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Lending the Face. *Lazy Sunday* by Emilio Vavarella*

Elisabetta Modena

Abstract

THE ITALIAN JOB – Job n. 3, Lazy Sunday (2021) è un'opera dell'artista e ricercatore italiano Emilio Vavarella (Monfalcone, 1989) che consiste in un film di 12 ore realizzato con una telecamera a 360° posizionata sulla sua testa con la quale ha filmato gli eventi di una domenica d'estate registrando ogni sua attività, dal risveglio fino alla sera. L'opera, fruibile tramite un casco per la realtà virtuale, è una sorta di autoritratto dell'artista in cui tuttavia il suo volto non si vede quasi mai. Esso viene infatti fisicamente sostituito da quello dello spettatore che assume non solo il suo punto di vista, ma anche una prospettiva aumentata sullo spazio che l'artista occupa e attraversa nel corso della giornata: solo occasionalmente lo spettatore incrocia il volto di Vavarella, che gli rivolge (o *si* rivolge?) lo sguardo dagli specchi o dalle superfici riflettenti in cui si imbatte.

Nell'analizzare questo caso studio il saggio si concentra su due aspetti. Innanzitutto lo spettatore fa qui esperienza di un autoritratto senza volto, un corpo senza la testa la cui iconografia può essere accostata a quella del ritratto decapitato o della testa senza corpo, oltre che alla forma simbolica del *first person shot* e al suo più sperimentale utilizzo nel cinema. In secondo luogo assistiamo a una chimerica sostituzione del fantasmatico volto dell'artista – bari-centro dell'opera e dell'esperienza nel mondo-immagine a 360° – con quello in carne e ossa dello spettatore vestito di un device per la realtà virtuale ed esposto nello spazio fisico dell'installazione.

THE ITALIAN JOB – Job n. 3, Lazy Sunday (2021) is an artwork by Italian artist and researcher Emilio Vavarella (Monfalcone, 1989). It consists of a 12-hour film made with a 360-degree camera positioned on his head, with which he

* This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. [834033 AN-ICON]), hosted by the Department of Philosophy 'Piero Martinetti' (Project 'Departments of Excellence 2018-2022' awarded by the Ministry of Education, University and Research).

filmed the events of a summer Sunday, recording his day from waking up until the evening. The work, available through a virtual reality helmet, is a sort of self-portrait in which, however, the artist's face almost never appears. It is, in effect, physically replaced by that of the spectator, who assumes his point of view and also an augmented perspective on the space Vavarella occupies and moves through during the day. The spectator only occasionally encounters Vavarella's face, which he looks at (or turns his gaze back on himself?) in the mirrors or reflective surfaces he comes across.

In analysing this artwork, the essay focuses on two aspects. Firstly, the viewer experiences a faceless self-portrait, a body without a head, whose iconography can be compared to that of the decapitated portrait or the painting of a head without body; it is also the symbolic form of the first person shot and its more experimental use in cinema. Secondly, we witness a chimaerical substitution of the phantasmatic face of the artist. This is the focal point of the work and of the experience in the 360-degree image-world, but here it is replaced with the flesh and blood face of the spectators wearing virtual reality helmets and themselves put on display in the physical space of the installation.

Keywords

Realtà virtuale; Arte contemporanea; Performance; Autoritratto; Immersività
Virtual Reality; Contemporary art; Performance; Self-portrait; Immersivity

In the artist's body

THE ITALIAN JOB – Job n.3, Lazy Sunday (2021) is an artwork by Italian artist and researcher Emilio Vavarella consisting of a 12-hour long film shot using a 360-degree camera and an installation set up at Casa degli Artisti in Milan on January 23rd 2022 (Fig. 1). Starting at 9:40 am and ending around 10 pm on August 8th 2021, Vavarella filmed the events of a summer Sunday, recording every activity from waking up until the evening without any cutting or editing. The work, which can be viewed through a virtual reality helmet, is a sort of self-portrait of the artist in which, however, his face is almost never shown. The GoPro camera used to film the entire sequence is positioned on his head, and the user's point of view thus coincides almost entirely with that of the artist.

