Drawing and the Invisible

Laura Marcolini

In recent years, the Italian word *disegno* has expanded its range of meaning, embracing the influences of the English term design and thus involving the whole semantic field related to project conception and to the definition of spatial, sound and even behavioral configurations. This shift dialogues spontaneously with the attitude that has accompanied Studio Azzurro since its foundation, even though, precisely for this fact, it may prove potentially insidious.

Forty years ago, three friends, who had already converged their experiences for some time, decided to make a film together, exploring the language of video. Their pre-vious experiences had been significantly linked to drawing: Paolo Rosa had published a few graphic novels in *Linus*, Leonardo Sangiorgi had dedicated himself to "one-step animations", both had trained at Artistic High Schools and then at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts; they were both excellent draftsmen, with a visionary inclination and a great ability to simulate space with a few strokes. Fabio Cirifino, instead, had trained as a photographer at Studio Ballo, coming into contact with architects and designers and absorbing an extraordinary mastery of the use of light. They were three people who imagined, who virtually drew, in their heads, every project they thought about.
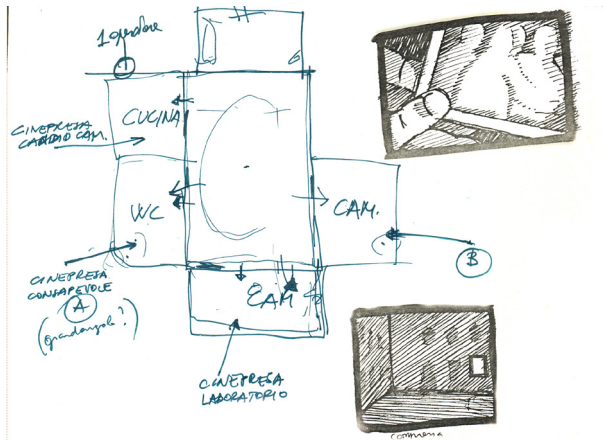
Fig. 1. Studio Azzurro, project drawing for the film Facce di festa, 16mm, 60 min., color, 1980.

Fig. 2. Studio Azzurro, Il nuotatore (va troppo spesso ad Heidelberg), video environment, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, 1984.

The film was preceded by a storyboard, by sketches and texts, and a rough diagram (fig. 1) of the position of a few fixed cameras (*Facce di festa,* film, 16mm, color, 1980). The place where it was filmed is quite particular: a private home where a party had been organized. That "parties were held every day", is true, but observed forty years later, the location appears decidedly programmatic. It was 1979, a moment of epochal passage recorded in an implacable and amused way on sets. In this work, several themes and attitudes that were to accompany the Studio for the next forty years were already consolidated.

On the one hand, by the intense planning that preceded each work, generated by a fruitful combination of study and free intuition, and on the other hand, by a tireless ability to adapt to the conditions encountered. The legacy of the previous experiences of contestation and metalanguage, carried out with a different group, the *Laboratorio di Comunicazione Militante* and with the first experiment in occupying an abandoned space (*La Fabbrica di Comunicazione* in the Church of San Carpoforo) supported both of these aspects and left its unmistakable mark in the ending of the film *Facce di festa*, in which considerations explicitly connected to the role of the artist/director/author and to the idea of collective work are ironically intertwined.

In the 1980s, Studio Azzurro took a different path, made a very decisive aesthetic turnabout, designed another pro-

ject for its research, and launched itself with determination towards a new consideration of space and of its dialogue with the 'spectator'.

Space, objects, light and moving images–albeit two-dimensional–are components of an environment in which the spectator can move, approach what he prefers, enter and exit the light, relate to a condition that resembles a theatrical staging in which the actor, and even the screenwriter, is the spectator himself.

It is no longer a matter of facing a predefined vision, managed *a priori* by a director, in which the spectator participates standing still, with his own emotional involvement, certainly, but without being able to put himself, in the least way, in a voluntary relationship with the proposed imagery. Instead, it is a matter of moving within a world, which works similarly to the outside world, but which tells unexpected stories, soliciting equally unexpected responses from our complex perceptual system.

