IMAGE ARCHIVE AND CONTEMPORARY ART.

ANALYSE OF EXPRESSIVE STRUCTURES OF DIGITAL ARCHIVES OF

IMAGE

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Change in communication model due to technological development has a major impact on culture and society. We experiment a new revolution, similar to that described by Marshall McLuhan due to printing press invention or apparition of photography in 19th century, except that this time the entire culture is, if not produced, at least mediated through the new technological medium. Transfer of images in virtual space involves rethink of image notion. In this context, we are interested in contemporary artistic practices, establishing intense use of image archives in contemporary art and at the same time we propose ourselves exploration of possibilities to analyse images using the new technological medium.

Given the fact that image creators are witnesses of image explosion, of image omnipresence due to existence of enormous archive of Internet, contemporary art is faced to challenges. Ubiquity of image, amplified by its universal character determines contemporary artistic practices and the first solution for artists to this crisis is to take advantage of the enormous quantity of available images. Image archives are constituted as a source, if not exclusive, at least dominant in contemporary art. Cultural unity, as Lev Manovich claims, is no longer represented by a single image, but a large number of images. Database (digital archive) becomes the main engine of creative process in the Internet era, representing at the same time a cultural form of the curent society.

At the same time with digitalization, one can talk about the existence of a common denominator of images, which makes it possible their analyse from a new perspective – analyse through quantifiable parameters of a large number of images, becoming a strong instrument of extracting visual knowledge. In this project I have realised the syntactic (or expressive) analyse of digital image archives. Syntactic analyse keeps in view the structure of grammatical reports which was performed by means of a software application named 3A (Archive of Artistic Archetypes). Performed analyses provide clear and stable marks, available in creating images with configuration character, tracking down image language elements in a precise way (quantifiable).

The present theme keeps in view the archive. Principle of operation with *big data* used in performed analyses constitutes itself as a current artistic practice. Also, exploration of this archive through proceedings offered by 3A application made it possible to extract new information about analysed images and the possibility to organise/reorganise, classify, arrange/rearrange, visualize depending upon criteria of syntactic kind which could be

correlated with those of semantic kind of analysed archive. Cluster, filtering, image sorting suppose several basic principles which help to extract information about images, principles which are indispensable in a culture dominated by archive of digital images.

The paper is structured in five chapters, in which we have tried to comprise the complexity of the approached generous theme.

In the **first chapter**, we have tried to discover the notion of archive, signalising changes intervened during time on its significance. The text is not made up under linear form by chronological approach of moments which have in view changes produced at the level of archive concept, but it is constituted as a collage which tries to discover different aspects or perspectives on *the most unclear term* (Derrida). In this sense, we reminded the relation between archives, libraries and museums, pointing similarities between these organizational forms. In order to illustrate the tight relationship between the three, we kept in view the following: defining of archive in relation with the deposit space and/or deposited content, stages identified by Marshall McLuhan (invention of typography determining the need of libraries), taking-over of organisational systems models of libraries by museums and the concept of archive in relation to the museum during modern art era and from informational era, where museum's function is taking over by the digital archive (Hal Foster). In elaborating all these aspects we had in view the digital archive, comparing it to its anterior organizational forms, emphasizing the expansion of archive notion together with the digital space of depositing which extinguishes traditional classifications, the archive becoming a *metaphor* (it must take into consideration the Greek sense of word *metaphorein* - transfer) for all forms of memory (Wolfgang Ernst).

At the same time we took into consideration several functions or characteristics of archive, such as: the repetition, the power the archive is invested with (the power to detain the historical truth, political power), the archive as cultural memory, the archive as reinterpretation and not presentation of facts, the fictive archive (Christian Boltanski, Zoe Leonard), archive as model, impulse to collect which sits at the base of archive creation (*mal d'archive* – Jacques Derrida), the problem of archive content selection, archive lacks etc. In the same time we've succinctly approached time, space and memory notions, as being defining notions for the archive.

One of the central ideas in this characterisation of archive term, idea which is retrieved along the paper, is that the structure of the archive creates meaning.

A special attention in this first chapter was assigned to the *Mnemosyne Atlas* by Aby Warburg. We make mention that the 62 plates created by Warburg are part of the database subject to analyses of images expression, but beside the expressive value of *Mnemosyne Atlas* we were interested in multiple and profound significances of this construction.