Lazy Sunday is the result of a residency forming part of the *12th Atelier*, a virtual atelier born out of the collaboration between Casa degli Artisti and the ERC Advanced Grant project "AN-ICON. An-Iconology: History, Theory, and Practices of Environmental Images" of the Università Statale di Milano the aim of which was to produce artworks exploiting *emersive* and *im-*

mersive technologies¹. Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality respectively allow the visualization of images that *emerge* in the space inhabited by the users, presenting themselves as real objects (AR), or give users the illusion of being *immersed* in an unmediated and transparent environmental image (VR).

Interested in the logic that regulates the production and fruition of the work of art, as well as in the artistic use of technologies, Vavarella immediately proposed to question the traditional concept of *residency*. Normally this kind of experience, pervasive in the contemporary art system, refers to the stay of an artist in a place for a certain time, with the aim of producing one or more works as the final outcome. The residency, in this case, was virtual and would take place on the virtual collaboration platform Mozilla Hubs, which allows the creation of one's own personal 3D space². This virtual space consists of a digital copy of Casa degli Artisti, whose recently renovated early twentieth-century building has been reconstructed online³.

After considering the possibility of producing his work by virtually inhabiting this space through one of the avatars offered by Mozilla Hubs, Vavarella instead put forward the idea of reversing the process. His proposal was to invite us virtually into his personal space. Rather than him coming to us, we would go to him and inhabit his body. The avatar in which we would be embodied would be his own body filmed and rendered as an all-encompassing image.

To do this, the artist chose as his medium a 360-degree camera and as his technique what on a preliminary analysis we could define as a first-person perspective. The distinctive feature of the medium, and of the point of view deriving from it, is that it gives form to an environmental image⁴: a space in which to feel present and immersed. Wearing a virtual reality helmet, the spectators are sealed in a bubble whose inner surface is entirely covered by an image which becomes an environment. Andrea Pinotti calls these images *an-icons* because this term "suggests a tension

¹ The artwork was presented on Sunday 23rd January 2022 at Casa degli Artisti in Milan with curatorial texts by Sofia Pirandello and myself.

² <https://hubs.mozilla.com/> (accessed 10th January 2022).

³ <https://hubs.mozilla.com/Ut7XCwr/120-atelier/> (accessed 10th January 2022).

⁴ See on this topic: O. Grau, *Virtual Art. From Illusion to Immersion*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (Ma)-London 2003; F. Casetti, *La galassia Lumière. Sette parole chiave per il cinema che viene*, Bompiani, Milano 2015; Id., "Mediascape: un decalogo", in P. Montani, D. Cecchi, M. Feyles (eds.), *Ambienti mediali*, Meltemi, Milano 2018, pp. 111-38; G. Bruno, *Atmospheres of Projection: Environmentality in Art and Screen Media*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2022.

between their ontological and their phenomenological status: while ontologically remaining pictures, they also tend phenomenologically to deny being such; they are self-negating images⁵.

Within these *an-icons*, the spectator's agency can be expressed in various ways: in the case of a 360-degree live-action video such as *Lazy Sunday*, it is limited to the so-called 3 degrees of freedom (3 DOF), i.e. the possibility of moving and directing one's gaze, but not the opportunity of crossing space, which is allowed by the 6 DOF.

By shooting a video with a 360-degree GoPro camera on his head, the artist has thus transformed his point of view into an inhabitable space to which he can extend a virtual welcome to others, inviting them to replace his invisible face with their own. Positioning ourselves on Vavarella's head, perched just above his gaze, we, as spectators, can (re)see everything he saw in those 12 hours, but we hardly ever see his face, replacing it instead with our own.



Fig. 1 - Emilio Vavarella, Poster for *THE ITALIAN JOB – Job n.3, Lazy Sunday*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

⁵ A. Pinotti, *Towards an-iconology: the image as environment*, in "Screen", Volume 61, Issue 4, 2020, pp. 594-603, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjaa060>. See also: A. Pinotti, *Immagini che negano se stesse. Verso un'aniconologia*, in P. Montani, D. Cecchi, M. Feyles (edited by), *Ambienti mediali*, Meltemi, Milano 2018, pp. 231-43.

