

Culture & Urban Stories: The Photography Between Cities and Europe. A Sociosemiotics Approach to the European Photography Reggio Emilia 2007

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The *European Photography*, held in Reggio Emilia (Italy) from April to June, displays the work of European artists. Photography meets the city, its people, and its culture. The theme of 2007, *Cities/Europe*, has a wider scope than last year's *The City*.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the discourse strategy that underlies the planning and definition of this event with a sociosemiotics approach. Both the text explaining the purpose of the Week and the texts, written or visual, by the artists build up together the meaning of the event itself and constitute a social and cultural reality. In this way photography becomes central to the cultural policy of the Reggio Emilia Municipality, targeting the belonging to Europe.

It helps understand the core of European identity, defined by social and cultural differences, and the interconnected experiences which the photographic discourse refers to and makes intelligible.

Introduction

The event *European Photography*, held from May to June in Reggio Emilia (Italy), displays the work of European artists. The exhibitions are set in important old buildings, some of them not even open to people usually, like a church in restoration or the ex psychiatric hospital. At the same time, café, art galleries, clubs of photographers have been induced to mount their own exhibition. Furthermore, several concerts, meetings, and presentations of similar European projects, have been scheduled. The theme of 2007, *Cities/Europe*, has a wider scope than last year's *Urban Stories*. Six photographers have been invited to give their visual interpretation of cities to create an image of Europe:

The first thing we have asked the photographers was that they should feel free to present us with the view of the kind of cities that could bear witness to this feeling of boundary, where the transparency, the overlapping and the opacity could be revealed, through which we might we might imagine a Europe that is fading away while at the same time it is being born again, new and different (Grazioli – Panattoni 2007: 6).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze with a sociosemiotics approach the discourse strategy that underlies the planning and the definition of this event¹. By discourse, we mean: a) considering the photos realized, their configuration according to Floch (1986); b) considering the event, the global discourse that underlies the project of communication of the event itself. In our opinion, both the text explaining the purpose of the event and the texts, written or visual, by the artists would build up together the meaning of the event itself.² We will focus on this inter textual relation.

Nevertheless, it is not clear what implies the focus of the event, which is Europe:

Although by now the meaning of the world “Europe” would appear to have been fully assimilated, every time the underlying concept is discussed one has a hard time understanding what is actually describes. It describes a unity, an uniformity, but it also would seem to be telling us that there is much that still need to be unearthed (Grazioli – Panattoni 2007: 6).

The photographic language has been individuated as a medium to research on this issue. In this view, photography should be helpful to grasp the core of the European identity, composed by social and cultural differences, by interconnected experiences, which it refers to and makes intelligible.

The problem we have decided to face belongs to two levels: a) considering that the event is the main project of the cultural policy of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, what emerges is a strategy oriented to foster a certain idea of Europe that starts from a new semantic investment of the city spaces; b) considering that the photography is identified as the central

1 This paper represents the first step of a research still going on for the Municipality of Reggio Emilia. The project of research will end with a publication of an in-depth report which this paper has largely contributed to. We would like to thanks professor Alvaro Pina who has organized the session *Eu-Euro-Europe: Where is European Photography?* and all the participants to the session. We would like to thanks ACSIS for *Inter: An European Cultural Studies in Sweden*. We would like also thanks the Municipality of Reggio Emilia for the cooperation.

2 In this perspective, we would like to precise that we will use variously the term photography, that for us has a general meaning (language, medium), as much as the terms photograph, photo, image, considered as sign or visual text. Floch recognizes an indefiniteness of the study of photography or photograph, meant as language, or medium, or sign without any distinction (cf. Floch 1986). Our case study, the event *European Photography*, implies a wide point of view that integrates all conception of photography/photograph to be well analyzed (cf. “proposal of deliberation”).

medium which can carry on a discussion about European identity, it is interesting to question the reasons why the photography itself has been chosen to build a discourse about Europe. Though on one side the fact that photography remains peripheral to cultural institutions, vestigial in analyses of Europe, dispersed in the interstices of media and scientific discourses, is balanced by the project *European Photography*, on the other side a new issue comes out, regarding the nature of photography: “What do we see when we think of Europe? What can be revealed through the images produced by a vision, such as the photographic one? Can photography show us something so intangible as an idea still in embryonic form?” (Grazioli – Panattoni 2007: 6)³. This is what we would like to probe in the following analysis.

