Back to the Future: Some Reflections on Authorship and Archiving in the Artistic Practice of Luciano Giaccari
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The most reliable way to forecast the future is to try to understand the present (Edgar R. Fiedler)

Abstract:

The idea for this talk stemmed out of the interview given by Luciano Giaccari in July 2011 to Dr Laura Leuzzi, in the context of the AHRC funded research project RewindItalia, which was followed by a lengthy phone conversation between myself and Giaccari a few months later. My interest in the artistic and curatorial practices of Luciano Giaccari is due to my expertise in the field of contemporary media theory, which lends itself to a particular appreciation of Giaccari’s work whose pioneering character is akin to contemporary critical reflection on video art.

The talk focuses on two aspects with regards to Giaccari’s work which are significant, in that the pioneering character mentioned above is more apparent: authorship and archiving/curatorial practices. As far as authorship is concerned, having rehearsed the theoretical debate on the ‘Death of the Author’ as it developed in the ‘60s and ‘70s (Barthes, Foucault) to include its most recent epigones, i.e. ‘quotational authorship’ etc. I notice the striking affinity between Giaccari’s view of authorship as a hybrid concept (due to the creative collaboration between video artist and videomaker) and the concept of the ‘digital mediator’ as it has emerged from the practice of contemporary video artists (Mohaupt).

As far as archiving and curatorial practices are concerned, having discussed the experience of the Videooteca Giaccari I draw attention to its multifunctional approach to the fruition of the work of art, which comprises pedagogical and critical elements together with the possibility for the visitor/viewer to contact the author. Such an approach is again comparable to contemporary trends in the field of museology. The pioneering aspect is further confirmed by Giaccari’s plans for a multi-branch museum that constitutes a network, a clear pre-figuration of the internet.

The talk concludes by offering a few theoretical reflections on the concept of the archive (Derrida) and the contemporary obsession with digital documentation (Virilio) and by recalling Vittorio Fagone’s acute observations with regards to Giaccari’s work to be intended not as ‘mere archiving, but as a clever and cognisant form of practice based on the opportunities offered by the new medium’.

On July 11th, 2011 Luciano Giaccari, whose work as artist, theorist and curator represents a milestone in Italian Videoart, was interviewed by Dr Leuzzi, in the context of the RewindItalia research project. The interview – one of the most interesting documents collected by the project to date – was complemented a few months later by a phone conversation between...
myself and Mr Giaccari; the reflections which I am about to share with you today stem from an attentive evaluation of the above mentioned interview and of the further clarifications emerged during the phone conversation. I also wish to preface my talk by saying that, given my professional background in contemporary media theory, it has been somewhat ‘natural’ for me to develop a deep interest in the artistic and curatorial practice of Giaccari, in that I detected several tendencies which can be rightly identified as prophetic of contemporary critical reflections and sensitivities with regards to video technologies and related artistic practices. The two areas which, to my mind, better explicate the prophetic aspect of Giaccari’s activities are: authorship and archiving/curatorial practices.

With regards to authorship there is a very interesting passage in the interview with Dr Leuzzi which is an appropriate starting point for my reflections:

**LL:** Why did you stop making artistic videos?

**LG:** You are touching upon a very sensitive aspect when it comes to video, that of authorship in that, contrary to cinema, video has not undergone a thorough elaboration of its creative paradigms, so while in the cinematic context the creative and collaborative roles have been clearly identified as pertaining to script writing, subject, directorial and so forth, video has known none of the above. A video would be defined as an artistic video only in so far as the idea to make it occurred to an artist in the first place. In reality, the idea alone was not enough of course and the artist, at least in the '70s, in order to make the video would resort to the help of the videomaker. So, if one were to use for the video the same roles mentioned above for cinema, the artist was certainly the subject provider, because his idea was the starting point, sometimes he would even indicate how he would like the video to be realized, hence he would become the script writer or co-script writer, very seldom the artist would contribute to other roles, ultimately the process of video image creation was mostly due to the videomaker.