A beheaded self-portrait

The technically simple but at the same time pioneering use of the medium of film proposed by the artist has several continuities and discontinuities between immersive technologies and other media.

Firstly, the perspective chosen by the artist to make our point of view coincide as far as possible with his, even giving us the impression of being embodied in his body, reveals itself as a kind of trick based on an illusion. As Sofia Pirandello writes: “at first sight, *Lazy Sunday* is an immediate artwork, very sincere, open, almost exhibitionistic”⁶.

An uninterrupted flow of unedited, seemingly unmediated and transparent images creates a sensation of wonder. Still, it induces us to suspend our disbelief momentarily and voluntarily⁷, rather than genuinely believing that we are experiencing what the artist has experienced and perceiving what he has perceived. In other words, we are aware that we can put ourselves in his shoes and empathise with him, with the environment in which he moves and with the people with whom he interacts, only by accepting the gap that inevitably separates us from him and his day.

Being aware of this fact, we can accept that the work, which can be viewed through a virtual reality helmet⁸, constitutes a sort of self-portrait of the artist since the 12 hours recorded describe his daily life in a way that reveals even the most intimate and banal aspects of his summer Sunday.

This is not the first time that Vavarella has tackled the idea of the self-portrait: the series of works entitled *The Other Shapes of Me* (2019-2021) explores the origins of binary technology and its most recent applications, placing itself at the centre of a reflection on the digitisation of the human being. With *rs548049170_1_69869_TT* (*The Other Shapes of Me*), a work produced in 2019, Vavarella proposed the translation of his genetic code (the title corresponds to the first line of text resulting from the genotyping of his DNA) into a fabric that was produced, with the assistance of his mother and using an early 20th-century Jacquard loom as one of the first mod-

⁶ S. Pirandello, *Catch me if you can*, curatorial text, 2021, <http://emiliovavarella.com/italian-job3/> (accessed 10th February 2022).

⁷ S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, Ferrer, London 1817.

⁸ In this case, 256 GB Oculus Quest 2.

ern computational machines (Fig. 2). The work, which forms part of the permanent collection of the MAMbo museum in Bologna, consists of the fabric, the monumental loom used, and a film.

While in that case, the self-portrait could be considered as such in an interpretative rather than traditionally iconographic way (since the artist's body was not made into a figurative representation), *The Digital Skin Series* (2018) is entirely dedicated to the theme of the portrait in more conventional terms: in this series of photos, Vavarella wears the *digital skin* of strangers photographed with a modified camera at very high resolution. Using a 3D scanner, the artist made a model of his own face on which he superimposed the 2D portraits of these people as if they were a further layer of skin in addition to his own. The resulting hybrids are not so much composed of several human beings as they are a fusion of different languages and codes (Fig. 3).

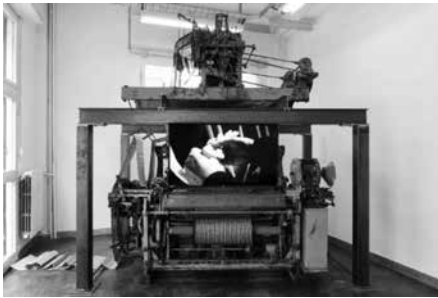


Fig. 2 - Emilio Vavarella, *rs548049170_1_69869_TT (The Other Shapes of Me)*, 2020-2021. Video installation composed of a modified Jacquard loom (X: 310.5 cm; Y: 302 cm; Z: 185.5 cm); a textile (X:60; Y:8.300 cm, cotton fibers, warp color: white, weft color: black, grayscale weave, rolled up on a weaving beam); and a film (4K UHD video, 00:21:36, aspect ratio: 16:9, b/w, sound). Overall installation: X: 310.5 cm; Y: 302 cm; Z: 185.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 3 - Emilio Vavarella, *The Digital Skin Series*, 2016. Sublimation print on aluminum. 18 elements. X:130; Y:100 cm, each. Courtesy of the artist.

In *Lazy Sunday*, the artist's body plays a different role. Here, the viewers experience a faceless self-portrait, a body without a head, whose iconography can be compared to that of the decapitated portrait or the head without a body⁹.

⁹ J. Kristeva, *The severed head. Capital visions*, Columbia University Press, New York 2012.