The corpus of analysis we are going to consider is composed by: 1) the official documents of public domain as the “proposal of resolution”, that is the document explaining the project approved by the Municipality, and texts of introduction of the event presented in the catalogue *European Photography Reggio Emilia 2007*; 2) the images, with the respective paratexts (Genette 1987), realised by the photographers invited in the section *Cities/Europe*: Marina Ballo Charmet, Jean-Louis Garnell, Cezary Bodzianowski, Aino Kannisto, Armin Linke, Klavdji Sluban. We will not consider each picture and paratext, but the series of pictures on the whole, pointing out how a text could make sense as regards the discourse it subsumes. Our look on the photos will be general and we will concentrate on the similarities among them in spite of the variety of solutions displayed by the artist. We will privilege the analysis of the discourse strategy of the event and the role given to photography.

In the first paragraph, we are dealing with the discourse strategy of the event which is revealed by the laying out set by the Municipality, posing attention on the role assigned to the imagination by the mass-media (cf. Appadurai 1996), so by the photography (cf. Eco 1985), and on the definition of an European culture.

In the second paragraph, we are dealing with photography as a text that refers to a discourse about Europe, being within an exhibition context dedicated to European cities. We will also briefly trace the profile of the semiotics debate on photographic image, on one hand meant as ontologized and undiscussable, on the other constituted by the interpretive saliences of the forms that are inscribed in the image itself⁴. However that may be, our main interest remains the way by which pictures displayed at the exhibition, with their different gazes and different aesthetic solutions, have been used to build a discourse about Europe. In this way, the interpretation of pictures is oriented towards the comprehension of an European identity and their semantic potentiality is found as improved (cf. Violi 1997). An original point of view on Europe should rely on the recorded whole of all the knowledge, beliefs, interpretations, distillate of texts, namely the concept of *Encyclopaedia* (Eco 1984), in the sense that it would activate new connections, within the limits of the text, given by the image, so far not probed.

Europe, Photography, Cities: the Lines of a Strategy

In the beginning, just let us motivating the choice of a semiotics perspectives. The project of semiotics is to bring the *signification* to the core of the cultural processes, eluding in this way the claim for an ontological foundation of cognition and experience (Dondero 2006: 110). For *signification*, semiotics assume a process depending on matters of the world and on interpretations of subjects. It is a social phenomena connected to cultural systems in which people live, speak and interpret.

European cities are the point of view from where it is possible to start looking to Europe. The photography, so placed in between, potentially becomes a way to negotiate the sense of

3 This has been the theme of the session *Eu-Euro-Europe: Where is European Photography?* within the program of Inter: An European Cultural Studies Conference in Sweden (Norrköping, June 11-13 2007).

4 For an overall view on the theories, cf. Scalabroni 2003, Dondero 2006.

the world, to negotiate a vision of Europe, to recognize a possible European identity, composed by interconnected social and cultural differences.

This remark fits with the purposes of the project *European Photography* as explained in the “proposal of resolution” and the catalogue. For methodological reasons we will focus on the photos and will not investigate other features of the event (i.e. concerts, live performances, etc.), though they are indicative of its profile and they are revealing of the project planned and realized by the Municipality of Reggio Emilia.

The Theme of Europe

Now we examine some passages from the “proposal of resolution”, where the theme of Europe is expressed clearly in.⁵

...By the language of photography and art, the project aims to trigger a reflection about our city: places, identities, needs, expectations, plans, emphasizing the centrality of culture in strategic planning policies...

...The aims is getting in touch more closely with the resources and the expectations of the community, sharing the city planning with people, not only with technicians...

