

## Barcodes

### A present continuous regard?

#### Intro

Let's start by saying that I don't have a statement ready that can satisfy me by using it in a "copy and paste" mode. Not because writing for me isn't congenial, I prefer to express "my"<sup>1</sup> art directly, from the plastic point of view (*plastiquement*) otherwise I would have chosen a different job *ça va sans dire*. So if you're a lover of summaries, once again I refer you to the end of this article to an abstract saved from previously.

The aforementioned attitude may penalize my position, but nevertheless, I need to use my apotropaic talent and protect it from unwelcome attention. This allows me, at 44 years old, to still enjoy experimentation. It's not even my style to publish words that for obsolescence expires like a commodity in the supermarket. On the contrary, I trust what Titus Lucretius Carus<sup>2</sup> wrote in his didactic poem *De Rerum Naturae*: "*I don't think eyes can be wrong in anything: it's their job to see the light where it is and the shadow where it is.*" As far as I am concerned, the result of a visual language is far different from any comprehension at the Saussurian level. In general, I believe that every attempt of interpretation made with direct experience should be considered closer to a certain truth than any theory itself. In fact, according to Jacques Lacan, everything loses meaning in a life full of messages and communications (written, radio, spoken, political) and life proceeds without meaning or purpose, if not perhaps that of a search for meaning itself<sup>3</sup>. Sure, there is a thought behind "Barcodes" that's even gradually condensed in words, but as a visual artist, I belong to the school whose work speaks for itself. So for this part, I leave the floor open for experts who know the state of art in this context. I trust them as long as they effectively read contemporary art without prejudices, helping to "give birth" to the truth<sup>4</sup> while the artist commits "suicide"<sup>5</sup> as Jung explains" navigating in the art of avoiding compromises. So, in the worst case scenario, (particularly in my case to not be very accustomed to explaining my work with even more engagement), I will still be able to keep my mind explanation-free.

#### How did you come up with the idea to add a barcode to your environment?

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<sup>1</sup> "He who has the fortune or misfortune to possess a particular talent is a victim of the illusion of being that same talent. Therefore, he is often a buffoon. A particular talent is something outside of me. I am not identical to it. The nature of talent has nothing to do with the nature of the person who has it. It often lives at the expense of the nature of the person who is provided with it. His personality is marked by the disadvantages of his talent, even the opposite. As a result, he never lives up to his talent, but always remains below it. If he accepts his Other, he becomes capable of holding his own talent, thus rejecting his Other, he loses sight of the measure, because the nature of his talent transcends the human and is a natural phenomenon. He himself will transcend the human, he himself will become a natural phenomenon, which he is not. Everyone will see his error, and he will be the victim of their derision. Then he will say that it is the Other who mocks him, while what makes him ridiculous is only the fact that he neglects his own Other." *The Red Book*, C.G. Jung.

<sup>2</sup> A Roman poet and philosopher (c. 99 BC – c. 55 BC) and maybe a pseudonym for Marcus Tullius Cicero.

<sup>3</sup> Guy Deborde docet. Rif. « *Société du spectacle* ».

<sup>4</sup> See "maieutic": denoting the Socratic mode of inquiry, which aims to bring a person's latent ideas into clear consciousness.

<sup>5</sup> As Jung explained "*The nature of talent has nothing to do with the nature of the person who has it*", so if keep on believing that it is the same entity, commits artistically "suicide".