A series of 2D screenshots, selected by the artist as documentation for the 360-degree video, give shape to a gallery of decapitated self-portraits immortalised from an unusual subjective viewpoint: the artist's arms, legs, and chest are visible (Figs. 4-5).

The spherical image places the viewer's gaze at the centre, making it coincide, in this case, with the artist's point of view. The users thus find themselves within an environmental image perceived from a subjective point of view which is extraordinarily similar to that which we enjoy in the real world, where our unmediated perspective inevitably takes place in a subjective mode and in a 360-degree environment.

With no caesuras or cuts, an uninterrupted and fluid environmental image flows all around us: it is curious to note in this respect an unexpected continuity between primitive cinema and the use made here of the 360-degree shot. Indeed, as has been noted, virtual reality and 360-degree filming brought about the end of the dictatorship of the frame¹⁰, of that framing of the image which inevitably cuts off everything beyond the frame, transforming it into the off-screen. However, the first historical cinematic experiments, at a time when editing had not yet been standardised, proposed a form that has been defined as a "cinema of the single frame"¹¹: a cinema similar to theatre – where a flow of characters and events were staged, creating a series of narratives which continually unfolded in front of the spectator within a single self-sufficient frame. In fact, at its debut, montage shocked the audience with its stitching-together of images cut one next to the other and experimentation of novel shots of the actor's body, such as the close-up. What appeared on the screen was a dismembered body, chopped up and torn to pieces by the camera. It was only in the cinema of D.W. Griffith, with *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), that the close-up as a severed head became the mature and conscious concession to the spectator of an unprecedented and close-up point of view. From the first screenings in 1895 and up to then, this peculiarity of the moving image had on some occasions been emphasised as a scenic trick, for example, in the staging of an actor with a head magically decapitated from his body, as in the cinema of Georges Méliès, for instance in *Le mélomane* (1903).

¹⁰ Alejandro G. Inárritu. *Carne y Arena. Quaderno Fondazione Prada #12*, Fondazione Prada Publisher, Milano 2017, p. 31.

¹¹ B. Grespi, *Cinema e montaggio*, Carocci, Roma 2010, pp. 11-14.

The substantial difference between the uninterrupted flow of the image on the screen typical of early cinema and that proposed by the 360-degree shot in *Lazy Sunday* is once again the point of view granted to the spectator. In the first case the point of view is placed in front of the screen (as if the viewer is seated in the stalls of a theatre), while in Vavarella the spectator is taken right to the centre of the image, which here coincides with the artist's body, or rather with the position of the camera that determines the pivot to which the spectator is anchored.

However, in this way, the sophisticated and technologically advanced 360-degree shot, despite the absence of cuts, paradoxically and unexpectedly proposes a reflection on the dismembered body: that of the actor/artist and of the spectators themselves.

This is a quality of the immersive image concerning the position of the viewers within it, whose bodies are represented by an avatar or by pieces of an avatar. In some cases, there is no trace of the spectators' body as if it had been disintegrated within the image-world into which it has been tele-transported. In other cases, we perceive only its extremities, typically the hands and arms, which are not precisely theirs, but those of their avatar; in this case, the spectators see the entire body of their host, except for the head which has been severed and is replaced by their own.



Fig. 4-5 - Emilio Vavarella, screenshot from THE ITALIAN JOB – Job n. 3, Lazy Sunday, 2022. 360° immersive video in 5.6K, 12 hours, color, sound. Courtesy of the artist.

The chimaera spectator

In Vavarella's work, the spectators' head is thus grafted onto their body or their body parts. The artist's head and face are physically replaced by those of the spectators, which takes on his point of view, albeit from a slightly elevated position. It does not match the subject's gaze exactly but

appears slightly off-axis. Furthermore, the spectators' gaze does not coincide with a subjective view of a classic cinematic or video game. Still, it represents something more than these two typologies, and indeed, we could say it lies somewhere between the two.