...The identity of the city is the frame which our project is introduced within. It would aim to be a relevant cultural event, able to cast Reggio Emilia beyond the local borders...

Photography would become protagonist and visible in a sensitive context that increases its capacity to carry out a discourse about a predetermined theme. What is recognized as deeply-rooted in photography is its being able to see and its efficacy. Also from the point of view of some Italian sociosemiotics research, according to Marrone (2001: XXXV) and Sedda (2004: 9), photography, as the language, could not be considered as pure representation of the external world, as well as communication is not simple transmission of information. The potentiality of photography would be grasped as openness of possibilities, experimentation of ways of being or giving that the photograph as text partly realized and partly proposes. The Municipality has wanted to catch the possible social role of photography, stating that the whole city should be somehow involved in the event. Let's read again from the “proposal of resolution”:

...The project *European Photography* aims to compare urban visions which should be different, but surprising for their similarity or proximity because of the differences themselves, offering a comprehensive view of what already belongs us...

...It is proposed as an inquiry by photography on what we think as essential for our time. In the age of disorientation, when places lose their meanings, this inquiry regards the relation between people and the places they live, marked by the multiplicity of landscapes: this relation shapes our being in the world...

Investigating by photography our being in the world seems to recall the social semiotics object of study as pointed out by Eric Landowski (1989), that is observing the ways which social communities give rules to themselves and become spectacle of themselves.

European Photography has been planned as a cultural event that arranges the possibility to build up a discourse about Europe. It seems the suggestion of James Clifford (1997), elaborated in ethnographic research, had been followed: Clifford conceives culture as relational, temporary, in unceasing transformation; for him representation as much as

⁵ The original “proposal of deliberation” is written in Italian. Here, we propose our own translation.

explanation or interpretation stays in this process of variation. *European Photography* connects together different concepts of photography, different perspectives, offering a multitude of points of view kept together in a single heterogeneous gaze.

About the idea of heterogeneity, it should be appropriate to mention what Russians formalists (cf. Todorov 1965) meant with culture, a conglomeration of differential and dynamic systems, typified by internal opposition and unceasing sliding (Hermans 1985: 11; cf. Dusi 2003: 25). The Lotman's concept of *semiosphere* comes from here. It is considered as the general whole of culture compared to the biosphere, the whole of the interactive living organisms (cf. Lotman 1985). According to Lotman, there would be cultural subsystems that modify and organize themselves both coexisting separately and meeting each other. The semiotic space is considered as a place of clash among senses that fluctuate between a complete equation or divergence. That is why Lotman sees the *semiosphere* as heterogeneous. This process permits to create a reciprocal and dynamic tension among different entities that produces new courses of sense, new information (cf. Pezzini 2004b). It is so possible to say that in the terms of Lotman's *semiosphere* we can draw Europe as an union of cultural differences.

Thus, the event *European Photography* enhances the belonging to Europe. It compares different diversities, languages and memories which are not shared. In this sense, the value of communication would reside in what make itself harder: translating what seems to be not translatable generates new culture (cf. Dusi 2000; Fabbri 2003). Let's read from the catalogue.

...Europe, as it turns out, like anyone else, lives a paradox of something that still is becoming and at the same time embodies something which, undoubtedly, has already been. This is why to some extent it has to sink beyond itself, to lose its original vocation, to revoke itself from itself in order to find what it is still in the process of becoming... (Grazioli – Panattoni 2007: 7)

...One of the most recognisable features of Europe is what is termed as its multicentricity and multipolarity, a complexity built up around many centres, that act as poles of attraction and interrelation, a variety, a constellation in which for centuries its cities have been stars. Fragmented into hundreds of regions each with the most diverse characteristics, each of which has found ways of building its own culture and history, Europe has always experienced this particular trait as both problematic and potentially rewarding...(Grazioli 2007: 13)