The first were deceptions

The first video environments realized in the early 1980s (*Luci d'inganni, Tempi d'inganni*) are places to explore in which almost everything is familiar and recognizable, yet something is unsettling because it breaks the rules of the
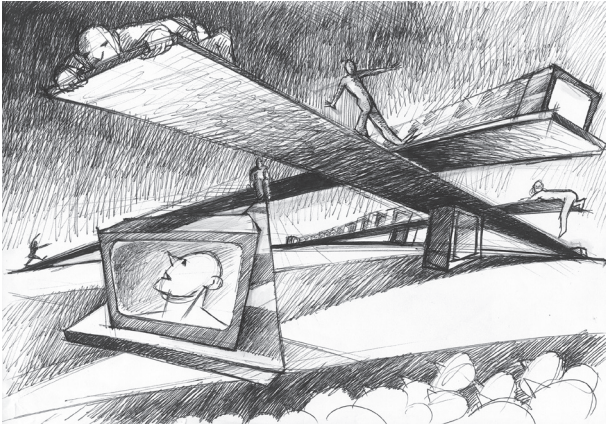
Fig. 3. Studio Azzurro, project drawing for the theatrical performance La Camera Astratta, *Documenta 8, Kassel, 1987.*

Fig. 4. Studio Azzurro, Vedute (quel tale non sta mai fermo), *video environment, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, 1985.*

relationships between the world of so-called reality and the world of electronic images. Often it is space and time that trigger a short circuit with images that appear inside the environment like subjects of an action set into a space and a time that the visitor is living inside, rather than outside, the world, as occurs in films. With *Il nuotatore (va troppo spesso ad Heidelberg)* (1984) the poetic gap becomes more evident, the environment is as plausible as it is impossible (fig. 2), its time is infinite and yet defined by the recognizability of human effort and of the unexpected. The aquatic light makes you hold your breath, and yet you can breathe, and if you move along the reconstructed swimming pool you see the swimmer also on the other side…

It is strange to think about these early works again, today, in the light of neuroscientific research, particularly Vittorio Gallese's most recent considerations on "embodied simulation" in relation to architectural space [Gallese 2017]. We now consider as being established concepts that were not then consolidated and that the Studio attempted to explore, disrupting the ways in which a work created using the language of video is planned. It is not a matter of objects, but of complex experiential systems set in a very plausible condition, which necessarily requires the active participation of the visitor.

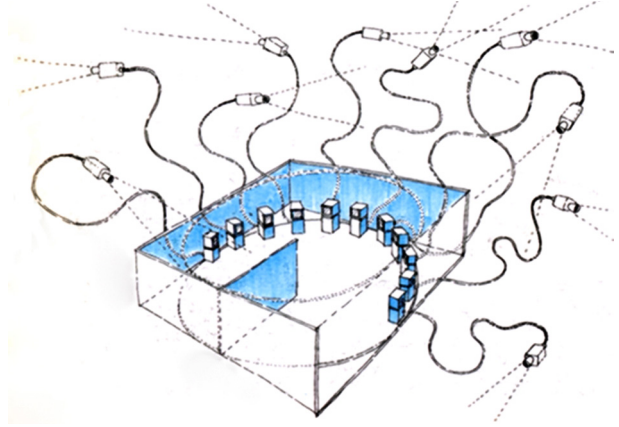Initially, this took place only in order to complete the exploration of space and its narrating subjects, but in the mid-1990s it became something much more disruptive, with the possibility of a significant and signifying, modifying action on the part of the visitor. As for planning, the design of the environments shifted from the amusing possibility of turning objects into narrative elements, to attention for the human gesture and for its potential relationship with the electronic image.

Before the opportunities opened up by technological interactivity, in the second half of the 1980s, research into this dimension became possible thanks to the constant collaboration with research theatre groups, and, in particular, with Giorgio Barberio Corsetti's '*Gaia Scienza*'. *Prologo a un diario segreto contraffatto* and *La Camera astratta* bring to the stage columns of stacked monitors presenting pre-recorded images and live images of the actors' bodies on a one-to-one scale… something otherwise impossible with the dimensional limits of a single monitor.

The medium of television–that unloads electromagnetic waves and moving images into family dining rooms and living rooms–is forced into a more complex design, and becomes the single element of a freer form, a piece of a mosaic in which the images regain a bit of the space reserved to visual works in the history of art.

Not only. In these two theatrical performances, the human figures presented in the columns of three superimposed monitors interact with the actors in flesh and bones, ac-

tively participating in the dramaturgy. It is precisely the drawing of the stage machinery (fig. 3) that makes the device evident: the arranged tracks and trolleys, transposition of the film cart, allow the actors to move the stacked monitors, or rather to move the images they contain. And a rocker arm, like a large seesaw, allows the monitors to move according to the weight exerted at a particular moment on the other side by the actor.