I could answer this question by claiming that this work popped up after a period of *self-analysis*. It all started with great curiosity while I was still a student in Milan (IED, 1998 - 2001). At that time I had the pleasure to have Silvio Wolf, an established artist as a professor. One artist I studied with Wolf grabbed my attention more than the others. This was the artist (and physician) Franco Vaccari. He was one of the most original and influential exponents of Italian conceptual photography who also offered us a challenging theory about photography with *technological unconscious*, which would deserve more space to be explained but which I will briefly summarize here and then take it up in the rest of the text. In his essay "Fotografia e inconscio tecnologico" (1976) Vaccari says: "It's not important that the photographer knows how to see, because the camera sees for him" (1976). Vaccari demonstrates<sup>6</sup> that when the camera is not used in a *forced artistic* way, but it is left to act as an instrument capable of producing autonomous recordings and memories, it favours the emergence of behaviours, relationships, functions that are fundamental to the definition of the very meaning of photography in contemporary civilization. So he told us how the camera has a life of its own and that the artist's own conscious personal motivation from the author is practically non-existent. A point of view obviously reinforced by a previous but different contribution. In "A Short History of Photography" (1931) Walter Benjamin wrote: "The nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye; [...] only through photography does he discover this optical unconscious, like, through psychoanalysis, the instinctive unconscious<sup>7</sup>. Benjamin already told us how optics brings back to consciousness what we cannot see<sup>8</sup>. Consequently, in no particular order, came other theorists who can be developed in this sense like Roland Barthes<sup>9</sup>, Jean Baudrillard<sup>10</sup>, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and other excellent intellectuals. Only in 2016 did I formally establish a connection<sup>11</sup> with these theories after reading P.K. Dick (eureka!). Later on reinforced by C. G. Jung with the greater concept of *collective unconscious*<sup>12</sup>. Alongside psychology, philosophy and critical literature, I also found another interesting connection with physics.

Some time ago I had the fortune to briefly correspond via email about this thesis with Carlo Rovelli, an Italian theoretical physicist, even stealing a laugh with him. I asked him if a photograph can still be seen as a document of reality. In Rovelli's book "The Order of the Time" he writes that with *entropy* also comes the idea of an "*unfocused present*" and explained the "*direction of the time*" by thermodynamic law. Additionally, he wrote: "Present is the only time that cannot be focused". Following this logic, like sound, an image reverberates from one location to another causing numerous reflections that are accentuated by a subjective reality under constant change. Thus dissolving a great misunderstanding among photographers that still drags on in the current debate. I took over from a very personal feeling with this so that I can prove what I say. As a provocation, I still think that physics could even tell us that *documentary photography* can't be considered to be *historical evidence* because it is relative to the subjectivism of the author. I say that every time I want to make fun of a purist, but don't get me wrong, I extremely appreciate "my" predecessors from the

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<sup>6</sup> Esposizione in tempo reale N.4. Lascia una traccia fotografica del tuo passaggio. Biennale di Venezia 1972

<sup>7</sup> W. Benjamin 1966: 62-63)

<sup>8</sup> A third contribution to the cause comes to us from Rosalind Krauss (1994) which for practical reasons I do not consider here.

<sup>9</sup> He also exposed the idea influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre with "the death of author". The notion of writing concerns that which is communicated outside or beyond any message or content. For Barthes, writing in its extreme form is *anticommunication*.

<sup>10</sup> He is best known for his analyses of media, contemporary culture, and technological communication, as well as his formulation of concepts such as simulation and hyperreality.

<sup>11</sup> Also through other projects presented in a different context (...).

<sup>12</sup> The collective unconscious is a concept originally defined by psychoanalyst Carl Jung and is sometimes called the objective psyche. It refers to the idea that a segment of the deepest unconscious mind is genetically inherited and is not shaped by personal experience.

*Düsseldorfer Photoschule*<sup>13</sup> (and who still practice it with a sense of humour). Besides, it's where "Barcodes" comes from, with the "difference" that here there is a documentation of a certain "unknown unconscious" and believe it or not, it's part of the scenario I like to imagine and share when it is possible. *Magic realism*<sup>14</sup>.

The potential that this medium has is still very vast and influential, but the question related to the *technological environment* is in which directions (?) Since we don't really know how much technology could still tautologically shape our way of being, much less in some cases where the phenomenon is already *à la derive* in knowing the side effect of simulation and hyperreality ("A *Scanner darkly*<sup>15</sup>" docet). A collective and personal un-conscious knowledge gravitates around photography that in the majority of cases, even for me, is not considered enough.

### Is it the idea to "standardize" the environment?

The discourse I'm producing through this research is not to explain a story, but rather to focus on some questions like: how to represent the unperceptive environment we are subjectively living in? My written answer used to be that: "*In Barcodes the optical stimulus meets the multitude of our unconscious creating a path that from linear, and therefore classic, is loaded with formal signifiers that accentuate the strength of the line allowing these images to connect with its intrinsic baroque*<sup>16</sup> side".