The writer John Berger once said in *Another Way of Telling*: “The look of the world, carried by photography, proposes and confirms our relations to the thereness of the world, which nourishes our sense of being” (Berger 1995: 88). This choice to represent Europe implies a certain idea of Europe: “The world photos reveal becomes tractable” (*ibidem*: 209). European identity is defined by plural and different framings. It seems that the variety of photography may be able to grasp the fact that Europe is still in a planning stage despite it got its name 25 centuries ago, since Middle Age, as the historian Jacques Le Goff said. Le Goff affirms that the long length of Europe is a dialectic between an effort to cohesiveness, unity, and the preservation of diversity (Le Goff 1994: 3). The variability of solutions that photography offers representing Europe explicates somehow the difficulty to single out an absolute objectivity of what Europe is.

The Choice of Photography

We would like to start this paragraph with some passages from the catalogue where the relation between Europe and photography is explained:

...The photographic outlook today is experiencing a variety of forms and results that represents a vast wealth for anyone who is intent on understanding, rather than defending their little space...(Grazioli – Panattoni 2007: 7)

...The categories, as in the search for a European identity, run the risk of dulling the identity of our own photographic vision, all the more precious seeing as it is ours: it is our vision. No art, non medium, as the saying goes, highlights this subtlety as much as photography, with its capacity to trigger within us both the sense of reality as well as the subjective sense of vision, without compressing the latter within the confines of the basic view, but opening it to the conceptual workings of the mind, be it intellectually or through the imagination, and without limiting the former aspect through a legitimate, yet often reductive, yearning for tangible reality...(ibidem)

As we have pointed out before, the project of semiotics is to bring the *signification* to the core of the cultural processes. This suggestion matches and is derived from the position of Umberto Eco, who considers a photograph as an *index* of something which was *there* and photography as a semiotic phenomena that creates sense for the reason why the impression or illusion of reference, given by the fixed framing, flakes off in the interplay of contents, of interpretations (Eco 1985: 34; 1997: 328). As photography in this event is considered as language, medium, sign, visual text for a cultural reflection about the idea of Europe, the idea of Europe itself fades away and arise again in a multiplicity of objective lens and perspectives. It could not be considered as ontologically founded, but build up by cognitions and experiences arranged in connection. “The photograph begs for an interpretation” (Berger 1995: 92). *European Photography* is meant as an opportunity to negotiate cultures, to negotiate the meaning of Europe through photographs. Reflecting on the concept of *Encyclopaedia*, Eco asserts that meanings, as contents, are identifiable, even if they rise and fall, coagulate and wrinkle (cf. Eco 1997: 238, 409; Bruner 1990: 13). Both photography and Europe are conceived as negotiable, produced and interpreted by preferential points of view.

European Photography assumes three competent observers: the Municipality that sets up the event, the photographer with his or her gaze, the people with their interpretation. So, the event lets see and lets be a certain Europe through different point of view⁶. Our interest is to establish how it is given us the possibility to see Europe through photography. We have decided to focus on the strategy of the Municipality and the photos realized. The meaning of Europe is negotiated through the interpretive work on images. We could mean this process as a socialization of the image: the production of a discourse presuppose a public (cf. Landowski 1989).

At this point, it is important to consider from a sociosemiotics perspective the concept of *relation*: on one hand, it is helpful to consider the Peirce’s concept of sign reference (cf. Eco 1975); on the other hand, it is helpful how Saussure posed the problem of the meaning of *signification* as relation of values determined together (cf. Greimas-Courtés 1979). The *signification* so does not reside on the things, but on their relation, on the process of their shaping (cf. Landowski 1989). But, if we want to speak about a socialization of the image, it may be even more interesting referring to Eco. The *signification* is given each time something materially present to one’s perception refers to something else (Eco 1975). Photography is put into the core of *signification*, exposed to the semiotics analysis as semiotics faces up to common objects insofar as they participate to the semiosis (ibidem). In this paper, photography is meant as a common object participating to the observation and interpretation

6 Here we briefly refer to the perspective of Generative Semiotics, with its theory of modality and the concept of actant (cf. Greimas-Courtés 1979; Greimas 1984a). The event *European Photography* develops a global modal competence and displays Municipality, artists and public as actants of a complex discourse on European identities and borders.

of Europe. It helps understand the core of European identity, defined by social and cultural differences, and the interconnected experiences which the photographic discourse with its variable perspective refers to. Could you know more about Europe now? The event aims to open a permanent inquiry on Europe and to appreciate the expressive capacity of photography.