The first difference with traditional cinema is the duration of Vavarella's subjective view. But, even if they are often shorter than 12 hours, there are certainly some cases in the history of cinema of experimental films shot entirely in first person¹². *Lazy Sunday* is a first-person point-of-view film, but unlike traditional cinema, here the gaze can be redirected across several points of view, thus introducing a margin of freedom which traditional cinema does not allow. On the other hand, while the first-person view in video games¹³ provides the players with a form of embodiment that enables them to physically move in space through an avatar, the perspective of *Lazy Sunday* is different, it lacks, as we have already mentioned, the user's freedom to move in space, which Vavarella has chosen in advance for himself and for us. Moreover, in both cases the assumption of the point of view is given on a 1:1 scale, which is permitted thanks to the virtual reality helmet and its ability to tele-transport the users into an environment that can be life-size.

The subjective construction in the experience designed by Vavarella thus allows us to go beyond the frame defined by cinema and to enjoy an enhanced 360-degree perspective on the space that his body occupies and moves through on a 1:1 scale during the day. Still, it does not allow us to go beyond that same space or to make different choices from those the artist has made for us. On the other hand, we are not limited to seeing only what his eyes have seen: we can direct our gaze left and right, up and down, and even backwards. Some moments are emblematic of the otherness of our gaze in relation to the artist's, for example when he is driving a car or motorcycle and the 360-degree view allows us to feel just like passengers on board not so much the car as Vavarella's body.

Here we witness a chimaerial substitution of the artist's face with that of the viewers who experience a strong sense of presence and embodiment

¹² Cfr.: V. Sobchack, *The Man Who Wasn't There: The Production of Subjectivity in Delmer Davies' Dark Passage*, in D. Chateau (edited by), *Subjectivity. Filmic Representation and Spectator's Experience*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2011, pp. 69-84; F. Villa, *Film, ovvero Esse est percipi. La natura impersonale del soggetto*, in "Imago. Studi di cinema e media", 5, 1, 2012, pp. 91-101.

¹³ R. Eugeni, *Il First person shot come forma simbolica. I dispositivi della soggettività nel panorama postcinematografico*, in "Reti Saperi Linguaggi", 4, 2, 2013, pp. 19-23.

in their host's body. The chimaera in Greek mythology is in effect a monster composed of parts of different animals with a lion's head and body, a second goat's head on its back, and a snake's tail that also had a head.

It is a physical and virtual substitution at the same time, a head in flesh and blood mounted on the body-image of another: the resulting chimæra is effectively the product of an encounter between the real and the virtual, between the present body and the represented body, between present and past, between a *here* and a *there*.

From a theoretical point of view, what is happening here lies at the intersection between the concept of the "scopic regime"¹⁴, the forms of "spectatorship"¹⁵ and the history of the "innervation" of photographic and cinematic technological devices¹⁶.

However, while becoming their avatars/Doppelgänger in the an-iconic world-image in which they are immersed¹⁷, the viewers can never fully identify with Vavarella, nor can they change the reality surrounding them. The phantasmal face of the artist, the centre of gravity of the work and the experience, is replaced by the flesh and blood face of the spectators, dressed in a virtual reality device.

The transformative and performative nature of the helmet has not escaped the attention of the artists who have used it and who have often transformed the VR work into an installation in which to put on display the visitors/actors. A central aspect of the experience is, in fact, its being a performance as well as an installation in VR.

Vavarella designed his installation as a unique and unrepeatable event staged and set up in one single day at the Casa degli Artisti. In the artist's intentions, the work will never be exhibited, or experienced again. In making this choice, which from a certain point of view appears extremely drastic considering the time and costs of production and post-production, Vavarella has chosen to emphasise the exclusivity of the work. The construction of the set for this video performance involved the setting

¹⁴ C. Metz, *Le signifiant imaginaire*, in "Communications", 23, 1975, pp. 3-55; M. Jay, *Scopic regimes of modernity revisited*, in id., *Essays from the Edge. Parerga and Paralipomena*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville-London 2011, pp. 51-63.

¹⁵ See on this topic the different approaches from J. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer. On Visions and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1990 to C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso Books, New York 2012.

