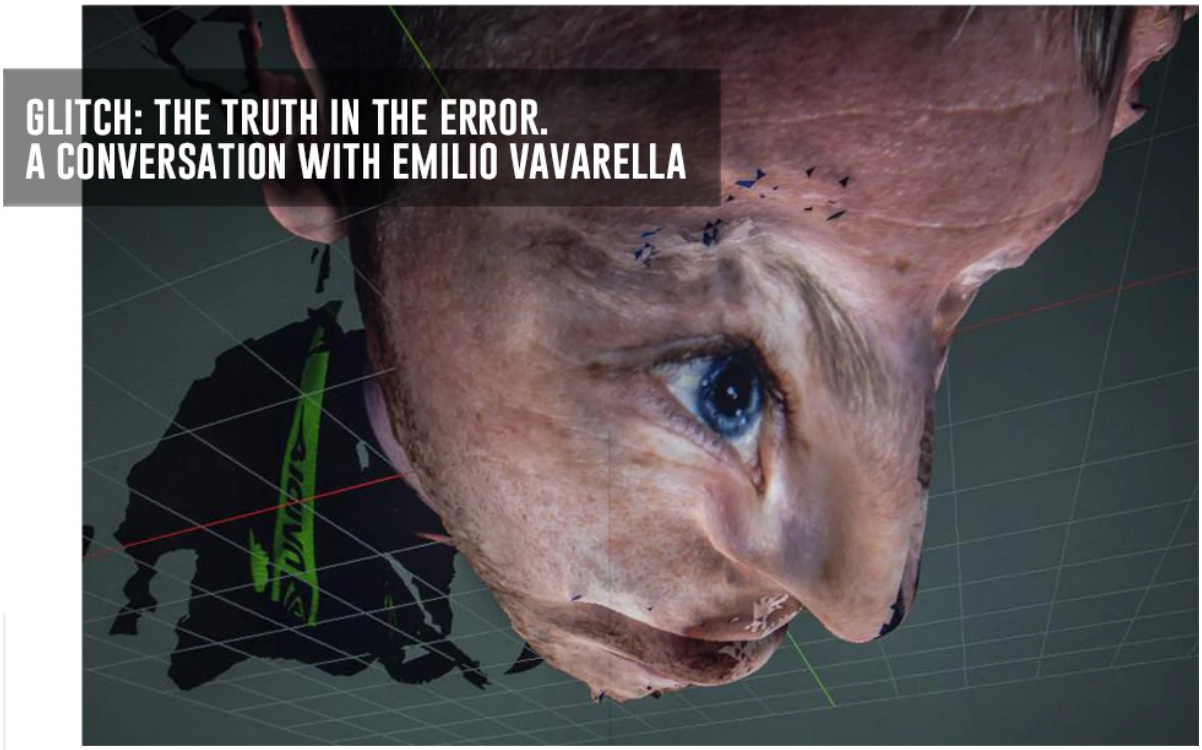
Glitch: The Truth in the Error. A Conversation with Emilio Vavarella

Posted on August 10 2020

LOOSENART IS CONNECTED WITH DOPPIOZERO



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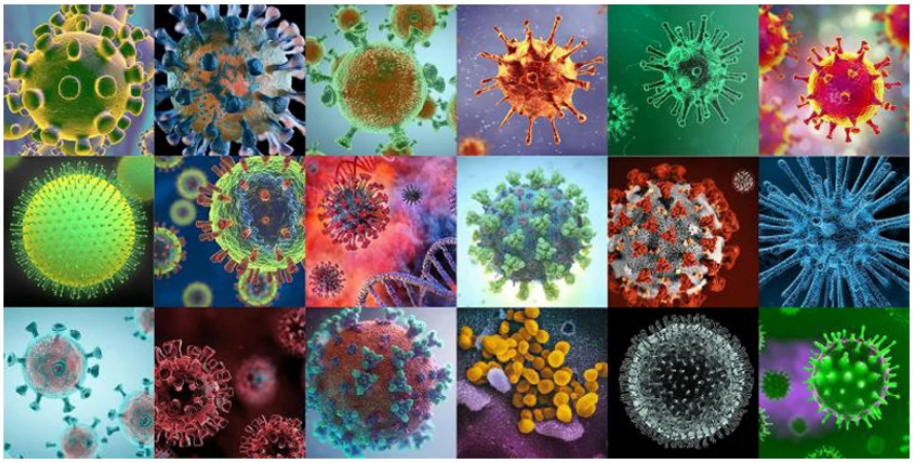
Mauro Zanchi and Sara Benaglia: "Report a Problem" is the message that appears at the bottom of the Google Street View screen, and allows you to report to Google any problems detected in the visualization of the place you are virtually visiting . Let's imagine that a system can be created to photograph or reveal internal images, places that live in the imagination. You traveled on Google Street View, photographing on the monitor all the "wrong landscapes" you encountered, before any other users reported the problem; inducing this way the company to adjust the image by replacing the wrong photos. How do you imagine the inner landscapes and a sort of "fantagoogle" that arranges the unconscious images people have? What could be the use of making unconscious images visible?

