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## Research and Inhabited Image (RIA): a spatial hypothesis

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## Research and Inhabited Image (RIA): a spatial hypothesis

### Abstract

This paper discusses the possibility of representing research activity as a narrative path starting from an experimentation field. The aim is to test and verify connections between social space and the construction of images of the world through the building and perception of specific language in the narrative dimension of research. The field work we present has been carried out as an installation art in Borromini's Crypt in Rome, and is the example of rendering the story-dimension of research through a medium, a narrative technology in constant progress and evolution. In this way research activity can be presented as ascent and descent, as a mix of light and darkness, in multiple symbolic ways and different values. The Research and Inhabited Image Project (RIA) is in this dimension conceived as a story of stories, not as a research communication work.

### Keywords

Research, art, images, space

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## **Research and Inhabited Image (RIA): a spatial hypothesis**

*Sveva Avveduto and Fabio Fornasari*

A statement by Saul Steinberg defines in a simple way the Research and Inhabited Image (RIA) hypothesis: he used to affirm that his work can explain something about something other than what the image is itself. The hypothesis is to move the research glance in space and not over the body that is watching. Neuroscientists look at the brain. We should look at the image that the brain produces and at the way people live in this image.

If we look at space, we realize that the attitudes of the artist, the scientist, become forms. Referring to these attitudes, we find the way to inhabit images that someone else has built around us and in our imagination. We should build our mindscape and put out the images in form of space (Giedion, 2002).

Our work is centered on the RIA Research Project to build paths and passages, to follow research activity in its different expressions: science, poetry, music, art; to study and produce objects to implement new models and new perspectives on art-science relationship.

The hypothesis put forward is that to understand the environment and the space around people, we should think that it is a memory about their consciousness. It tells us all about their thoughts. The space around people is a large part of experiences, and narratives. We can recall what Wittgenstein affirms: “the human body is the best picture of the human soul” (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 178).

We must look not only inward, into the recesses of our insides, but also the ways in which each of us, as a whole animal, carries on the processes of living: in, with and in response to, the world around us. The environment built by anyone is the best image of his/her thoughts (Downs & Stea, 2005).

### **The research work on ‘RIA’**

Following these principles it is possible to carry out investigations on others’ research, and their results become the inhabited form. Representing research activity as a narrative path gives us the experimentation field to test and verify connections between social space and the construction of world images through the building and perception of specific language in the narrative dimension of research.

The output of our ongoing research activity has up to now been expressed in a series of art installations that put together the art dimensions, the research definition and description, through the exhibition of different research contents.

The installation (see photos) consisted of an oval ‘water mirror’ made possible by using a special

pool built inside the site. It has been made using black matt wood to create a basin that occupied most of the walkable space of the site itself but with small edges, and reflected (in a dark created



environment) the walls and the roof made of white plaster (the typical renaissance stucco) and/or the people that gazed at it bending on the pool. The effect was a mix of opening the space towards a dark depth behind the pool while at the same time multiplying the space towards the reflection of walls and roof.

### **Ascent and descent in space, images and research**

Our imagination can be moved along two ideal and real lines: the horizontal and the vertical one. The horizontal line makes it possible to travel, even dreaming of new frontiers trying to move ‘further and further’ on a planet that we have suddenly discovered finite. Moving through a horizontal line means using only one possible dimension, albeit a very relevant one, and using the spatial possibilities only in a linear direction. We travel on a sphere that, after all, has a surface that can be expressed by a mathematical formula which can make humans aware that it is finite and expressed by a number.

On the other end it is possible to make our ideal journey moving our imaginary on a vertical axis: from the center of the earth towards the infinity. The point of view we express on the horizontal journey on the blue planet, is expressed as a pilgrimage in the already known: although we may not know what is there, someone before us has known it and seen it and our path has anyway been traced and followed by other people before us. The horizontal journey on Earth is essentially a real physical one.

The vertical travel is a journey that moves above all on a symbolic level. It is the journey from darkness to light, for example. It is a journey to the extreme.

The dichotomies between different alternatives either on theoretical and real level, travel on the vertical axis. The vertical axis represents the possible different assumptions of opposites: radicalizing the concept good and evil, black and white, and contextualizing the concept to a

special dimension it symbolizes the possibility of transcending the boundaries. The verticality is also the first real achievement of man: after crawling we won our erect position, the conquest of the axis of stability of all things, the opposition to the force of gravity. It is a path that breaks many certainties. Moving along the vertical axis makes some spatial/time concepts (such as day night) even disappear. The day has a meaning only if we live in close contact with the mother planet. It makes sense in relation to a geographic space. If this space disappears also the spatial/time concepts disappear and have no meaning.