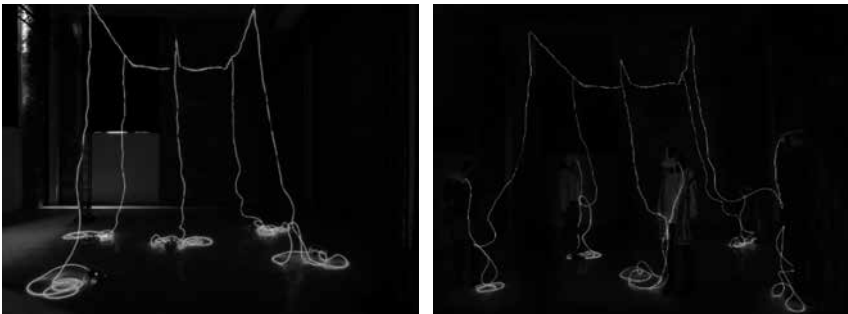
¹⁶ All these topics are part of the debate about visual culture studies. See: A. Pinotti, A. Somaini (eds.), *Cultura visuale. Immagini, sguardi, media, dispositivi*, Einaudi, Torino 2016.

¹⁷ A. Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell'immagine. Da Narciso alla realtà virtuale*, Einaudi, Torino 2021.

up of a physical installation in the building in the centre of Milan which has housed artists' studios since the beginning of the last century. Setting aside the rhetoric of virtual immersion as an experience detached from the world, the external and physical nature of the experience cannot be overlooked, because an awareness of this technology as a medium and osmotic membrane between virtual and real reality¹⁸ has matured thanks to the artists.

In a space obscured by heavy black curtains, a thin tubular metal structure held five virtual reality viewers whose electric cables were highlighted by green neon cables. Their luminous presence emphasized the formal and material qualities of the devices rather than masking them (Figs. 6-7). This is a strategy that Vavarella has consciously adopted in other works, both in photographic works such as *Digital Pareidolia: A Personal Index of Facebook's Erroneous Portraits*, (2012-2013) or *THE GOOGLE TRILOGY – 1. Report a Problem* (2012) and in installations such as *Do You Like Cyber?* (2017) and *Amazon's Cabinet of Curiosities* (2019-ongoing.)

The visitors were thus invited to put on a visor and inhabit the artist's body at a moment that coincided temporally with what he had experienced on a Sunday a few months earlier. At 10 am in Milan, the spectators would thus relive what had happened to the artist at 10 am on August 8th 2021 in the vicinity of Boston.



Figg. 6-7 - Emilio Vavarella, *THE ITALIAN JOB – Job n.3, Lazy Sunday*, 2022. 360° immersive video in 5.6K, 12 hours, color, sound. Installation views. Ph. Rosa Cinelli (Fig. 6) and Giancarlo Pastonchi (Fig. 7).

¹⁸ K. Joyce, 'AR, VR, MR, RR, XR: A Glossary To The Acronyms Of The Future', in "VR Focus", 22 May 2017 (<https://www.gmw3.com/2017/05/ar-vr-mr-rr-xr-a-glossary-to-the-acronyms-of-the-future/>; accessed 10th January 2022).

As can be imagined, the visitors enjoyed the performance in a piecemeal fashion, as no one wore a VR helmet for the entire 12-hour duration. At the same time, the presence of the five helmets available to the audience favoured a particular form of shared experience: although separated and enclosed in the 360-degree image-world that each helmet reproduced for the exclusive use of a single individual, the visitors shared the same experience and the same body at the same time.

Inside the image-world, the spectators *lent their faces* (to use an expression typical of acting jargon) and found themselves interpreting the artist's life for a few minutes, acting out a script already written for them. Thus, a hybrid and a chimaerical creature took shape, albeit momentarily, composed of the spectators' faces and the artist's body.

However, compared to the mythological figure of the chimaera, the recomposed body of the artist's viewer in the 360-degree image of *Lazy Sunday* also maintained that extra characteristic we have already mentioned, namely a margin of freedom (or improvisation), an ability to see more, in all directions. Like the giant of Greek mythology Argo Panoptes (the 'all-seeing') described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*¹⁹ with eyes all over his head (while others picture him as having eyes on every part of his body), the helmeted visitors can see much more than what Vavarella saw. Moreover, this hybrid body is multiplied in the performance and composed of the artist's body and the faces of several people – according to a mechanism similar to the one proposed in *The Digital Skin Series* – because several users inhabit the artist's single body simultaneously.

