psychological aspects as a contemporary of the phenomenon. According to Simmel, this
alienation is intensified in immigrants, who come to a metropolis faced with problems
beyond the struggle for acceptable working conditions, including those of social, ethnic,
religious, and racial integration into a new country. Endless lines of waiting immigrants

are a symbol of the universality of this alienation and the difficulties immigrants faced, and they recall, too, the same scenes of migratory flows seen in present-day newspapers (05).

Immigrants (especially Italians) were employed in low-level tasks and extremely difficult occupations, such as construction jobs building the new, expanding metropolis (01), or its railways, roads, bridges, and canals (14, 78, 79). They changed the face of New York City, not only in its population, but in its architecture, its textiles, and its industrial production.

Defined as "urban villages," ethnic neighborhoods grew near the harbor, where immigrants waited to see the new land for the first time with the hope of being accepted (05). Once welcomed to New York City, they gathered in slums, inside colored/black tenements, always in large blocks of small and overcrowded apartments with shared facilities. They used to live according to their logic of territorial origin, with the attempt to recreate their traditional network of social relations (55, 75, 82).

The word "immigrant" and "hard work" are historically very close, and they evoke many other images, among them social injustice, individual and economic redemption, spirit of adventure, and rebellion or resignation to a fate of fatigue. However, these words have also always evoked other visions, such as nostalgia for a native country and the dream of a promised land (28). It is worthwhile to note that among European nations, Italy contributed significantly to the migratory phenomenon that sent so many immigrants to the states during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is estimated some 26 million Italians migrated abroad from the end of 1800 to the end of 1900. Today, the Italian American community in the United States stands at 17 million (6% of the total population), and statistics show that nearly 5 million of these Italians migrated between 1900 to 1914[x] alone (most of whom reached New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania). We can imagine that the American land was a distant projection in their mind, an indefinable blank space (16), and they might imagine it as a wide and wild landscape (118) in contrast to what they already knew about city life as learned from the press, the culture industry, and correspondence with relatives already living the "American Dream". These particular events have inspired artistic and literary production and have served as a source of sociological analysis for artists and historians alike. The experience of journeying into a difficult unknown, but one full of potential, is shared by millions of immigrants worldwide (23, 66). In the late 1800s, Genova, Naples, and Palermo were the main Italian emigration ports, where non-professional agencies, often run by loan sharks, offered dangerous journeys to the states in absolutely precarious conditions at least until 1901, when an attempt was made by Italian legislation to guarantee a minimum security. On the other side of the ocean, conditions were hardly better, proper sanitary restrictions being legislated as late as 1908.

Not all immigrants were interested in permanently establishing themselves in a city, or submitting to their exploitation, by means of hard and repetitive tasks in factories. An alternative job could be found, for example, in the Circus. Immigrants, minorities, freaks, or people simply endowed with extroverted attitudes were those that belonged to this parallel world, in which everybody could define themselves simply as "artists" (41).

Reflections of Content within the Job

The evolution of the work, the mode of its production, and its associations with human subjectivity have undoubtedly driven the visual selection for Emilio's artwork inside the NSAF as well as influenced the process outside of the content. The content of the GIF offers a visual realization of work lives based in concrete, manual labor. These themes and the work involved in affording their exhibition compose the material inside of the project. Those themes and jobs found outside the project fall into a category that has been called "immaterial labor," the tertiary and sometimes exploitative properties of which served as the central motivation of this project from the beginning.

Economists and philosophers use the term immaterial labor to define actions typical of tertiary sectors of advanced capitalist societies, those consisting of the production of "the informational content of the commodity,"[xi] or series of information accompanying goods and creating strategic connections in public opinion. Maurizio Lazzarato, an Italian sociologist and philosopher whose research is focused on labor, claims that the entrepreneur succeeds in transforming the worker into an "active subject" when he, the worker, produces collective cooperation and communication. His personality and subjectivity are addressed through the production of value and, thanks to technology, the "subjective processes" are controlled inside a global, "diffuse factory." Immaterial labor activity is "not normally recognizable as work,"[xii] but instead sometimes confused with leisure time. Here, "life becomes inseparable from work. […] Immaterial labor produces first and foremost a "social relationship" (a relationship of innovation, production, and consumption)."[xiii] The inversion of work roles and curatorial practice found in the project lends itself well to a modern capitalist era that generates "new knowledge" through immaterial and cognitive labor and couches the term "work" among other social activities in its economic processes.

Also relevant to Vavarella's project, the main factors responsible for establishing the immateriality of work in metropolitan economies have been continuous technological progress and its worldwide diffusion. Through the creation of "spaces of flow,"[xiv] digital spaces in which information is produced give rise to economic flows. Sociologist Manuel Castell calls our society the "Network Society," a society of diverse discourses that facilitate adaptable labor and technological innovation (a positive feedback loop in the network society). Each one of us can be part of a particular network as well as

maintain (or store) social relationships with other network members residing in geographically or temporally distant places thanks to the technology. Staying connected with other people and sharing with them a piece of information, whether voluntary or not, can be seen as immaterial labor in the economy.