The text, which also stages a fragmentation similar to that of the body rendered electronically, is broken, alternating inner conversations with real dialogue, in a 'wild clarity' bordering on an explosion of speech. And the monitors tumble to the ground, making the cathode ray tube go wild, altering the behaviour of the electrons and with them the image that is generated. Behind the scenes, a complex set is prepared that trasmits live, in the monitors, actions moving back and forth from the scene for the audience to the hidden scene and vice versa. Thus, the invention of the 'double scene', which attempts to stretch the limits of what is visible for the audience.

Following this, between the collaborations with Barberio Corsetti and with Palazzo Fortuny (Venice), *Vedute, quel tale non sta mai fermo* (1985) permitted the investigation, in a visionary fashion, of the idea of the use of surveillance cameras and the narration of an imaginary story that (fig. 4) broke the hierarchy between live and recorded, reality and fiction, bringing the external space, the *calli* of Venice, and the imaginary space into the Palazzo. The most effective project drawing shows this operation as an organism combining architecture and technological innervations, with electronic, investigating eyes like hidden nerve endings, hidden, but focused on the world.

Returning to the invisible to find things again

Images pressed on the membrane of 'reality' from every side, they were everywhere, but imprisoned in the box of the monitor, in the frame of a photograph, in the borders of posters. And they were more and more realistic, more and more seductive in the lucid hedonistic magma of the late 1980s. Just like design objects.

It was at this very moment that Studio Azzurro began to capture a sort of 'lament of the images' and in 1990 created a theatrical performance with Moni Ovadia based on the prophetic text by Ghiannis Ritsos of 1961-1962, *Delphi*, about tourists who, in the archaeological site of Delphi,
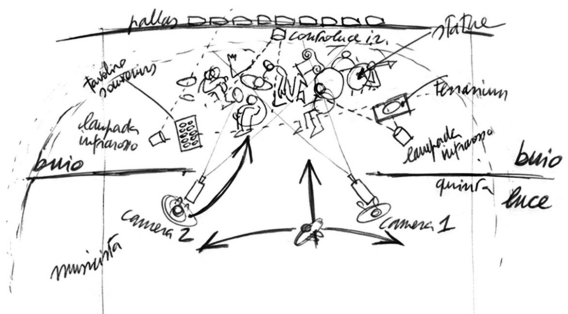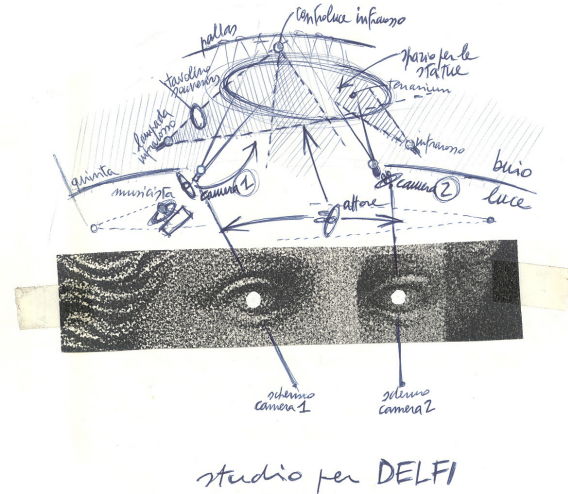

Fig. 5. Studio Azzurro, project drawings for the theatrical performance Delfi (studio per suono, voce, video e buio), *Festival Teatro 2, Parma, 1990. The statues' eyes become monitors and the study of the stage and of the positions of the hidden IR cameras.*
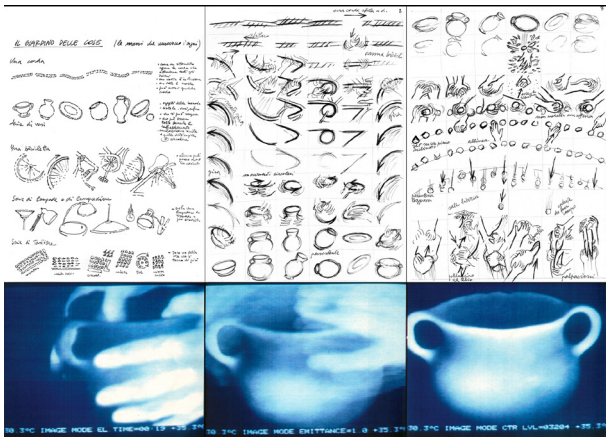
Fig. 6. Studio Azzurro, storyboard and detail of 3 monitors of Il Giardino delle cose, *video environment for infra-red images, Triennale, 13th International Exposition, Milan, 1992.*