### **The installation in the Borromini's Crypt**

How can we render all this in displaying art and science? We tried to perform and portray our research vision in the '*horto concluso*' of a little Paradise Lost, where the fallen angel Francesco Borromini has provided us the ideal location to set the three-dimensional environment and the many, sometimes divergent concepts linking research and space, light and darkness, discoveries and disillusion. The topography of the site reflects, in the geometric solitude of the environment, the emergence of an underground space, of a thought, a conception of an invention. It is an immersive space through architecture that is structured in two opposites, the visible and the hidden created by Borromini, this was his last effort before his tragic death.

The crypt, made for the Falconieri family as a shrine, is hidden under the main altar of the Church of San Giovanni dei Fiorentini in Rome. This crypt enhances the duality of light and darkness that is common in Borrominian architecture (Fehrenbach, 2005).

Mind and space that represent a duality of tangible and intangible that in turn become more or less evident and important become the easy metaphor of research and the condition of the artist or researcher that looks for space alone to work. Both the artist and the researcher share the condition of going through the everyday life as anyone while for their job or passion they have to

pursue a path of continuous change towards something new, still undiscovered or to be created by themselves. This may be called: the restlessness of the new. Both the artist and the researcher even if they wish so, are not easily destined to succeed. Every true artist or researcher is a visionary and this makes him or her different: the individual may not be seen by the other as a through our installation we made people enter the science and art dimension through several elements:

- Research and the representation of the idea of living images, made visible through a continuous flow of images of research in various areas and disciplines displayed through a screen activated automatically on loop
- The space transformed into an image itself for being inhabited, i.e. the art installation of the oval back pool filled with 5cm of water that changed the still space of the crypt by becoming a reflecting mirror for those who entered the crypt and at the same time a lens that made the space behind the floor of the crypt an endless well.
- The visionary artist, starting from Borromini's visions to reach the modern ones.
- The researchers and their activity were present only as a continuous noise, a mass-sound. A sound device broadcasted continuously the 'sound of research' made by a collection of different sounds (or even noises) and voices produced by different research activities and researchers coupled with a music composed by a musician for the installation itself.

Water was the key element that made it possible to connect all the different elements (tangible or intangible) that were settled in the crypt. Water became a sort of the connective tissue that was linking the elements either physically, through vision and touch, or emblematically through all the symbolic meanings of water (an amniotic liquid, renaissance, life, nourishment but also danger and even death. A water mirror was located in the crypt, at the

center of its oval space, so wide that it was almost touching the walls: a black low basin, almost a floor in itself, filled with clean water that looked like thin foil filling almost the entire space of the crypt.

The water mirror was there to show what we cannot otherwise see. The unfinished space was reconstructed in a reflected image which is a relic of the space itself. The screen, water lens and mirror virtualized the space, back into an unstable image. On touching it the water surface was modified and activated a low-tech but immersive interactivity: you can see yourself in a mirror, you can enter it and you can live in it.

The installation was conceived following an idea of interactivity that is mostly virtual although not being digital, nor electronic, but conceptual and hands-on. The light was studied to be very weak and point toward the white ceiling, and was visible in the lens of the water, while a continuous sound-mass brought the voices of the researchers to those present at the installation.

### **Conclusions**

Architecture had a central role in many models: the human attitude to fly, to go beyond, to research. The invention of the wing and the scale of the shaman or the steps of the ziggurat<sup>1</sup> are only rough artificial flight. For this reason all these are already symbolic means of purification: they allow elevation.

Ascent and descent, light and darkness, not to mention all the corresponding imaginary, in their symbolic values are at the heart of research and can be rendered as we did in the Borromini's Crypt in Rome.

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<sup>1</sup> As the Merriam Webster dictionary defines it the ziggurat is an ancient Mesopotamian temple tower consisting of a lofty pyramidal structure built in successive stages with outside staircases and a shrine at the top.



This work (a part of our ongoing research project), offers a descent, a trip down towards the depth of images. The descent to the crypt suggests an approach towards something "less known" a journey that becomes a metaphor: the door on the threshold of a world that is not real but is virtual because it is a double of reality without possessing its substance. It suggests, to people gazing at it, an attitude towards research that becomes an image in the water mirror in the shade. It becomes the threshold between a high-ceilinged space, an endless fall and the possibility of coming back.

Representing research as a narrative path gives us the experimentation field to test and verify connections between social space and the construction of world images through the building and perception of specific language in the narrative dimension of research.

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