From the outside, however, the spectators' face is masked. This particular characteristic peculiar to the virtual reality helmet has already been identified by a VR pioneer as its true essence: for Jaron Lanier, in fact, VR is "those big headsets that make people look ridiculous from the outside"²⁰. The visor has the ability to blind the wearers²¹, as it prevents them from seeing the reality all around by making them penetrate an alternative image-world. Even as an optical device or prosthesis that provides access to an aniconic image-world apparently not

¹⁹ Ovidio, *Metamorfosi*, Utet – De Agostini, edited by N. Scivoletto, Torino-Novara 2013, I, vv. 625-626.

²⁰ J. Lanier, *Dawn of the New Everything. Encounters with Reality and Virtual Reality*, Henry Holt & Co., New York 2017, p. 9.

²¹ S. Arcagni, *L'occhio della macchina*, Einaudi, Torino 2018.

mediated by a visible support, the visor represents a threshold, which Vavarella does not intend to hide.

Already in *MNEMOSCOPE* (2020), a site-specific public installation for the territory of Capo di Leuca that made use of cross-reality (XR), the artist had used the device critically, making it bulkier and hard to transport. The reason for this was linked to the content of the work, dedicated to the personal memories of former immigrants. The device's weight made it more complicated and tiring for the users to use, giving form to the heaviness of memories that many of us carry at all times.

Mise en abyme of faces and gazes

The masked face of the spectators/actors (or of the *spectactors*, as they have been renamed²²) is only the first face of a gallery of portraits that we can therefore list, each of which is the bearer of a specific gaze.

This is what we might call a *mise en abyme* of faces and gazes, present and absent, real and virtual, in a mirroring game that also questions the forms of spectatorship²³ and the dynamics of looking and being looked at.

During their experience of the work, the *staged* visitors are first of all watched and spied on by other spectators, the not-yet-masked actors awaiting their turn to wear the VR headset. In the half-light of the installation, this dynamic is enhanced in a more intimately voyeuristic way than in other possible choices. I am thinking of solutions such as that proposed by Marzia Migliora in the VR work *Lo spettro di Malthus* (2020) staged at MA*GA in Gallarate, which placed the visitors on a real base almost as if it were a sculpture, or by Morehshin Allahyari, who invited visitors to lie down on a bed for *Kabous*, a VR installation part of the project *She Who Sees The Unknown: Kabous Installation* (2019); or by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, who framed in a window visitors intent on enjoying the experience of *Endodrome* (2019) in the Arsenale for the 58th Venice Biennale.

²² Cfr. M.R. Beato, *Opacità e trasparenze della cornice performativa nel teatro immersivo*, in "Carte Semiotiche", Annali 7, 2021, pp. 181-98.

²³ C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, London – New York 2012.

However, the gaze of the viewers who observe those intent on experiencing the work is not reciprocated due to the blindness to real reality to which the wearers of the visor are condemned.

The helmet is a membrane that screens (covers, hides) in a double sense, as it blinds the user to the outside world by opening up perspectives invisible to others who remain outside the image-world. But, at the same time, like any screen, the visor allows one to visualise: it reveals the image-world to which one has access and shows the transformation it triggers in the spectators-actors who experience it.

Other gazes are activated, once again unrequited, or only apparently reciprocated inside the visor. In this 360-degree bubble, the spectators seem to meet the gazes of the people around them, such as the friends with whom Vavarella spent that summer afternoon by the lake. However, even though these others are aware of the camera's indiscreet presence, they are primarily looking at the artist and not at the spectators. Secondly, their faces and gazes are frozen in the "rigor mortis" of a past time that they are condemned to repeat²⁴.

On the other hand, the way in which the viewers encounter the artist's face as he occasionally turns his gaze onto himself in the mirrors or reflective surfaces he comes across is different. What happens on these occasions? Who looks at what, and who is looking at whom? We deal with something more complex than the traditional form of *interpellation* of the audience in the cinema which triggers the actor's gaze in the camera²⁵.