Fig. 7. Studio Azzurro, Il viaggio, *video environment for X-ray images, Fondazione Mudima, Milan 1992.*

seat of the Oracle of Apollo, instead of observing, take pictures, taking photos on film. All they need to do is to point and click, without paying much attention, without the effort of making a drawing, which searches for and investigates forms. It recounts the generational passage between two tourist guides, and of a timeless time, where the statues alone are forced to continue observing, despite their millenary weariness. With respect to the text, at the time of the staging the tourists also captured images in movement, accumulating them in a growing distortion of the concept of memory. Something it would be necessary to deal with a few years later with the triumph of digital. In the project drawings for *Delfi (studio per suono, voce, video e buio)* there is a collage that centers expressively on the hollow eyes of the classical statues (fig. 5).

The stage is dark. From beginning to end. Two large monitors, huge eyes turned towards the spectators, and a few beams of light in which Moni Ovadia moves, seen and unseen. Two invisible operators film live, with infrared cameras, the plaster statues present on stage but hidden by the darkness. The shots appear, white and dazzling, in the two monitors. Only at the end, when the lights are turned on, do the spectators discover that they have had, right in front of their eyes, those same white objects, overloaded

with history, without being able to see them. They had only seen their electronic images. Exactly what was happening to them, more and more, every day.

Experimentation with the non-human gaze continued in two other works that marked the definitive passage to a new chapter in research. In both works the image loses its photorealistic fidelity and approaches the simplification of a mark, in one case, and the essentiality of drawing in the other. These results were obtained by using cameras that 'see' frequencies invisible to the human eye, as in the case of *Delphi*. In one of these two works, *Il Giardino delle Cose* (1992) (fig. 6), the storyboard is significant to the point of becoming a device for the visual representation of the space-time narration that was to take place in the eighteen synchronized monitors. It is a fundamental projectual device for planning the shootings and for realizing the video editing. The shots, realized with thermal cameras, detect the heat of hands as they touch a series of simple everyday objects. The gesture that traces the shape of the object, redefines its form through heat. It redesigns it, finds it again, as though appearing to the eye for the first time, out of the darkness. In reaction to the impending consumerism and overexposure of the images, the care for the simplest and most useful objects restores form and life to them.
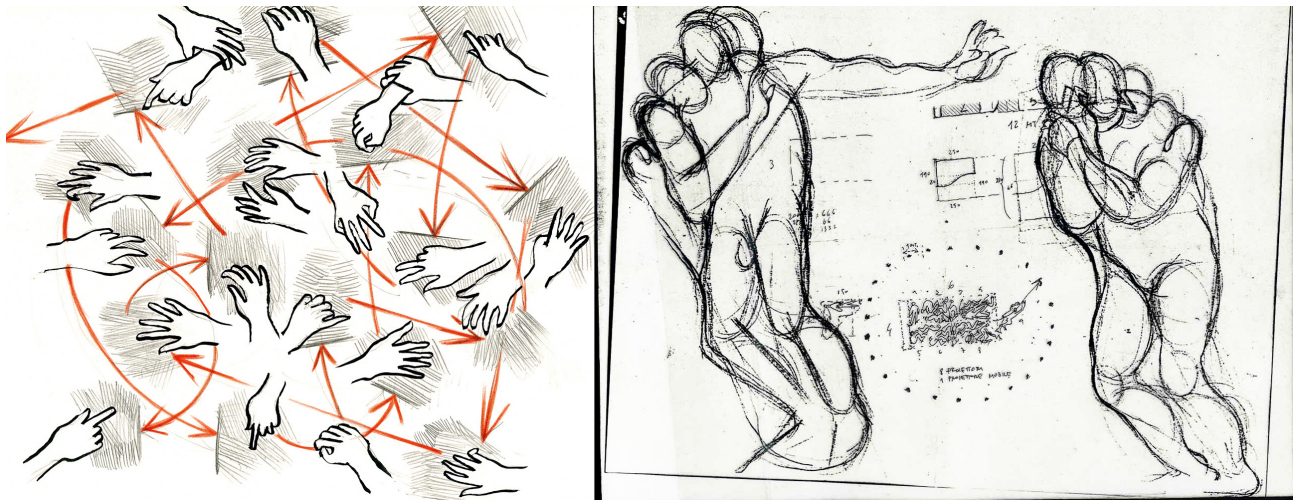
Fig. 8. Studio Azzurro, project drawing for Tavoli (perché queste mani mi toccano?) and Coro, the first two sensitive environments realized in 1995, respectively in Milan at the Triennale and in Turin at the Mole Antonelliana in 1995.