Warburg's investigation represents an insight of visual culture outside the art canon, an atypical presentation of history of culture. The adopted format speaks about the content. Warburg's choice for an art history in images is the first trial in history to overtake the paradigm of art history, orientated until then linearly chronological and based upon writing. *Mnemosyne Atlas* represents a refusal of stylistic-formal method predominant in art history at the end of 19th century. Furthermore, the *atlas* is a visual form of knowledge. *Mnemosyne Atlas* represented the great turning point in understanding what images mean. In this *Atlas* we can recognize a history of human imagination (Georges Didi-Huberman).

Warburg's revelation to present his ideas through images – in expressive ways, is in a perfect resonance with the contemporary era where digital images develop. We have associated the form of his searches with the quantifiable analyse of images performed in this paper, from the perspective of conviction of *formula* existence graved in images, which continue beyond cultural changes produced along the history and in the same time both of them (Warburg's undertaking and this analyse) wish to represent forms of image knowledge through images. The comparison may seem forced, but we have realised it only referring to the two reasons mentioned, being conscious of major differences among the two approaches.

In the **second chapter** we have taken into consideration the new model of communication, developing certain aspects related to changes produced by the new technological medium, by implications of these changes, by archive transformation in this context, emphasizing the effect of changes on culture and especially of contemporary art. We have been preoccupied by the aspects related to the relation between word and image in technological medium and especially the existence of digital image metalanguage, which offers the possibility of quantifiable analyse of images having in view their own medium (independent of natural language). Together with digitalisation, all forms of language are brought to a common denominator – natural language (text), visual one, audio-visual, this possibility being unprecedented. The fact that all types of digital

environments share the same digital code makes it possible the interaction and the simultaneous access through the same interface of different medium categories, which traditionally were separated. Coming down only to visual language, we must set out two main aspects:

- all images are brought to a numerical common denominator;

- digital space is profoundly visual (graphic interfaces).

The database was constituted as an important subject in this research, as in digital medium the archive becomes a database and in the same time the contemporary art becomes more and more interested in the digital archive. In this context we made mention of the possibilities of data visualization, of opposition between database and narrative (Lev Manovich) and last but not least of database aesthetics (Victoria Vesna), in the context where database becomes a cultural form, and patterns identification or connexion become a preoccupation of aesthetics (Sharon Daniel).

Keeping in view that major changes are produced at the level of languages and in the same time due to interest on image expression reported to their significance, we have performed several semiotic specifications, following the twelve theses belonging to Mihai Nadin referring to visual semiotics, more precisely to the sequential character in regard to that of image configuration. Mihai Nadin considers that logic of relationships should overcome the impasse semiotics is in and it can lead us to define the significance of the visual. Change of syntactic level of an image determines change in its semantic level. As mutual influence between the two levels is a complex one, we must be aware of the fact that image semantics does not derive from a certain syntactic structure, not being subsequent to it, as well as pragmatics does not derive from image semantic or syntax, but are simultaneously built and are mutually influenced.

Perception is a sequential one and also fragmented and it becomes norm in contemporary art, due to non-linear and non-configurational characteristic of the new communication model which influences artistic practices. Thus, they become multiple and profoundly heterogeneous, taking over the sequential character transmitted by the new language. Thus, image explosion is one of sequential character images, which supposes an ambiguous and unstable expression and significance. We consider that analyse from the point of view of image expression should help by delivery of clear marks of image language.

Due to the fact that the vast majority of digital images from the database submitted to this analyse were digitalised, and as initially they were realised in traditional mediums and the digitalisation process in a contemporaneous archiving process (performed at an enormous scale as norm of present society) we have approached the problem of conversion from old media into new ones (largely based upon the perspective of media archaeology formulated by Wolfgang Ernst).

Considering the afore mentioned phenomena, we can talk about a contemporary culture profoundly visual, which also signals transition from art history to visual culture (Hal Foster).