When last January you asked me to imagine a photograph capable of revealing inner images, I would not have imagined responding from a coronavirus. But I would like to start right here, demonstrating how relevant it is to understand the role and production of images even in a moment of deep crisis such as that triggered by COVID-19. This virus has imposed itself as an unexpected tenant of our inner landscapes, both physical and psychological, and most of our energies have been directed towards its identification and understanding. Giving it a name, a code and associating it with statistics that map its behavior means building a precise ontology. The virus becomes such only when it acquires a representation of itself, both visual and theoretical. But, how do you recognize an invisible enemy? Until a few years ago, cartoonists would have been tasked with sketching a virus and, pencil and books in hand, these would have given more or less ideal representations of the pathogen in question. Nowadays, however, the representations of a virus can reach a greater level of objectivity through the use of various scientific equipment. These representations are not merely illustrative, but are also essential for scientific research, from diagnostics to therapeutics, and even for development of a potential vaccine.



Some COVID-19 visualizations have appeared in recent weeks. Various sources.

But it is also important to understand that there is no ontologically fixed image of something like COVID-19. An actual photograph of the virus cannot be produced. An optical microscope cannot focus on it, and it is not technically possible to reconstruct a unique image even using an electron microscope. The electron microscope collects inputs, acquires data, mathematically models such data, and gives back a hypothesis. All this can then be integrated with data produced by other technologies, such as X-ray micro-crystallography, which uses other mathematical models to try to trace the atomic structure of the virus. The whole process is based on the computational capacity of powerful calculators, but the result remains a statistical rendering, even if the most advanced techniques are used. These images, that are the result of strenuous scientific studies, are accompanied by countless other images. These appear

to be very similar, but are actually the result of free interpretations. All these representations coexist within our media sphere, which in turn can be imagined as an extension of our collective psyche. In parallel to the advancing of the virus, its representations appear in scientific journals, on the internet and on our news outlets, invading even the media space that is not physically accessible to the virus itself. The pervasiveness of the virus, in this sense, is total. One of the challenges of the virus is the fight against the invisible, and the fighting must be done also through aesthetics.

Let's go back to the system capable of photographing interior landscapes that you asked me to imagine. What if I told you that not only it already exists, but it is probably already available in all the major cities on the planet? First off, the idea of using the photographic medium to capture internal images has accompanied the development of photographic technology since its beginning. The history of art, as much as the history of science and technology, is filled with examples of technologies and techniques that, at some point, someone turned towards themselves. Language, one of the first techniques we have learned to master, still has a highly introspective dimension, for example in poetry, narrative, or psychology. The same goes for painting, which has always offered the possibility to represent the external world and to give shape to the internal one. Photography, though, has a peculiarity that makes it even more suitable for this type of work: it has always been linked, rightfully or wrongfully, to the idea of objectivity and impartiality. It is noteworthy that the theme of spiritual research is recurrent among the first photographs and movies. I am thinking, for example, of the studies on the paranormal collected in the early 1920s by the Baron Albert von Schrenck Notzing, in his Materialisation sphaenomene, or the science fiction prototype of Sam Graves, called the 'electrical mind revealer,' which proposed to read and visualize thought.