It is no coincidence that, in its edition most integrated with the environment, in Castellina in Chianti, *Il giardino delle cose* dialogued with a large mass of abandoned fragments of terracotta. The other work, *Il viaggio* (1992) (fig. 7), is the last video environment created by the Studio, a sort of affectionate farewell to the age of images in monitors. There are eight synchronized monitors in which X-ray images of suitcases, taken and then colored, flow across the screens. And one projection. The objects are perfectly recognizable but seem to come from a cargo of shared memory. They are almost like drawings deposited in those black boxes that accompanied us on our journey together in the first ten years of exploration with videos.

Images can be read

With the 1990s, the need to define a new path was felt. The idea of an environment designed for people in dialogue with moving images evolved precisely because those images could finally free themselves from the monitors, from their objective dimension, and their being in motion could involve space and whatever is present in it. Projections were in-troduced, and moving images could be deposited on any surface and at any height: even on glass, on a parachute, on sand, on salt, on the ground, on a ceiling, floating.

In 1995, this paradigm shift was joined by an even more disruptive one. The possibility for images to respond to the gestures and presence of people. It was a new world to invent. A world that would radically change the relationship not only with images but also with technology.

Three years of intense exploration followed. Video editing could be set anywhere in space and needed to be entirely rethought to make the viewer's involvement effective, but without losing the narrative potential, because the goal was still to tell stories, like in literature, like in cinema. But with the possibility of further amplifying the physical involvement of the spectator, of imagining synesthesias and sensory short-circuits allowing people to abandon their disbelief and follow the narrative, adding their own part of desire and creativity [1].

In this way, the need for fragmentation together with the organic nature of the project reappeared. This opened the fundamental theme–distinctive for Studio Azzurro–of collective interaction, because a new relationship with technology was already taking root, and it was a one-to-one relationship, pre-established in its canons by those who produced it.

The first interactive installations were a manifesto in defense of the choral nature of the interaction and of the possibility that an environment, if it is sensitive to a visitor's presence and gesture, can become an environment enhancing relationships between people and not just between people and machines [2].

Ultimately, it is a way to contrast 'behaviorial design', to divert it using the same instuments that carry that risk, manipulating them to allow man to not lose his natural sensitivity, to not lose the relationship with things, shapes and materials, with the correspondence between image, body and meaning.

Paradoxically, it is to make things and spaces become 'sensitive' so as not to expose technological man to the risk of forgetting that he is human, and therefore, sensitive.

Tavoli, perché queste mani mi toccano (1995), *Coro* (1995), *Totale della battaglia* (1996), *Il soffio sull'angelo (primo naufragio del pensiero)* (1997) were the first 'sensitive environments' [3], that is, created with projections that respond to the gestures of those who perform them: the touch of a hand on an ordinary wooden table, the trampling on the image of a body lying on the ground, asleep on a carpet (fig. 8), a breath on a feather, a call sent out to communicate with others in an ancient bastion… The natural interfaces [4] are the response to the new paradigm of the body in dialogue with machines and to the colonization of perception. The hand will always encounter a natural material, not an electronic appendix or a button, feet will step on carpets or sand, eyes will remain free to choose what to look at, the body will be able to move as it pleases within an enveloping environment, designed by light.

Light is another element in the design of an environment, which wrongly often goes unnoticed. From the first installation (*Luci d'inganni*, 1982), which staged design objects animated by haiku videos set in monitors, light, an element inherited from photographic sets, had an essential role in designing an environment where people feel like they are in a sort of dream. In this work the light hits mirrors and draws geometric spaces that re-trace the directions of a room immersed in a soft semi-darkness.