The Focus on the Cities

Europe is represented as many faced through different interpretations, different ideas of what photography is. As we said, these heterogeneity accounts for the planning stage of Europe. The key where the inquiry of *European Photography* starts from is the city, seen as a borderland. The concept of border reminds the Lotman's theory of *semiosphere* (cf. 1.1). The cities are the preferential place where the cultures are negotiated, clash or meet together. Let's start from the passages of the "proposal of resolution":

...The topic of the border, of the bound, is meant not only in a geographical sense, but also social, psychological, cultural, with the intent to privilege photography as art and cognitive experience that quests for the reality and widens its look to the complexity of places, anthropological or geographical, moving from their possible images...

The document explains that one of the goals of the event is to find identities that are interwoven in the facet of cities. The mayor of Reggio Emilia considers today the cities as "labs in which a new Europe is being created through the cross-fertilisation introduced by diversity, tradition, behaviour, gesture" (Grazioli, Panattoni 2007: 4). Several images mechanically produced has been available for one's own imagination and life. The places on the border become our cities, the people they live in them, and the photography. We quote now from the "catalogue":

...While electronic and virtual flows bypass any difference and connect everything in one single global network, cities are still the place where reality urges, relationships get entangled, obstacles slacken the rhythm...(Grazioli, Panattoni 2007: 6)

In our opinion, it is possible to question this dualism that places the real city and the electronic flows on two different levels. Bruno Latour (cf. 1996, 2001), who has contributed to develop the *action/network theory*, would challenge the opposition between real and imaginary: in his point of view, electronic flows and networks are (among others) what let being the city in its concrete and real materiality, as infrastructures, technological mediators. Photography is placed in this process.

...Though Europe and all its cities have been a geographical reality for a long time, this particular historical moment challenges it to make a effort of imagination helping it to find and finally gain its own unity and identity. Cities are the perfect laboratories of this Europe under construction. In the cities, individuals, cultures, habits, attitudes, gestures and signs are well mixed together; contacts have been set for a long time and people as well as objects have already come together. We have to change the way we look to understand Europe through its cities... (Grazioli – Panattoni 2007: 7)

...We need to find a fresh look to reduce the dullness of reality, a glance capable of deeply understanding the cities we are living in. We have to go beyond any pre-constituted European identity and find out that very feature common to all our open cities that can be reached by those who really want to know them....(*ibidem*)

...The first thing we have asked the photographers who have been invited to produce images for the occasion was that they should feel free to present us with a view of the

kind of cities that could bear witness to this feeling of boundary, where the transparency, the overlapping and the opacity could be revealed, through which we might imagine a Europe or at least catch a glimpse of a Europe that is fading away while at the same time it is being born again, new and different. In the belief that photography plays a fundamental role in this context, embodying this outlook like no other art can hope to do today, we expect that it should manage to convey this in all its breadth... (*ibidem*)

We can outline three different issues: where is Europe moving towards? How does photography build up an effect of sense and account for a possible reality? Where is the process of *signification* placed and which are the pre-arranged goals? We should recognize that these issues converge together. Europe is oriented also by our interpretive attitude, by our look, by the relevance we give to the images. *European Photography* is based on a cultural strategy which gives the images the role to guide a reflection on European arrangement of identities.