Emilio Vavarella, The Google Trilogy – 1. Report a Problem, 2012. Installation

Ancient obsessions. The desire to be able to objectively fix on photographic paper an ephemeral and ectoplasmic dimension. This can be a symptom of a culture, like the European one of the first half of the XX century, fascinated by modern technology but still also highly superstitious. But it would be a mistake to think that things have changed drastically in the past hundred years. The idea of being able to photograph what is unconscious or invisible is, in fact, the basis of all medical visualization technologies, from gastroscopy to the most recent experiments with neural networks to reconstruct the images produced by the visual cortex of the brain. Among the most advanced medical visualization technologies, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) is certainly the most widespread and accepted. So, exactly as I anticipated, in all the major hospitals it is already possible to photograph our 'internal landscapes.' An fMRI allows us to assess our neuronal activity and to 'photograph' it in real time, managing to give shape and color to mental activities impossible to visualize with the naked eye. Its usefulness is proven, but the issue

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regarding the supposed objectivity of the images it produces is more delicate of a matter. These are periodically described by the mainstream media as 'objective images,' or as 'mental maps,' or even as 'snapshots of thought'. Instead they are none of this, regardless of their effectiveness. As shown in Anne Beaulieu's ethnographic studies, the images of an MRI are the result of complex digital imaging and graphic processing techniques that follow statistical models, therefore they are far from photographing a given and objective reality. In other words, regardless of the complexity of a visual representation, it is good to remember that every form of representation still is more or less arbitrary, so it is a translation in visual terms that always hides a mediation, human choices, technical processes and more or less subjective intentions; but they are never neutral.

Emilio Vavarella, The Google Trilogy – 1. Report a Problem, 2012

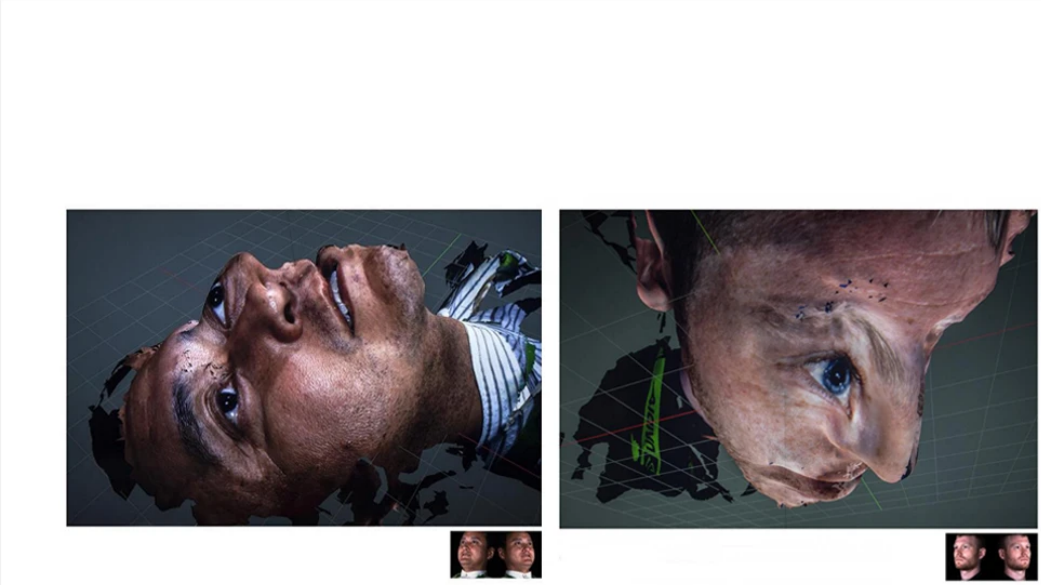
You investigate issues related to glitches and errors as a detecting element, and related to the extremely complex mechanisms. According to your vision and direct experience, what makes the error visible or reveals it? And, from a metaphotographic perspective, how could the consequence of error be constructively applied to create new aesthetic forms?