With projections, whose luminous intensity is less powerful than that of monitors, the environments become even more enveloping, the eye willingly gets used to the dim light and is guided by the presence of lights that underline a physical presence or a path. Thus the warm temperature of the light, in contrast with the bluer light of the projections, establishes a dialogue of great intensity with those who move in that space.
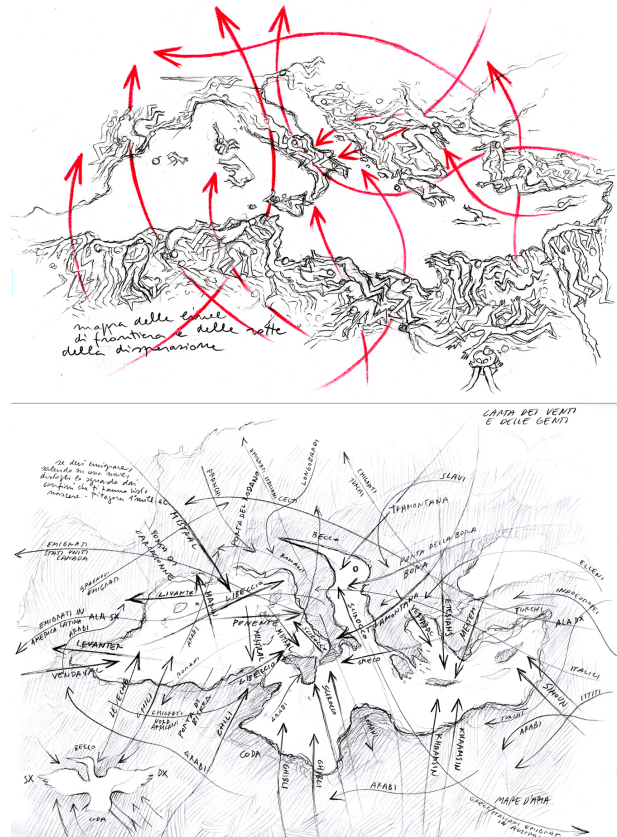

Fig. 9. Studio Azzurro, Meditazioni Mediterraneo, In viaggio attraverso cinque paesaggi instabili, *sensitive environment, Castel Sant'Elmo, Naples, 2002.*
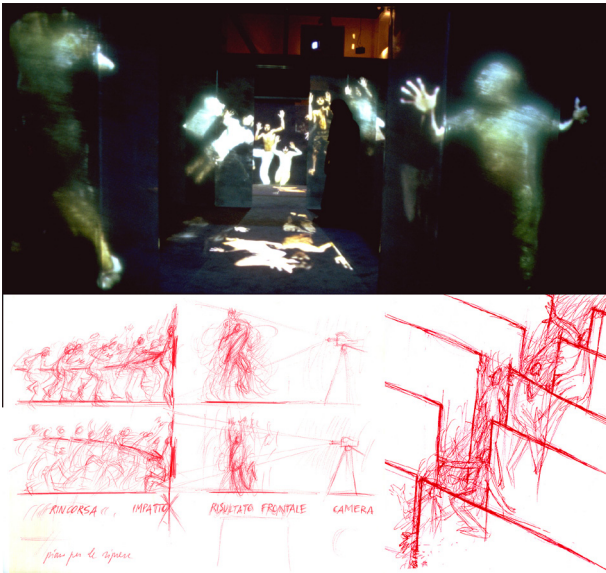
Fig. 10. *Studio Azzurro,* Dove va tutta 'sta gente*, sensitive environment, Vision Ruhr, Dortmund, 2000.*

The Mediterranean and memory

The 2000s marked a new step in Studio Azzurro's research and a return to cinema. With some unexpected commissions came the opportunity to deal with the outside world, not only to encounter and gather images for our stories, but also to collect stories for new images and for an evolution of the idea of the work. Precisely in the year 2000 an important proposal arrived and a parallel, autonomous work began, both about the Mediterranean Sea, with two approaches so apparently contrasting as to be complementary. On the one hand, *Meditazioni Mediterraneo* (2002), the work realized after having completed an almost complete circumnavigation of our sea to collect scenarios and craft traditions, touching on Italy, France, Greece, Libya and Morocco. Five installations dedicated to five unstable landscapes, threatened by strong anxieties whose outcome would be seen a few years later; five sumptuous landscapes full of natural and human history, five different interactive systems, designed for that specific content. A path that allowed everything that brings together, that unites the
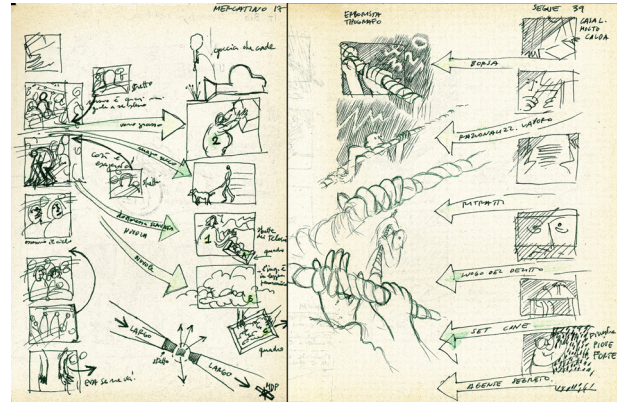