If a thought has no beginning and no end, how does it affect our choices in a certain moment and what does it mean if we want to look into this issue in-depth? Following this dissertation, which can also be considered philosophical, I discovered an interesting word used in literary technique: *parataxis*<sup>17</sup>. The aesthetics of this method has a visual language that recalls this technique by using short and simple sentences in a row. I reverberate this dialogue in my aesthetic choices by including reflections as a structured language and facilitate a physical mirroring of a technological matter perceived by sensoriality. The "camera," as a reproductive tool, helps "me" in this challenge by giving me confidence and allowing me to fully enjoy a pure conceptual act, an *acte photographique*<sup>18</sup> as an artistic gesture. As well known, the human collective unconscious is populated by *instincts*, as well as by archetypes which can also be seen in Barcodes as a kind of *metamedium*<sup>19</sup>. Exploring media and their *archaeological materiality* using *pure photography* for *decoding* a new balance through its transversal level but with a *line*<sup>20</sup>. So in this discourse, the idea of standardization is related to this technological issue. In a *tecnobarocco*<sup>21</sup> sense, we can't give a limit to this kind of evolution, but maybe it's possible to understand its behavior by observing what modern technology like *mechanical reproduction* generated in the

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<sup>13</sup> Bernd e Hilla Becher, Laurenz Berges, Boris Becker, Volker Döhne, Elger Esser, Claudia Fährenkemper, Bernhard Fuchs, Claus Goedicke, Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Axel Hütte, Simone Nieweg, Tata Ronkholz, Thomas Ruff, Jörg Sasse, Thomas Struth, Petra Wunderlich all them contemporaries of the Italian conceptual movement, like Franco Vaccari Vito Acconci, Vincenzo Agnetti, Carlo Massimo Asnaghi, Giuseppe Chiari, Giuseppe Desiato, Ketty La Rocca, Elio Mariani, Claudio Parmiggiani, Aldo Tagliaferro e Michele Zaza.

<sup>14</sup> Often refers to fiction and literature in particular, with magic or the supernatural presented in an otherwise real-world or mundane setting, commonly seen in novels and dramatic performances.

<sup>15</sup> A *Scanner Darkly* is a fictionalized account of real events, based on Dick's experiences in the 1970s drug culture. Dick said in an interview, "Everything in *A Scanner Darkly* I actually saw."

<sup>16</sup> It should have a less negative connotation. Baroque exists in technique, especially in the meaning of technical innovation.

<sup>17</sup> From Greek παράταξις "act of placing side by side", from παρα para "beside" + τάξις táxis "arrangement".

<sup>18</sup> Ref: Philippe Dubois.

<sup>19</sup> As coined by Alan Kay and Elena Goldberg, *metamedia* refers to new relationships between form and content in the development of new technologies and new media.

<sup>20</sup> Ref: *Point and Line to Plane*, W. Kandinsky.

<sup>21</sup> Technobarocco by Mario Ticozzi. Does technology help us to live better? An essay to unmask its inefficiencies and do without the superfluous, rediscovering the authentic sense of cultural and technical-scientific progress.

previous generation. Photography has revolutionized our lives just like the World Wide Web has. But, in comparison, it is still in its early stage. Now it's close to its 200 years and considered here to be a yardstick, a very accurate objective, a *spectrometer of our unknown*, a standard for measuring *The Human Phenomenon*<sup>22</sup>. It's hard to justify a statement like that, but until the contrary, it's an intellectual and practical way for me to verify if it's possible to generate a standard in terms of limits in technological unconscious by revisiting photography with some formal studies. So far there are a dozen studies that have been carried out over 4 years between various official and unofficial artistic residences in Switzerland, France, Italy, Balkans and my hometown in *Ticinocittà*<sup>23</sup>. Let them speak for me. "Look At the pictures!"<sup>24</sup>.