From the very title of the paper it is emphasized the interest for the contemporary artistic practices which keep in view the archives. Juxtaposition of images, serialisation, modules are characteristics to image archives. We desired to illustrate the way of work of artists in creating series of works, archives or their use as support in creating new works. Producing images in series is reinforced by photography apparition, which by its nature involves multiplication, but generally the obsession of an artist for a certain theme, subject, composition etc. leads to creating of series of works, not only to create an isolated artistic object. Nevertheless, serialisation becomes a preoccupation of artists even from the last century (Andy Warhol), being an influence of contact sheets and of photo booths. The principle of working with archives is reinforced by the technological medium, and the modularity principle or modular structure is specific to the Internet, especially to interfaces. Considering the fact that all the culture is received through interfaces, we wanted to emphasize the importance of their structure, insisting upon the code value through which cultural messages are transmitted. Structure creates significance, a fact valid both in archives and in interfaces which structures them. By these aspects we have tried to demonstrate the influence the new medium has on contemporary art (which also becomes an medium used by artists), establishing the influence of interfaces, the influence of the principle of Internet functioning and organisation and of commands or operations used in digital space.

If until now we have tried to determine the frame in which contemporary art preoccupation for archives develop, we have continued in the same chapter to demonstrate through examples of practices/artistic projects the predilection of contemporary artists for archives.

Contemporary artistic practices are diverse, but we wish to remind several of the approaching means of archives:

- use of archives as inspirational source;

- creation of art works as archive;

- creation of image archives which have the role to document art works (the most obvious is in the case of forms of ephemera alternative art, which after their production remain known for the public as photographical archives);

- use of existent archives as ready-made (which can include their reorganisation, rearrangement, restructuring, recontextualisation).

Nature of Internet and the large number of available images encourage the use of existent images, being unnecessary to create new original images; thus numerous contemporary artists choose to work with image archives on the ready-made principle, focusing on image selection, organisation and classification. At the same time, artists question semantic nature implications which lay at the base of archives, being aware of their structure importance.

In the **third chapter** of this paper we displayed the analyses which take into account the expression constants of created image archives. The analyse was performed on a database of 3.837 images selected on the principle of art archives, the database constituting as an archive of archives. The analyse supposed identification of grammatical constants of analysed images, which semantically are very different (it is about an eclectic archive, similar to Internet archive) and which covers a vast area if we take into consideration traditional classifications (time, authors, geographical space, techniques, theme, subject etc.). The analyse model has in view quantitative parameters which are visible through the identification of constants of geometric structure and numerical reports. Expressive analyse of image made with the help of software application includes:

- Low-image quantitative analyse performed on a number of about 70 reports;

- Geometric structure analyse of quantifiable constants of golden section and musical rhythms;

- Hierarchical and factorial classification according to the above mentioned elements;

- Evaluation of identification possibilities of expression and significance constants.

Quantitative analyses were performed on the entire database of 3.837 images, following to identify the multiple quantitative constants on image clusters, next to comparative

analyses between clusters. Also, we have performed analyses which consider the expression of images on a classification performed on authors (in a number of six), and finally getting to their comparative analyse.

On a group of 800 images we have performed quantitative analyses together with analyses of geometric structure. Identification of expressive constants at the level of analysed images demonstrates their interconnectivity and it is determined by the desire to search a pattern common to all images or the trial to get to an archetypal image. The existence of grammatical affinities of analysed images reminds us about the existence of a collective subconsciousness or the use by artists of representation stereotypes.

Even if the communication model is changed, we must point out that in the digital medium (for example web-designers) traditional representation schemes are deliberately used, the creators of interfaces being aware of the importance of visual language.

If within this chapter we have displayed the data of performed analyses next to visual exemplifications of image groups made up as a result of analyses, the **fourth chapter** comprises the conclusions of performed analyses and the proposal of research themes.

We consider that this type of analyse which keeps in view the expression of images is a novelty seeing the paper theme. It is not to be ignored the possibility to perform analyses which consider the grammatical nature of images on such a large number of images, which was not possible until now, working with *big data* being more and more intensely explored and increasingly more by artists.

We also consider that the importance of syntactic analyse of images is supported by the fact that one cannot create image beyond language, as language is the one that determines the coherence of message, the two being in an interdependency relation. As a consequence, when we consider the syntactic elements of the image, we implicitly consider its semantic nature.