Fig. 11. *Studio Azzurro,* Il Mnemonista*, film, 35mm, color, 2000.*

countries bordering the Mediterranean, to emerge clearly. On the other hand, *Dove va tutta 'sta gente* (2000), a single large installation that exhibited, in the heart of Europe, in Dortmund, the emerging phenomenon of the first migrations from Albania. A metaphorical work, anything but documentary, realized in our studio, staged without a background, like a universal phenomenon belonging to the whole human race, and that tells, in a different way, what was beginning to be seen in the news. Transparent, interactive sliding doors against which half-naked, defenceless bodies threw themselves, trying to cross this invisible border. When the doors open for the passage of a visitor, the bodies fall to the ground, unable to cross that threshold.
In the year 2000, a film was also realized, entitled *Il Mnemonista*, which drew inspiration from Alexander Luria's book on the clinical case of 'S.' (Solomon Shereshevsky), to narrate the theme of memory, which began to provoke reflection with the enormous accumulation of data of the digital era. In all these works the component investigated and defined by drawing proved very important and is visually very significant because it reveals the function of drawing with respect to the design process. In the case of *Meditazioni Mediterraneo* it gives shape to the conceptual dimension: two visionary maps (fig. 9) transform the Mediterranean into a large bird carried by the winds, and into an uncertain coastline defined only by clusters of human bodies clinging on desperately; the cartouches with the poetic syntagma for each country, the representations linked to the material

Fig. 12. Studio Azzurro, Sensitive City, *Italian Pavillion at the Universal Exposition in Shanghai, 2010.*
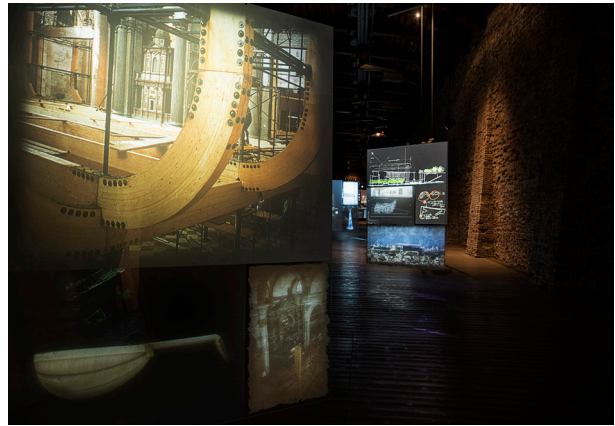

Fig. 13. Studio Azzurro, Renzo Piano. Progetti d'acqua, *video environment and sound, Magazzino del Sale, Fondazione Emilio e Annabianca Vedova, Venice, 2018.*

selected for each chosen place, such as salt for Greece, fire for the Phlegraean Fields, wind for Libya, weaving for Morocco, perfumes for Provence… (fig. 9).

In the case of *Dove va tutta 'sta gente*, instead, the drawing (fig. 10)–with its very tormented strokes–clearly shows the scenes imagined for the installation (fig. 10). It is no coincidence that the drawings are done with red ink, compressed into almost claustrophobic spaces, with swirling lines forming the volumes. Looking at them, you already see the installation, from points of view that are impossible for the human eye and very important for the project.

In the case of *Il Mnemonista*, the film, Paolo Rosa kept a workbook in which it is possible to see the development of the thought that generated the film, the writing of a storyboard (fig. 11) done with a very personal technique that expands in the pages, taking on free forms, and finally, it is also possible to find iconographic references, and even stylistic ones that intentionally recall the great Russians contemporary with Luria.