Cultural Studies considers mass-media, and thus photography, part of the general tissue of experience (cf. Silverstone 1999). "Images can help us in imagining or understanding a new Europe leaving its old boundaries behind and reviving new and different" (Grazioli – Panattoni 2007: 7). We would like to introduce here the concept of *mediascape* theorized by Appadurai in *Modernity at Large* (1996). The term *mediascape* means a whole of accounts based on images, possible narration of reality. It is also possible to shape scripts of imagined lives of someone else that is living somewhere else. Imagination is considered here as a social practice that designs a scape made of collective representations. We assume that this scape could be filtered by photography. At this point, it is central to wonder where we could find *European photography* and what is the role every culture, society, group reserve for images.

...In what is commonly termed the age of globalization we are deeply aware of how highly unlikely it is to establish boundaries that may correspond to simple limitations of geographical or geopolitical space, the permanent shifts of the multitudes cause unstoppable flux and turn cities into throbbing places that are totally imbued with this rhythm... (Grazioli – Panattoni 2007: 9)

Photography fixes cities and people in a framing and exposes them to the interplay of interpretation. As Viviana Gravano has suggested in a book called *Crossing*: photography seems to undergo something like the crossing of the cities, both of them preferential places of passage, transit, cultural crossing.

Challenging Photography: the Section Cities/Europe

In this paragraph we focus on the exhibition context. Our interest to analyse the discourse strategy of the event *European Photography* aims to verify how such a project makes photography becoming a collective property. Photography has been selected to be the core of a cultural project. The result of the event is a marked heterogeneity. John Berger has well described the process of cultural construction implied by photography:

The photographer chooses the event he photographs. This choice can be thought of as a cultural construction, that implies the rejection of what hasn't been chosen to be photographed. The construction is the reading of the event. Otherwise, the image of the event is a cultural construction, as it belongs to a specific social situation (Berger 1995: 92).

Any photographer invited at the event has faced the theme of Europe, picking up scene, stories, feelings to shot.

...Europe is not just the object of our discussion but also the vantage point for our observations, while at the same time representing our objective, the purpose of our inquiry. We see inside it and from within it, while at the same time it is our exterior, because it is not just what we identify ourselves in, but also where our prospects lie, in terms of our future...(Grazioli 2007: 13)

The variability of solutions which Europe is represented through singles out the multitude of images potentially makable and the difficulty to find an absolute objectivity. Quoting from an essay by Chamboredon, in Bourdieu's *The Social Use of Photography* (1965), the French Hungarian photographer Brassai, once speaking at the *Semaine pour l'image dans la société industrielle*, said: "Where to find the absolute objectivity? Even the most important scientists do not find it. De Broglie noticed that the simple act of seeing modifies a phenomena". The photo is the result of a selection that fixes a feature of the reality; it is certainly a transcription of the reality, but oriented, opened to the interpretive activity (cf. Bourdieu 1965; Floch 1986).

We want to start looking into the photos of the section *Cities/Europe* quoting from the catalogue: "The inner differences between photographers is in fact part of the difference at play in the search for signs in the cities and of the European identity that has yet to be formed" (Grazioli, Panattoni 2007: 8). In this way, the semantic potentiality (cf. Violi 1997) of the images would be increased, being devoted to a representation of Europe. Thus, an original gaze on Europe would be connected to the whole of recorded interpretations, what Umberto Eco calls *Encyclopaedia* (Eco 1984), activating connections unexplored, but still within the textual limits given by the image. The photo should be considered not only self-sufficient. The information the medium carries out seems to be in this way not complete, but fragmented; it has to be rearranged (cf. Eco 1979; Fabbri 2003). Therefore, we mean photograph in the terms of Eco (1975) as a complex visual text that allows to start a reflection about European identity, considering the exhibition context and the inner configuration of the photograph itself.

We end this paragraph exploring briefly the centrality of the exhibition context. We are interested in this event because it reveals how is difficult to isolate the photographic image from the place of its inscription (Dondero 2006: 89). Thus, it should be useful to consider what Edward and Harts say about the materiality of photography. On a book titled *Photographs, Objects, Histories. On the Materiality of Images* (2004), they say it is not only image to be the location of the meaning, but also its presentational forms and its uses in society become central to identify photography as object socially prominent (cf. Dondero 2006).