The fact that there were identified constants of grammatical type of images within this database is significant for this research. The fact that despite semantic differences between images there are still syntactic affinities, demonstrates in a certain way the atemporality of artistic creations, images universality (having in view that analysed images belong to different period and geographical spaces). Artists cannot create beyond ingrained filters, beyond a language, beyond present representational schema, from where we consider that these syntactic constants appear in analysed images. Cultural filters are ingrained in

the collective subconsciousness, thus even if the artist did not propose to use certain schema, structures, reports, he unconsciously uses them.

We are the witnesses of *anomic* archive (Gerhard Richter) determined mostly by the abundance of information, which requires in an imperative way its organisation, triggering thus the actual undertaking of artists preoccupied by ordering, classification, organisation, more than ever. This paper proposes the classification and organization of image archives, a systematisation of large volume of visual information, being fully resonant with current practices. These ordering criteria of image archives depending on quantifiable syntactic affinities reduce speculative judgements specific to classical models of semantic interpretation of images.

This research can be considered as a departure and questioning point of above mentioned issues, which of course can be developed further on, this theme itself being a vast and complex one.

In the **fifth chapter** we have presented the personal undertaking which suppose both juxtaposition and superposition of image archives. We have proposed archiving, recording of images which are persistent in subjective projections. Aiming at transfiguration of memories, conditions, impressions, even oneiric projections as drawings, drafts, notations, films, photos and paintings.

All elements comprised by the archive articulate the unit as an ideal configuration. Thus it is created the juxtaposition and the superposition of a large number of projections.

All those who create series are aiming at performing a configuration, such as the case of artist couple Bernd and Hilla Becher, who through repetition wish to establish a configuration. All structuralist images once they are serialised they get configuration features. At the origins, the serialisation, conditional on a certain communication type, represents the incapacity of the artist to determine a configuration, this capacity being conditioned by external factors, such as communication model, technologies which facilitate image production etc.

We have proposed ourselves both the transfiguration of personal projections (images with sequential character) through a traditional language – painting (image with a configuration character) and the transfiguration through alternative artistic forms – video (sequential image).

Through superposition the image archive could be represented as a single image, having all the elements contained by the archive specifically superposed. If generally archives are constituted as modular form (where modules represent images), this time the archive is presented as a single image where all the images of the archive are superposed (all archive elements). This way the resulted image is as a sum of archive elements. Of course, this image is a new image different from the elements from which it is made up. The expression of superposed images appealed and inspired other images.

If in the case of option for image juxtaposition they are brought to the same level, being simultaneously presented in a certain order, in case of superposition distance between images is eliminated (distance which is still present in case of juxtaposition being created by this order of their exposure). Both image juxtapositions and superposition were inspirational and brought along new ideas, observations and interrogations.

At the same time, visualisation and analyse of such a large number of works on very different categories (authors, time, different space) shall have a positive influence on practical work in studio and we have used and shall use image archives for studio practice. An important point was the possibility of simultaneous visualisation of many divergent images, and also their clustering possibility depending on criteria of semantic nature, but this time also depending on syntactic criteria, which constituted a novelty. Visualisation of these clusters of images offers new directions which can be explored in personal artistic projects.

We consider that the used approach in this research study helped in aiming at new directions in personal artistic creation which we don't perceive yet as being used-up or ended.

This paper is accompanied by **annexes** which comprise the images from the database subject to analyses, of image clusters formed as a result of analyses, a table on centuries with the authors from the database, a digital table (due to its size) with the list of works in the database and numerical data of analyses on works, next to the illustrated legend of rectangle enclosure, golden section and musical rhythms.

KEYWORDS

Archive, digital archive, contemporary art, database, visualisation, analyse of expressive structures, repetition, structure, configuration, sequence, serialisation, modules, interface, cluster, quantitative analyse, analyse of geometric structures, syntactic analyses, juxtaposition, superposition, filtering, sorting, metadata, statistics, communication models, dematerialisation, libraries, museums, digital medium, organisation, order, technology, memory, digitalisation, archiving, language, Internet, personal memory, collective memory, history of art, visual culture, space, deposit, time, quantifiable analyse, pattern, image, digital image, metalanguage, common denominator, constants, digital space, classification, golden section, musical rhythms, similarities, axes, big data, ready made, culture, change, transfer, screen, reports, expression, significance, image grammar, virtual space

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