I am very fascinated by the possibility of recovering what is considered an 'error,' because something else always hides behind this term. From a techno-scientific point of view, the error is fundamental, but only as a way to optimize some system. According to the writings of the father of cybernetics , Norbert Wiener, the technological error must be isolated and reduced to feedback. The 'sterilization of error' is a sort of founding myth of techno-scientific progress and is one of the cornerstones of cybernetic discourse. I believe that when you are faced with an extremely complex mechanism, one of the ways to fully understand how it works is to wait for an error to make visible something that was hidden. I experienced this in DIGITAL PAREIDOLIA: A Personal Index of Facebook's Erroneous Portraits (2012-2013) regarding one of the first online facial recognition technologies, and in THE GOOGLE TRILOGY (2012) I explored this idea in relation to the functioning of Google's digital maps. In the first case, I uploaded all the photos I had on my Facebook profile and considered all the facial recognition suggestions proposed, in search of the wrong ones. This way I built a portrait archive that also functioned as a kind of facial recognition error index used by Facebook. In THE GOOGLE TRILOGY - 1. Report a Problem, the unexpected error considered is that of the 'glitched' landscapes of Google Street View, which act as a breaking point in a system that would otherwise flow in a fluid, regular and predefined way. In the last part of the trilogy, entitled 3. The Driver and the Cameras, I went instead in search of portraits of Google Car drivers that escaped the censorship of Google's algorithms. Here the error unmasks a human presence hidden behind the apparent self-sufficiency of the computer system. In THE SICILIAN FAMILY (2012) the glitch was born by forcing my

personal memories within the ASCII code of old family photos. Similarly, in MEMORYSCAPES (2012-2013) I found a way to integrate satellite data and Venice memories collected in New York. Here too, the forced interlocking between inaccurate memories and apparently objective data results in a series of unpredictable visual inconsistencies. Whenever a system stops or is altered by something erroneous and unexpected, a new aesthetic form and a new horizon of meaning inevitably emerge.

Your work is located on various boundaries, between contemporary research and methods that come from tradition, between construction of subjective meaning and more impersonal modes of action, such as algorithms. What does it mean for you to overcome boundaries through the photographic medium?

It means producing an autonomous field of action for my artistic research. I consider each of my works as what remains of the artistic process that unfolds within this space of action. Ideally, each work is simultaneously both the result and the process that precedes it, which leaves traces and signs, and which generates starting points, arrival points and breaking points. All this brings about other beginnings. It is a conceptual and material organization of a non-hierarchical type, within which more or less complete projects return to being questioned. In these projects the ideas themselves are left free to wander, to create new connections and new opportunities for sense. The important thing is that in each of my works the tools used are those most capable of giving shape, as precisely as possible, to my research. Photography often responds to this need, which is why I use this medium the most.

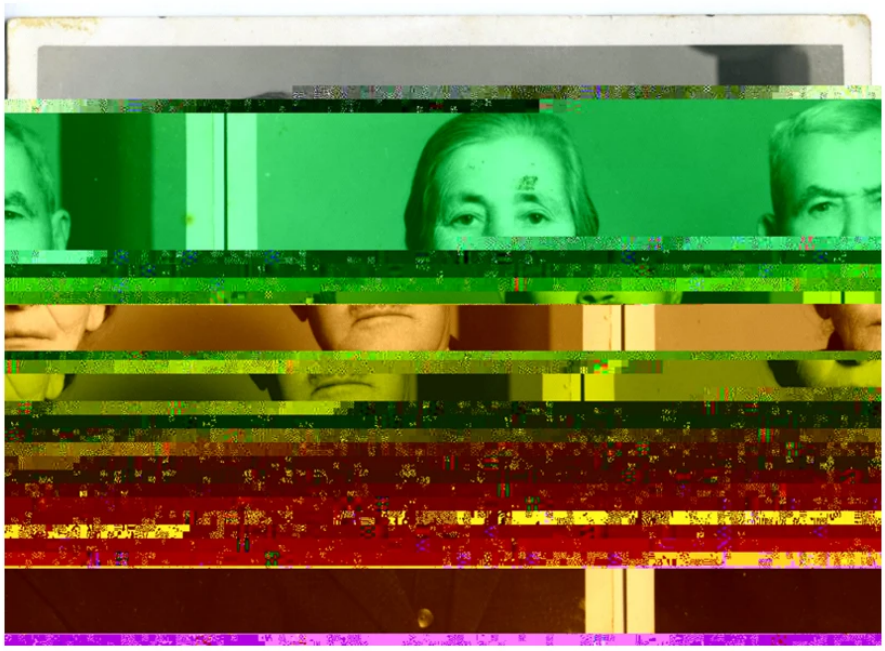


Emilio Vavarella, The Digital Skin Series (Photo n.3/18), 2016

Let's imagine that the human being is multiple, plural, and has multiple identities. Following Deleuze's intuition (from individuals we are becoming "dividuals"), how do you read these aspects with your research?