Photograph as Complex Visual Text

The perspective of photographer, what the filmmakers and photographer Wim Wenders (1983) calls *disposition* to the scene that it is possible to find again in the image realized, which configuration is a plastic and figurative disposition of elements, enables to read the world. This suggestion is interesting if moved into the context of *European Photography*. The ethnographer James Clifford wrote about his disciplines that hermeneutics reminds us how cultural reflections are intentional creations: while we are interpreting we build up ourselves (cf. Clifford 1997). *European Photography* is an event intentionally arranged that aims to be an interpretive mediator through photography, shaping an idea of Europe and setting Reggio Emilia within Europe.

Thus our interest is to comprehend how photography means something within a cultural event whose project of communication is to create a discourse through images about European cities. We so consider photograph not only for its own inner textuality (cf. Pezzini 2004a). In these terms, it is helpful to place side by side Floch's analysis of themes, figures

and plastic formants of images (cf. Floch 1986) with a wider perspective, that is inspired by Eco's theory (cf. 1975, 1984, 1985, 1997).

We would start this part referring again to Eco: semiotics faces up to common objects insofar as they participate to the semiosis (cf. Eco 1975). We might consider photography as common object. At the same time, we would consider the issue from Floch's perspective, who prefers to focus on the discourse configurations, analysing how photos produce meaning. The relation between the Eco's interpretive point of view and the Floch's generative point of view allows us to see a) how photographs give many and different interpretations of what Europe is with Eco's concept of *Encyclopaedia*; b) how this heterogeneity is the result of a complex mixture of plastic and figurative *formants* that *thematizes* an issue and create effects of sense (cf. Greimas-Courtés 1979; Greimas 1984b; Floch 1986).

This twofold perspective is helpful even if Eco criticizes the enhancement of the plastic analysis, seeing photograph as an index (cf. Eco 1985, 1997). However, he reminds us that picking up a *topic*, a theme, from a photograph, helps us to define an *aboutness*: the photographer refers to something (cf. Eco 1979). This implies a generative process that carries out an interpretive strategy. Even if Eco's use of the term *generative* comes from a pragmatist interpretive point of view, we may check how it fits with Floch's generative perspective. Floch means each photograph as construction, selection, hierarchy of geometric configurations. The possibility to recognize and read them is due to a semantic grid that changes according to different cultures. Floch also reminds us that photography does not imply plastic *formants*, but the use of plastic categories to analyze the photograph is useful to explain the rules of shaping of the result (cf. Floch 1986). This twofold perspective so helps us to go beyond the debate on photograph's nature, on one hand meant as ontologized and undiscussable (cf. Bazin 1954, Barthes 1980, Dubois 1983, Schaeffer 1987), on the other constituted by the interpretive saliences of the forms that are inscribed in there (cf. Floch 1986). Although Eco's position of photograph as index (cf. Eco 1985, 1997) is much more closer to the first side, his critics of iconism, his attention on interpretive strategy and his concept of *Encyclopaedia* (cf. Eco 1975, 1979, 1984) offer a possible contact with Floch's position. Floch says that each effect of *iconization* is relative to what is culturally conceived as reality (cf. Floch. 1986; Dondero 2005). Thus, our focus is on interplay of interpretations oriented by a strategy due also to the discourse configurations within the photographs.

The process of *signification*, that is the articulation, the togetherness, between a level signifying and a level signified, is fulfilled and attested by historical and social conventions. We translate and quote a study about the language of photography, by Attilio Colombo (1984, in Marra 2001: 120):

“If we wished to communicate within the system of photography, we should subscribe a collective agreement, a system of values that has become institutional and that is difficult to change individually. That is why there are photographers who experiment and move on what appears to be already established. They force the limits imposed by conventions”.