... So, when it comes to my work of video-documentation all the authorial decisions were mine. Also in the case of the Living Theatre I was completely free to realize the videotape as I wished to, (artist) Julian Beck’s only request was not to make any commercial profit out of it. Such was the predominant work methodology as far as video documentation was concerned and often for artistic vide as well. One could argue that my experience was different from such situations when the artist in order to make his video would rent the technology and the technician. Being an artist—“video-maker” myself I was on the same wavelength of the artist—“creator”, this would bring about a very peculiar symbiotic relationship as far as the creation of the work was concerned.

Giaccari is obviously right when he notes how sensitive the issue of authorship is, since Barthes and Foucault first announced the ‘Death of the author’ in the late ’60s and early ’70s the author has been resurrected under different guises. More recent theories on this topic cover a vast spectrum which includes the absolute dissolution or ‘annihilation’ of the author in the digital ocean which surrounds us and an Expanded (Performative) Author/ship/Agency as defined by Bruno Latour (2005) and Simon Biggs (2010). From the latter perspective authorship and agency ‘can be seen to originate from, or within, non-conventional, diffused and difficult to identify sources from various devices, machines, apparatus, networks, communities and the relationships between these and other forms of agency’ (2010). It is now the machine itself that performs an almost authorial role, of artistic creation (generative art). The concept of the ‘Remix Author’ on the other hand, especially in the formulation of one of his champions, the
Italia media artist and theorist Eduardo Navas, argues for a ‘questioning of authorship’ since “writing” is no longer seen as something truly original, but as a complex act of re-sampling and reinterpreting material previously introduced (2008). Within such critical spectrum it has also been argued that the digital revolution far from erasing the concept of authorship has reinforced it via the navigation strategies typical of the web, moving on from one author to the next at the click of a mouse. In other words, the authorial presence finds its confirmation at an empirical level thanks to quotation and appropriation practices as they manifest themselves in digital technologies. Such authorial presence started to emerge in the mid ‘90s when the Internet became ever more popular with its various ‘hyperlinks’, first to be found in personal homepages and diaries (blogs) to culminate in the more recent phenomenon of ‘social networking’ entirely based on the practice of sharing links and information. This kind of authorship, based on a commonality of interests and quotations can be defined as ‘quotational authorship’, the more links an author has the more his status as an author is confirmed within his community. So we are faced by the paradox that the same reasons (the quotational nature of authorship) which, according to Barthes, caused the death of the author have now become the raison d’être for his survival. Actually, one could even argue that digital technologies have ended up reinforcing the concept of authorship, making it apparent to a wider public, the premature announcement of the author’s death has brought about the ‘cult of the author’ and perhaps even its tyrannical status in the digital age (Rombes 2005). In any case there is critical consensus on the idea that creativity cannot be intended, as the old Romantic myth would have it, as emanating from a single individual, but as the outcome of the interaction among various actors, such process is by its own nature hybrid and impure, uncannily similar to the one described by Giaccari in the interview excerpt above. Besides, Giaccari’s description of the creative process as being on the same ‘wavelength’ with the artist ‘creator’, in a sort of ‘peculiar symbiotic relationship’, echoes the critical reflections on similar themes of contemporary video artists, one of such artists is Holger Mohaupt (2007) – whose practice-based doctoral thesis at the University of Dundee I have examined. Mohaupt defines his artistic practice of videomaker as one of a ‘digital mediator’, to be understood as a connecting link between the skilled technician and the artist. According to Mohaupt no artistic practice can exist without technical knowledge and technical creativity cannot survive without artistic practice. Any separation between artistic activity and technical realization is a false myth. The digital mediator creates a work ‘for’ and ‘with’ the artist, thus performing the function of technical advisor and supervisor of the artistic production. Any artistic creation presents problems which are difficult to solve hence the artist and the technician need a mediation. The digital mediator is endowed with specific skills that go well beyond the ones of a technician, they include crucial aspects typical of artistic practice itself, i.e. an understanding of the exhibition stage, of the setting in which the work will come to fruition etc. Ultimately, what Mohaupt describes today, which bears obvious resemblances with Giaccari’s experience of forty years ago, is a multidisciplinary approach. The digital mediator’s role is not too dissimilar from that of the film producer or editor, crucially trust is at the base of the relationship with the artist. Mohaupt in his thesis analyses his personal experience of collaboration with artists Zoe Walker and Neil Bromwich; according to such artists the function of the digital mediator goes well beyond the mere documentation of the event, it contributes instead to construct ‘a new space’ between the real and imagined. Once again the open structure of the collaboration creates a new perspectives between our own vision and Holger’s (2007, 171).