The transition from "individuals'' to "divided-ual" described by Deleuze is exceptionally striking and certainly brilliant. In my opinion it should not however be read as the dividing point of a sort of technologization that has radically changed us in an anthropological sense. In other words, it is not a transition from the traditional human being to the human being 2.0, as some would like. It is a matter of management and information flows and the devices connected to it. But even if apparatuses and technologies change, 'being human' always means being technological. There have never been

cultures, nor forms of human life, of a pre-technological type. At the same time, I have the impression that the term 'human', especially when expressed in the singular, is imposing itself more and more as 'name' than as 'adjective.' In the sense that it is as if it were demarcating something given once for all. But every definition of 'human being' is always accompanied by a plethora of sub-categories, as has happened with every form of slavery. These sub-categories of almost-humans serve precisely to swallow alive those who do not recognize themselves or are not recognized in the proposed definition. The difficulty of the question, especially in its more strictly ontological meaning, is evident, and in my work THE DIGITAL SKIN SERIES I ask myself these questions, avoiding to provide an univocal answer. I prefer to think, perhaps utopically, of the human in the sense of a process, an event, a phenomenon, something that can never be framed once and for all, as a performative activity in constant progress.



Emilio Vavarella, The Sicilian Family (Foto n.26/44), 2012-2013

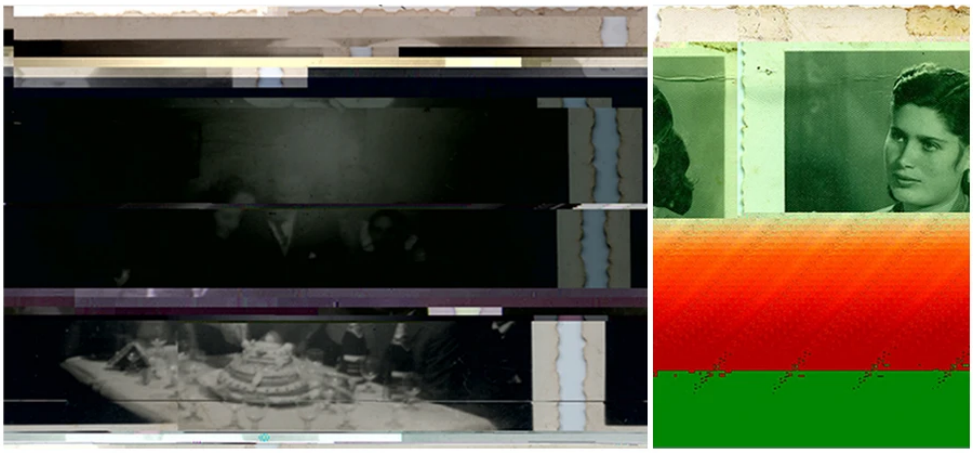
Will it be possible to photograph something that hasn't happened before, before it happens? Will the "beyond-photography" be an art of foresight?

If we talk about photography in the analogical and more traditional sense of the term this is obviously impossible. Only what is physically in front of the lens, and only if this something shows a certain level of opacity, can it be photographically recorded. If instead we talk about photography in the expanded sense, and we include digital imaging technologies, the answer changes. In this case I can tell you that an art of foresight already exists, and that it mobilizes billions of dollars every year across the planet. As in the aforementioned case of functional magnetic resonance imaging, it is possible to produce images on a statistical basis, and regardless of any direct contact with the surrounding physical world. Obviously, these are not photos, but photo-realistic images produced on the basis of statistical incidence calculations linked to the most varied data sets. Photographs in which data and metadata, that is representation and information about the representation, coincide. From a technical point of view, each image is a flow of data and metadata: microscopic signs that correspond to the most basic form of representation. From the aesthetic point of view we are no longer automatically able to distinguish the difference between a photograph, translation of a physical reality, and a photo-realistic rendering, translation of a data flow.