## How do you proceed technically?

Both analogically and digitally. Formally I don't make any difference since I had the pleasure to experience the gelatin silver process very well. Since I have learned this process, I use it as I please while not taking it into big consideration. I mean, technique and equipment are real barriers, but once you are over them, then they disappear going in the direction indicated by Vaccari. Btw, mechanics and optics here really only matter with a mind in the *semiosphere*<sup>25</sup>. *Téchne* doesn't count too much if it ends up on in itself. During the *intuitive moment*, it becomes an interior collaborative entity on par with me, the best partner in crime for investigations in a *metaphysical ground*.

Beyond the concrete technical aspects, photography is still a great medium. Etymologically, "medium" means "*in the middle, between; from the middle*" and it should be considered as such. It's a gateway to knowledge and, as Lucretius argued, it's already objectively true and it's up to us to see what we detect, a little like *mirror neurons*<sup>26</sup>. If a certain kind of imagination emerges, and this involves lots of technocracies, technique comes out influencing the scene. So, if we are what we imagine ourselves to be and if we are the image of those who imagined us before, we may understand why we are selected based on *technocracy society*<sup>27</sup>. The difference is made by the *regard* we have about it, otherwise, it will become impossible to compete with cyborgs. And in this case, when I look at my work, I see a "*present continuous*", a kinetic projection of our contemporary world we are living in, full of relations, condensed in multiple ways of *being Nature*<sup>28</sup>.

In "Barcodes" the interplay between individuals and their surroundings is a "*written registration*" in both ways this medium allows. The visual results are a consequence of using the camera as an "*unconscious scanner*". Instead of reading the classic barcodes, it reads the layers that this hypothetical line *gestaltically*<sup>29</sup> forms through a

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<sup>22</sup> Ref: Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre.

<sup>23</sup> Ref: Cinecittà in Rome.

<sup>24</sup> "Look at the Pictures" is a 2016 American documentary film about the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe.

<sup>25</sup> The semiosphere is the sphere of semiosis in which sign processes operate in the set of all interconnected *Umwelten* (*environment*).

<sup>26</sup> A *mirror neuron* is a neuron that fires both when an animal acts and when the animal observes the same action performed by another. Thus, the neuron "mirrors" the behavior of the other, as though the observer were itself acting. Such neurons have been directly observed in human and primate species, and birds.

<sup>27</sup> Technocracy is an ideological system of governance in which decision-makers are selected based on their expertise in a given area of responsibility, particularly with regard to scientific or technical knowledge.

<sup>28</sup> Ref: Nietzsche.

<sup>29</sup> Gestalt psychologists emphasized that organisms perceive entire patterns or configurations, not merely individual components.

cognitive process, tracing a conceptual environment as scientific evidence does. In “Barcodes” the images are broken down inside a singular process in an *iconoclastic*<sup>30</sup> sense and rebuilt with even more *simulacrum*<sup>31</sup> *iconodulism*<sup>32</sup>. It is similar to how a mosaic creates new patterns in which each element is built up from small regular or irregular pieces of substances. Instead of using elements such as stone, glass, ceramic, an atom or a byte, one operates with *pieces of unconsciousness* that somehow, as a common denominator, unites all these technological issues, including the most acclaimed ones.

Matteo Fieni, June 2020

**Abstract** (old, the copy and paste one).

This project aims to question the relationship between the symbolic coding of the barcode and the construction of the photographic image from the notions of *optical* and *technological unconscious* developed by Walter Benjamin and Franco Vaccari. In “Barcodes” the photographic image of the world is structured with the same paratactic construction of the linear parallelism that characterizes the Barcode system, a universal identification that allows and regulates the spread of goods and objects in a capitalist and globalized society. In this sense, this research should be seen first of all as a reflection on the nature of the photographic act - the primary act through which the visual identity of the world is built today and its diffusion within the social structure thanks to the mechanisms that regulate the technological unconscious.

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<sup>30</sup> Breaking or destroying images, especially those set up for religious veneration.

<sup>31</sup> A simulacrum (plural: simulacra from Latin: simulacrum, which means "likeness, similarity") is a representation or imitation of a person or thing

<sup>32</sup> Iconodulism (also Iconoduly or Iconodulia) designates the religious service to icons (kissing and honourable veneration, incense, and candlelight).