Fuori di sé

The experience of the encounter triggered by works related to the territory was consolidated in the 2000s and found an ideal dimension in a series of works that we have called *Portatori di Storie* ('Story-carriers'). They are complex

sensitive environments, in which people appear projected at a slightly larger-than-life size, walking or facing the space while waiting for attention. If they don't receive any, they leave. If, on the other hand, visitors touch the figures and hold them in place with their gestures, they notice, pause, turn and begin to tell their stories. The gesture is very simple, like stopping a person to greet them by placing your hand on their arm or shoulder. They tell the story of places dear to them, reconstruct itineraries, remap a territory according to their own personal experiences, according to the memory of oral stories. *Sensitive City* was the most impressive project realized with this format, a large installation for the Shanghai Expo, dedicated to the livable Italian cities, small realities that preserve a shared history and strong traditions despite tourism and technological advancement. In this work the people encountered were asked to tell a story and then draw it by hand. All these traces reappear in the stratification of the projections, together with the scenarios, to redefine an imaginary world shared with anyone who accesses the installation (fig. 12). The development we are working on for this format would offer the possibility for visitors to leave new testimonies, new traces that will remain together with those we have gathered. We realized an anticipation of this possibility in *Patine e accumuli* (2015) an environment totally without images until

someone visited it leaving their trace. It is one of the next objectives involving a further regression of the role of the director, who would definitely limit himself to creating the conditions for something to happen, that is freely generated by people around a theme, an object, a subject presented. After all, what we are trying to find and recreate in an environment is that ritual dimension shared through the artistic expression that man has been looking for and pursuing since he first conceived symbolic thought. A thought that was developed, first of all, through drawing.

That's why it was easy to work with this analogy in a recent project, which had drawing as its subject. In 2018 we were asked to tell the story of sixteen of Renzo Piano's projects and to present them in the wonderful spaces of the Magazzino del Sale of the Fondazione Vedova, in Venice. The result was a staging (fig. 13) for this evocative place, which resembles the bridge of a ship, a theater, the belly of a whale… a sequence of eight screens with different degrees of transparency, which held mainly line images, digitizations of original, partially animated drawings and 3D models, and which 'swam' in a mobile sound environment. A case in which interaction was triggered by the environment itself without any need for forms of technological interactivity. A demonstration of how a powerful space can suggest solutions that free us from technological superstructures by immersing us in an environment so saturated with narration that it asks only to be explored.

Notes

[1] Samuel Coleridge masterfully expressed this concept in relation to literature in 1817, calling it "that willing suspension of disbelief" [Coleridge 1817].

[2] Paolo Rosa, in his notes, later merged into *L'arte fuori di sé, un manifesto per l'età post tecnologica*, stated "We have come to say that the work that is being constructed is no longer the thing that is presented, but the one which is constituted in the moment it creates a profound and effective relationship with an interlocutor. That is when the work is constructed. The work is not what I propose. It is what results from this moment of interaction" [Balzola, Rosa 2011].

[3] 'Sensitive environment' is the definition used by Studio Azzurro to indicate environments in which technological interactivity is present, but in which its presence is not immediately perceptible rationally. It is the images, surfaces and objects that react, not sensors.

[4] 'Natural interfaces' is the expression used by Studio Azzurro to indicate forms of technological interaction that do not pass through graphic interfaces, but through the development of sensors that make it possible to completely hide the presence of devices that make everyday surfaces such as wood, metal, sand, fabric etc., 'sensitive', that is, interactive.

Credits

Photographs Studio Azzurro; Drawings Paolo Rosa (Studio Azzurro)

Author

Laura Marcolini, Studio Azzurro, lauradelvuoto@studioazzurro.com

Reference list

Balzola, A., Rosa, P. (2011). *L'arte fuori di sé, un manifesto per l'età post tecnologica*. Milano: Feltrinelli.

Coleridge, S. (1817). *Biographia literaria*. London: Rest Fenner.

Gallese, V. (2017). *Human Perception & the Built Environment. The Role that Mirror Mechanisms and Embodied Simulation Play in the Perception of the Built Environment*. Vittorio Gallese interviewed by Sarah Robinson in occasion of Driehaus Foundation Built Environment Symposium, <https://youtu.be/us8mMKUi1cc>, (accessed 2019, May 10). The transcription in italian of the interview is at <https://www.academia.edu/37134702/Intervista_su_Architettura_e_Neuroscienze_con_Sarah_Robinson> (accessed 2019, May 10).