Emilio Vavarella, The Google Trilogy – 1. Report a Problem, 2012. Installation

But what are the common characteristics of the images produced through different data elaboration processes?

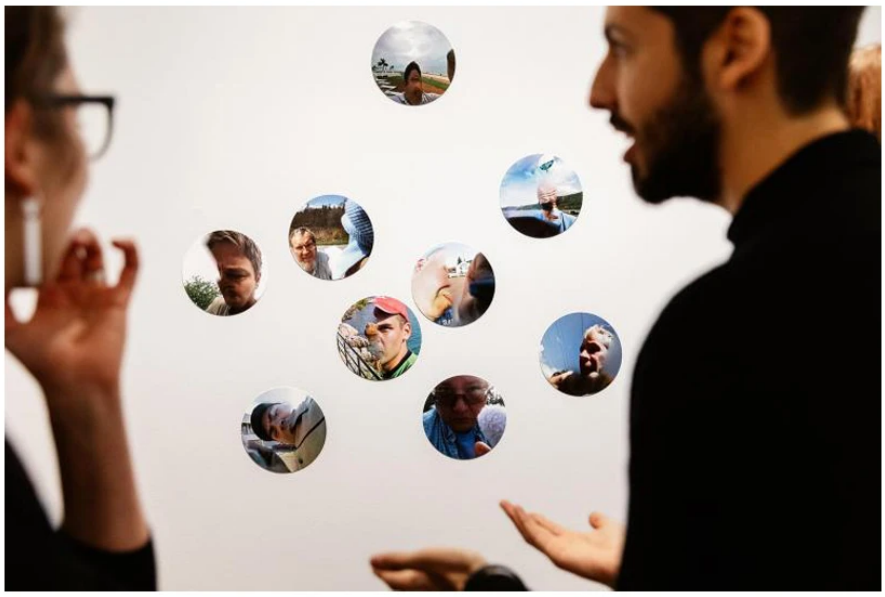
They are unstable, variable, virtual images, they move in many ways, sometimes in flocks, they are decomposable, often anonymous and sometimes even invisible. Among the visible ones, think of the many types of rendering that accompany us from cinema to billboards, from social media to scientific works. In the financial sphere, these images act as so-called 'self-fulfilling prophecies'. A famous example of such are the renderings of Songdo, the famous smart city in South Korea where the border between marketing and architecture has been completely annihilated. Many have invested in the real estate of what used to be a digital postcard. Even without going so far we may think of the function, economic and political, of the first renderings that circulated accompanying the MO.S.E. (Electromechanical Experimental Module) of Venice. It showed how the Venetian territory would appear a few years later, due to the rising waters. But the character of self-fulfilling prophecy is linked to the fact that these images were part of the project for a system designed to prevent those changes. The renderings already included the photo-realistic image of a technology that did not exist, but which, also by virtue of the power of those images, would shortly have been financed and partially built. A sort of foresight based on the ability to centralize financial resources. The prophecy, in this case, is precisely this: to show what does not yet exist in order to finance its construction.



Emilio Vavarella, The Sicilian Family (Foto n.26/44), 2012-2013

In what other ways can photography be able to 'see the future'?