The mode of production of this artwork, together with its presentation and diffusion, represent a key part of this economic and political framework. *The Italian Job n.2* was collectively created through discourse technologies, such as email, Skype, Dropbox, and social networks, all of which permitted the artist and curators to build and maintain their work relationships. The "friendship" between artist and curator hid a true working activity and distorted its perception into entertainment, rendering the job a sort of game. Immaterial labor here, where no particular deadlines, rules, or salaries were present, still created an economy of production and value flow. Just as the artist-curator relation was inverted in the planning of this project, so too were the traditional associations of work and play in its fledged production.

New York City, Conclusion and Convergence

Economic theory explains that it is increasingly unnecessary to move physically in real space to find information. Younger generations are often more efficient retrieving data from the comfort of their own laptops and from familiar spaces, and workplaces stress more and more the value of the flexible worker, the agent who can transform his office as well as his home into his workspace. Increasingly, personal time has become a time set aside for work. The advanced capitalist society we live in proposes a model of fast and adaptable productivity, where geographical and temporal boundaries are excised by technology. Occupations, not just social relations, are transmuted into a multidimensional existence. If people no longer need a physical workspace, if labor is changing into something (or at least being labeled) non-remunerative and pleasant, one should wonder whether people, at least in western capitalist societies, have broken with the "migration phenomena" that drove cultural and occupational shifts throughout the twentieth century. Are people really free to move independently from their workplace or are they, paradoxically, forced to live in a perennially nomadic and uncertain condition due to changes in the working mode of production?

Maurizio Lazzarato stresses the presence of the second scenario and explains that "precariousness, hyper exploitation, mobility, and hierarchy are the most obvious characteristics of metropolitan immaterial labor."[xv] New York City, both the metropolitan monolith at the center of this project's content and production and the heart of global capitalist flows, is today the city most representative of Lazzarato's theory. It is a crossroads of cultures, knowledge, and business that, for all its industrial history, remains at the forefront of communication work and culture. It is a city that

generates innovation to no end, but where the disparity driven by these evolving processes of labor forces itself through, as the Occupy New York movement tried to demonstrate in 2011.

Moreover, New York – the only physical space foregrounding this international project – remains one of the top destinations for migrating people seeking employment. Emilio Vavarella's artwork can be considered a multifaceted and anachronistic portrait of Italian labor, in its material context and in its immaterial mode of production. His pivotal re-appropriation of creativity as a new form of creativity, all centered on immigrant fortuity in the face of twentieth century labor, typifies well the Italian notion of l'*arte di arrangiarsi* – that is, the art of getting by, of making do but doing well with little. *An-archiving Game* takes from that which has already been taken, creates from that which has already been illustrated. Its aura, if anything, has already been imagined. But like the networking economy it exploits, the project achieves novelty through its inversion of social relationships and its reversal of working roles. Its work describes, in the end, what it intended originally: a game.

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[i] http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/vc_majorthefts/arttheft/national-stolen-art-file

[ii] The concept of "postproduction" in Contemporary Art was developed by the French art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud in Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World. New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002. This publication followed the more famous Relational Aesthetics (1998/English version 2002), a term he coined to identify a particular artistic practice became common in Europe in the early 1990s.

[iii] The term "Artworld" was coined by Arthur C. Danto and appeared for the first time in the The Artworld (1964).

[iv] Terry Smith, Artists as Curators / Curators as Artists: Exhibitionary Form Since 1969 in Germano Celant (edited by), When attitudes become form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013, Milan, Fondazione Prada Arte, 2013, (519-530), p. 519.

[v] Ibidem

[vi] The selected pictures are presented in the text with the same numeration used in the archive built during the working process.

[vii] The numeration here proposed follows the system used in the archive built during the working process.

[viii] Karl Marx, Economics & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, 1959, Progress Publishers, Moscow.

[ix] Georg Simmel, The Metropolis and Mental Life in The Sociology of Georg Simmel, 1976, New York: Free Press.

[x] Annuario statistico dell'emigrazione italiana dal 1876 al 1925, curated by Commissario generale dell'emigrazione, Roma, Edizione del Commissario generale dell'emigrazione, MCMZZVI, Anno V, Tavola I, p. 8. See: Ornella De Rosa, Donate Verrastro (a cura di), Appunti di Viaggio – L'emigrazione italiana tra attualità e memoria, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2007.

[xi] Maurizio Lazzarato, Immaterial Labor in Paolo Virno (edited by) and Michael Hardt (edited by), Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics, University Of Minnesota Press, 2006, (132-146), p. 133.

[xii] Ibidem

[xiii] Ibid., p. 137.

[xiv] Manuel Castells, The Rise of Network Society (1996), Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2010.

[xv] Maurizio Lazzarato, ibid., p. 136.