In the view of another contemporary video artist, Dan Norton, ‘by working with technology and by collaborating, we are loosening our grip on authorship, if not abandoning it altogether’, ‘technology’ – Norton notes – ‘is a collaborative enterprise’ (2007, 172).
There are other elements connected to the digital mediator one (prefigured in the artistic practice of Luciano Giaccari) which is worth dwelling briefly upon, and they relate to video documentation and to the same concept of mediation. Such issues do not pertain exclusively to contemporary artistic practices, already in 1980 Giaccari elaborated as follows:

*It is said that what we see in a video is not the artist’s work, but how the person in charge of the video documentation sees (emphasis mine) the work. In this case we are faced by the problem of mediation and how legitimate it is... I would argue that while the function performed by the technician dealing with the video documentation is similar to that of the critic, his activity differs significantly. While the critic is institutionally required to mediate by explicating and interpreting the work of the artist, the person dealing with the video documentation of the work is asked to ‘mediate’ by ‘reproducing’ the work of the artist, thus minimizing any possibility for interpretation... the mental attitude of such a professional figure cannot but function as a filter between the work and its tele-visual representation... so it is crucial that the object of documentation and the artist’s previous work are known to the technician in order to prevent any personal interpretation from arising.* (Luginbuhl and Cardazzo, 54-55, translation mine)

On the related topic of mediation, it is useful to refer back to Dr Leuzzi’s interview with Giaccari, particularly to the passage when Giaccari describes in detail his theory of the ‘mediated video’:

*First of all one needs to consider my theory of the ‘mediated video’, that I also defined as ‘instinctive camera-take’ based on the presupposition that the technological device, similarly to a prosthesis, is connected directly to one’s sensorial activities, in this sense the camera becomes not only an extension of the arm but of the eye and the mind as well. Such a presupposition is crucial in that it significantly curtails the technological component of the camera-take in order to avoid a dangerous discordance between the work and its reproduction. The more one minimizes the influence of this component the more one achieves a non-mediated relationship with the work one is reproducing, thus positioning oneself on the same wavelength of the work itself. I came to define such methodological presupposition as a state of ‘trance’, an immersive experience which allowed the most direct contact with the work I was taping.*

Now, it is far from my intention to dwell upon the concept of mediation in the limited time of this talk, as this is a concept that, given its complexity, would require a lengthy examination; however I will limit myself to offering a few considerations. What is evident in Giaccari’s reflections over the past forty years is a constant tension/desire towards ‘transparent reproducibility’, already implicit in the writings of Walter Benjamin (1968). For Benjamin in fact mechanical reproduction has a tendency to satisfy the desire for a ‘transparent’ or ‘immediate’ mediation. We are faced by the age old question as to whether a true instant reproducibility can ever be achieved, to this aim the ultimate scope of mediation remains mimesis, an attempt to create the illusion of immediacy via a trompe-l’œil. Such a desire characterizes the digital revolution as well, if one considers the ways in which it has dramatically altered the relationship between image and reality, author and representation. In the digital world in fact there is no direct relationship between the image and reality (if ever that was the case) with the obvious consequence that the balance of power between author and representation has been altered, the unique point of view, typical of the linear perspective, has been replaced by a new type of virtual vision where images can be produced and simulated from scratch. Digital technologies
sever the link between reality and the means of reproduction, the image presents itself as a computational model which ‘interprets’ the same reality it is supposed to reproduce.