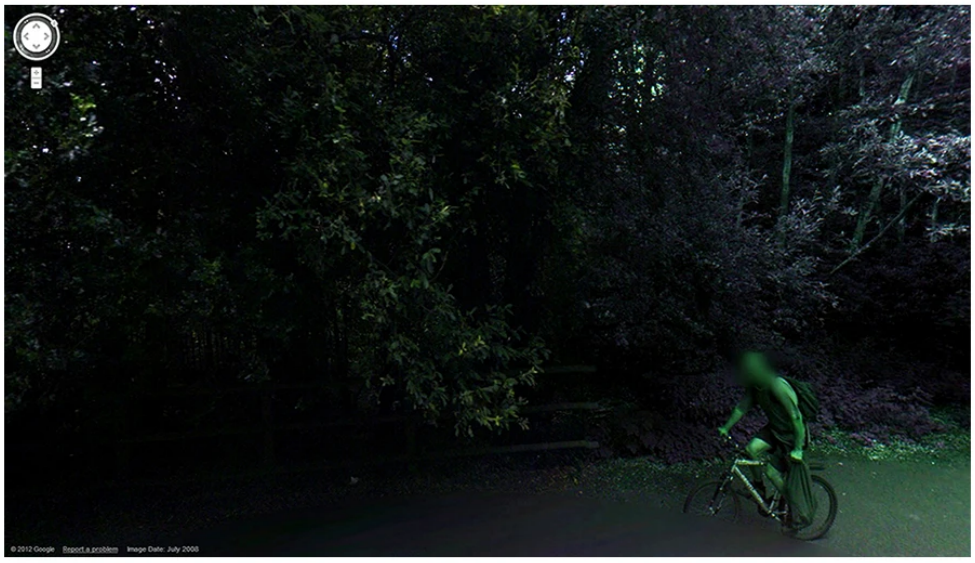
For example, managing to make us travel in space, as in the case of the study of exoplanets. Exoplanets are celestial bodies that are so distant from our planet that it is optically impossible to capture their image. Photographing them with the means at our disposal would be possible only if we could go beyond the Solar System, which is currently beyond our reach. All this although, as a quick Google search will show, there is a huge photographic archive of exoplanets. In order to study these celestial bodies, exoplanetologists use a vast collection of deduction techniques that allow them to reconstruct the appearance and characteristics of these planets without having physically seen or reached them. An art of foresight which, as Lisa Messeri explained in a beautiful study on the work of groups of scientists from a Chilean observatory, from MIT and from NASA, consists in the production of statistical models that shape the data collected. Through a long chain of representation techniques, the result is a scientific description of such planet accompanied by a series of hypotheses and often by a realistic photo image in high resolution. These images are based on a concept of statistical vision, and not an optical one, in which to be seen are not "things" but "fields of possibility." Our ability to see is no longer just a biological faculty, it has now become the final step of a probabilistic calculation. Returning to your question, through this imaging process we are able to cancel the limits of space that separate us from these celestial bodies. In a nutshell, even before being able to see them with the naked eye, we have already produced thousands of images of planets that perhaps we will see in hundreds of years, or perhaps never will see.



Emilio Vavarella, The Google Trilogy – 3. The Driver and the Cameras, 2012. Installation view at The Photographers' Gallery, London

Quantum physics questions the linear and chronological progression from the past to the future. In reality the issue is more complex. How is the theory of time understood as a tangled handkerchief, described by the French philosopher Michel Serres, applicable in the field of metaphotography?

This too is a question that has made me reflect a lot. Michel Serres has focused several times on the limits of an idea of temporal development in which we proceed linearly towards the future. Serres had noticed, instead, how much of the apparently distant temporalities are actually close, and how much distant elements can influence each other. His idea is very similar to the space-conceptual model of co-determination expressed by physicist and philosopher Karen Barad. Serres uses a very evocative image, giving the example of classical astrophysics, in which the sky is fathomed waiting for information from the future, or from a present not yet lived, from already dead worlds, which belong to the past of others which is still a future for us. If this tangled space had its own photographic counterpart it would be a kind of quantum photography, capable of going beyond the idea of capturing a given reality (like in analog photography) or of producing a synthetic reality (like in electronic photography). This new type of photography should be able to capture, or copy, in some way, a fragment of the spatio-temporal indeterminacy that precedes our perception of things.



Emilio Vavarella, The Google Trilogy – 1. Report a Problem, 2012

What are the structures that a camera reproduces even when it is managed by an animal?

Moving structures, tension, meeting and collision points, forms of closeness, absence, and presence of the unexpected. In my film 'Animal Cinema' (2017), entirely shot by animals in complete autonomy, the movements of bodies, claws, tentacles, fangs and legs replace any directorial premeditation. The result is a whirlwind of forms of awareness and a constant unfolding of ways of being: a chain of actions and passions that opens a window on the complicated assembly of men, animals and technologies of which we are all part.

Emilio Vavarella, Double Blind (Dubendorf), 2020 - in progress. 8K digital photography, artificial neural network

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