Like anyone else, Vavarella first looks at himself in the reflection when looking in the mirror. However, in that moment and making that gesture, the artist/Narcissus is aware of a different *depth* of that reflecting surface. In looking at himself, he is also consciously looking into the eyes of the spectators, momentarily dressed in his body. It is a conscious but asymmetrical glance: a gaze that turns from the past to the future and can therefore be reciprocated only virtually (Fig. 8).

²⁴ A. Pinotti, *Autopsia in 360°. Il rigor mortis dell'empatia nel fuori-cornice del virtuale*, in "Fata Morgana", n. 13/39, 2019, pp. 17-31.

²⁵ F. Casetti, *Dentro lo sguardo. Il film e il suo spettatore*, Bompiani, Milano 1986.



Fig. 8 - Emilio Vavarella, screenshot from *THE ITALIAN JOB – Job n.3, Lazy Sunday*, 2022. 360° immersive video in 5.6K, 12 hours, color, sound. Courtesy of the artist.

This *mise en abyme* of gazes is part of the long tradition of studies of the genres of the portrait and the self-portrait²⁶, in the awareness of the different temporality of these gazes, an aspect that conceptual artists have enhanced through the conscious use of the medium employed.

Consider, for example, the work of conceptual artist Giulio Paolini and his photograph entitled *Giovane che guarda Lorenzo Lotto* (Young man looking at Lorenzo Lotto), which stages the “reconstruction in space and time of the point occupied by the author (1505) and (now) the observer of this painting”²⁷. Again, for Paolini: “the painting becomes a mental mirror of a situation, because it gives the spectator at that moment the illusion of finding himself in the position, and therefore in the person, of Lorenzo Lotto”²⁸.

Within the framework of Conceptual Art, Paolini in 1967 was questioning the characteristics of the medium of photography and the roles attributed to the image, the author and the viewer. In particular, the artist changed perspective by stepping into the shoes of the spectator.

²⁶ J.L. Nancy, *Le regard du portrait*, Galilée, Paris, 2000.

²⁷ Giulio Paolini. 2121969, exhibition catalogue, Galleria De Nieubourg, Milano 1969, s.p. (author's translation).

²⁸ Paolini: opere 1961/73, exhibition catalogue, Studio Marconi, Milano 1973, s.p. (author's translation).

With *Lazy Sunday* Vavarella, using 360-degree video, proposed an equally conceptual and experimental use of a technology which, by placing the spectators at the centre of an environmental image, promises that they will see with his own eyes and even step into his own shoes.

In this case, the medium favours an enhancement of the sensation of embodiment and, therefore, the illusion of “being in the position, and therefore in the person” of the artist. In the name of the total identification of the artist’s body with that of the spectators, Vavarella’s act of mirroring also takes on another function since, in doing so, he provides the viewers with tangible proof of his presence. He gives the viewers concrete evidence of his existence: by mirroring himself, he reveals himself to the spectators who have found themselves in the shoes of a person about whom they may know a great deal (his friends, his home, his body, his voice, etc.) but not his face, and about whom they may therefore have doubts: the artist’s face remains almost unknown to them except in these rare *epiphanic* moments. During the 12-hour video, it has the air of a *cameo*: the rapid and occasional appearance of a famous person in a film.

Finally, this intersection of gazes for a second time assumes an element of voyeurism, in this case entirely internal to the space of the image: the artist’s pleasure in revealing himself and being observed corresponds to the spectators’ pleasure in looking without being seen.

The complexity of *Lazy Sunday*, here interpreted from the point of view of the role of the face, (but it could also be analysed from several other perspectives), is due to the artistic use of 360-degree video. However, it is the fact that this technology is used and misused by Vavarella to produce a work of art which makes *Lazy Sunday* a project capable of articulating a multifaceted reflection on the potential of this medium to innovate genres, languages and iconographies with respect to the still and moving image.

Biography

Elisabetta Modena has a PhD in History of Art (University of Parma 2010), and she is a post-doctoral fellow at the Department of Philosophy “Piero Martinetti” of the University of Milan within the ERC Advanced Grant AN-ICON project, coordinated by Andrea Pinotti. Her main areas of research are contemporary art of the second half of the 20th century, museology and video game culture. She has been a fellow at the Centro Studi e Ar-

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