It is also worth mentioning that a new special connection between the body and the machine comes to the fore, the body of the artist not only ‘owns’ the machine but becomes one of its components (the prosthesis of his sensorial activities mentioned by Giaccari) to the point that it is difficult to distinguish where one ends and the other begins, this is the cyborg aesthetic best represented by the Australian artist Stelarc.\(^{vi}\)

There is one last reflection I wish to offer at the end of the first part of my talk which connects the concepts of mediator and mediation as discussed so far. Mohaupt aptly remind us that from an anthropological perspective the role of the artist/mediator finds its archetype in the shaman whose rituals in a given culture help the members of such culture to heal and to live better, in this sense experiencing a work of art is not too dissimilar from participating to a ritual, and extra-ordinary experience. (Mohaupt 2007, 32) The work of the artist is located at the crossroads, as a mediation between that ‘cultured’ and the ‘instinctual’. I would add that one of the problems faced by contemporary men and women is the discrepancy that exists between the technologies at their disposal, advanced and potentially leading to extraordinary developments, and the backwardness of their human psycho-sensorial apparatus. The time of the ‘tecné’ and the time of ‘anthropos’ are not in sync, in this context artistic experimentation can only hint at novel anthropological configurations, thus functioning as a precursor for new trends to come.

In order to address the second aspect of Giaccari’s work which I wish to discuss today, his archiving/curatorial practices I will start once again from the above mentioned interview, when Giaccari describes in detail his archive:

The archive was first called Studio 970 2 to change its name from the late 70s onwards as Videoteca Giaccari, this was due to the fact that the archive had accumulated a vast number of materials, enough to qualify as a “Videoteca”. In any case I have always had from the start an editorial/museological approach to this activity, then the museum-like character came to be better defined when it became clear that the videos collected reflected the activity of the mid-twentieth century avant-gardes. In other words, the collection is so specific, articulated and homogeneous that it perfectly qualifies as a “video-museum”.

The video-room, on the other hand… was initially conceived as a video-lab where one could test how the videos produced could be viewed in different contexts, as an individual experience or in what today is called a network ... the function of the videos was diverse, their purpose was documentation, pedagogy or just information... The first video-room was very original in scope in that the concept of exhibition and technical laboratory coalesced. Sometimes artists and critics were video-interviewed in front of an audience on the use of video as artistic practice, which happened to be my theoretical interest (see my classification) at the time, and the interviews would be instantly broadcasted and later made available in the exhibition space. So the first video-room was very important because it reflected this hybrid vision of producing theoretical research and artistic experimentation. Among the art critics who participated there were: Renato Barilli, Lea Vergine, Daniela Palazzoli, Ernesto Francalanci. I also recall the presence of the theatre critics Franco Quadri and Ettore Capriolo, and of the cinema critic Morando Morandini. …
In any case from a conceptual point of view the video-rooms were extensions of the videoteca, later on they came to be known as ‘Porziuncole’ with a view to become part of a museum network to develop into an Electronic Museum.\textsuperscript{vii}

There are several interesting and somewhat prophetic observations in the interview excerpt above. First of all I wish to mention Giaccari’s insightful conception regarding the multifaceted character of the work of art, which can function from a critical, pedagogical perspective and also bring into contact artist and audience. Similar ideas resonate with contemporary museum practices where the use of headsets and tablets (iPad etc.) is becoming increasing popular in order to offer the visitor a truly immersive fruition of the work of art. It is not difficult to imagine that such immersive tendencies will increasingly characterize visits to museums in the future.\textsuperscript{viii}

Another interesting observation concerns the same idea of the museum to be intended not as a single place but as a network. The term network in its contemporary meaning is connected to the world of Internet and even if the web does not feature, at least at the moment, in Giaccari’s conception of his Electronic Museum\textsuperscript{x}, it looks to me as if a more significant virtual presence of Giaccari’s archive is the most logical outcome of his thinking.

The museum as a network or the ‘networked museum’ is a crucial concept within contemporary digital culture and, as it often is the case it amplifies and opens up fascinating opportunities, I am thinking in particular of the Google Art Project (http://www.googleartproject.com) which includes a network of 150 museums in 40 countries.

One cannot help wondering what is the reason for the contemporary renewed interest in museums and archives exactly at a time when, thanks to digital video and photography, we are engaged in a constant activity of documentation of our daily experience, an activity that seems to erase the present while constructing a future to be experienced on Twitter or Facebook. Maybe our mobile devices and smart phones which allow us to be always connected, always online, have the only purpose to help us forget the banality of the present, our awareness of what surrounds us increasingly altered by these novel electronic tools. Our obsession with documenting the present ends up consuming it, almost literally and our own physicality becomes redundant. The French theorist Paul Virilio (1997) has most poignantly warned against the dangers of technology and its negative effects on ‘natural’ notions of time. For Virilio our contemporary obsession with documenting the present stems from the anxiety caused by the speed of change all around us. We document because, since we don’t have a ‘true’ experience of the real anymore we are afraid that there won’t be any trace of our existence to leave behind once we are gone.

In such a context the role of the archive becomes particularly poignant and slightly different from the established one, i.e. of legitimation of current political power and the creation of a national narrative, a taxonomy of knowledge which produces history. A more contemporary view of the archive goes well beyond the mere collection and offers itself as a site of contestation and flux, an invaluable aid in understanding and/or adapting our perception of time and memory. A contemporary archive is by no means static as Derrida acutely observed already in 1996 in his Archive Fever. Archiving for Derrida represents both attempting to preserve something to be remembered and leaving out something to be forgotten. The French philosopher notes that this impulse with contradictory purposes is found in individual and collective minds, historically and fictionally. Indeed, history and fiction may blur in the haunted selves that suffer from ‘archive fever’. Not surprisingly, such interest in the archive is reflected in contemporary artistic practices to the point that, as Marinella Paderni (2011) notes while
discussing the work of artists Emanuele Becheri and Michele Dantini, ‘The increasing attention paid by artists to memory (both individual and collective) has transformed the archive in an aesthetic principle in its own right... it is the archive that makes it possible for us to experience time and change.’

I think that Paderni’s definition of the archive as ‘aesthetic principle’ is a particularly fitting one as far as Giaccari’s work of documentation is concerned. Already in 1990 art critic Vittorio Fagone qualified Giaccari’s activities as being not ‘mere archiving, but a clever and cognisant form of practice based on the opportunities offered by the new medium’ (169 translation mine). Elsewhere Fagone, and it is with his words that I wish conclude my talk today, notes how Giaccari ‘had been very perceptive in understanding the manifold potential of the new medium. The video is not only a new artistic language which expands the complex space of the visual arts in the late ‘60s, more importantly it reflects the whole of contemporary artistic experience’. (1988, 43)

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i An edited version of the interview will be available on the RewindItalia web site http://www.rewind.ac.uk/rewind/index.php/REWINDItalia. A fairly accurate EduEDA biographical entry on Giaccari (in Italian) is available at http://www.edueda.net/index.php?title=Giaccari_Luciano In 2012 come the fortieth anniversary celebrations for Giaccari’s historical Videoteca with various events planned in Italy and abroad.

ii Translation mine, since I am not endowed with the sophisticated skills of a professional translator all its faults are to be considered mine as well.

iii The Living Theatre is an American theatre company based in New York City. It was founded in 1947 by, among others, actress Judith Malina and painter/poet Julian Beck. It is the oldest experimental theatre group still existing in the U.S.

iv For an excellent introduction to generative art see Galanter (2003).

v In brief, the concept of mediation can be examined through different lenses. In philosophy, classical examples such as Plato’s cave, Cartesian dualism, and Kant’s division of phenomena and noumena, all rely on some normative notion of mediation. Mediation is also central to Marxist theory and to the study of technology and media. From the latter perspective, the core issue is to analyze what is possible and what is limited by the structure of a given medium and how social actors work both within and against that structure.

vi See Stelarc’s home page http://stelarc.org/_swf

vii The ‘Porziuncola’ is a small church located within a bigger one, more specifically the Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli situated near Assisi, in the Italian region of Umbria. Giaccari’s concept of the museum network is inspired by the Porziuncola structure, hence the name of ‘Porziuncola project’ for his electronic museum.
This is an exciting field of study, useful insight is provided, among others, by the AAM’s Center for the Future of Museums (CFM). This is ‘a think-tank and research and design lab for fostering creativity and helping museums transcend traditional boundaries to serve society in new ways’ http://futureofmuseums.org/

The (Mu.EL) Electronic Museum’s web site is to be found at http://muel.altervista.org/blog/ (in Italian) and provides an historical narrative of Giaccari’s activities. No video material is available online.