At the same time, we may consider what John Berger argues about the nature of photography: “Semiological systems each one being a social/cultural construct do indeed exist and are continually being used in the making and reading of images” (Berger 1995: 112). The main convention that seems to bind photography concerns what Bourdieu (1965) said: the nature of photography is connected to realism and objectivity, a convention attributed by society. If we compare this assumption with *European Photography*, our event seems to be kind of untrendy. A photo is produced by a cut, an arbitrary selection, that is the framing fixing a certain facet of reality, something that is not only a mere transcription of reality, but that is oriented, exposed to interpretation.

The image of a family inside a flat (cf. Garnell), or a man wearing a blond wig on the street (cf. Bodzianowski), or pictures of people in a park (cf. Ballo Charmet), or scene of a murder in interiors (cf. Kannisto), or photos taken from above on Cyprus (cf. Linke), or a dark city we are told being Berlin (cf. Sluban) do not immediately refer to Europe. In this sense, it seems to be obvious what Dubois argued: the photo-index affirms the existence of what is in front of our eyes, of what represents, but it does not say anything about the meaning of its representation (cf. Dubois 1983). We may view this problem from an other perspective.

We recognize what we materially see because the image is rendered intelligible by the recognition of an iconic code, according to Eco, “the system that matches perceptive and cultural codified unities to a system of graphic vehicles. These are pertinent unities of a semantic system that depends on a previous coding of the perceptive experience” (Eco 1975: 274; cf. Kant 1997). This position matches with Floch’s idea that is possible to comprehend *iconicity* within a culture.

If on one hand the visual perception of a photography moves from an image of the reality, grasping what is in front of the objective lens, on the other hand the photo leaves a blank space that should be filled by the interpretation (cf. Eco 1979) of the photo itself: what does the photo want to communicate to us? What is it telling or revealing to us? What is thematizing? The act of interpretation is by the side of the photographer as much as by the side of the spectator. The photo itself becomes a sign, any interpretable expressive portion of the world according to Peirce (cf. Peirce 1931-58: 1.339; Eco 1979: 39; Eco 1997: 328): what is it relating to? We need to find a limit to the semiosis: potentially the photo refers to anything. The limit we could set for the *Encyclopaedia* is the *universe of discourse* (cf. Eco 1979: 39) which in our case is the reference to Europe.

Thereby, the exhibition context comes in our help to orient the interpretation and to make working the semiosis, tracing all the possible courses and links. The images realized by the photographers have been thought and produced targeting the theme of Europe, that is the core of the exhibition. Not only the photos are important, but also the paratexts, according to Genette (1987), zones, threshold of transition between the image and the spectator in which the informative features of the art are explained: for instance, the name of the author, the title of the photo, the text of comment by the photographer, the sizes, technical and printing features. According to Eco, what a photo relates to as iconic sign could be something like a process of translation vaster and more complex than the elementary process of synonymy or lexical definition. We can not explain a photo in a single word, as much as it seems hard to find a synonym for the term Europe.

By the way, it is possible to set up an event that creates a discourse by images that aims to represent the European identity through the cities. At this point, it would be clearer the reason why Eco (1975: 282) considers an iconic sign as a complex visual text. The potentiality of a visual text lies not in the fact that it depends on a code, but that it establishes a code. We might read the images produced for this event following Eco’s suggestions. These images build up a discourse about Europe, considering, with Eco, that the equivalent of an iconic sign is not a word, but a description, a statement, sometimes a whole discourse. These concepts help us to verify how photography has been considered central developing the most important cultural project of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia and help us to understand how photos mean within the frame of the event *European Photography*. These photos refer to a semantic domain concerning Europe. They fit into a predetermined context. It would be possible to establish a way to produce sign functions: ostension as a sign production contributes to change the semantic domain of the images, at least in terms of enhancement (Dondero 2006: 29). In other terms, we should appreciate the complicity, the reciprocal penetration and performativity between the text and the world (Sedda 2004: 4).

The Images of Cities/Europe

If these photos were considered in themselves, out of our pre-given context, or fit into an other context, they would be coded and would mean in another ways: we could appreciate a family posing, a cross-dresser in the street, buildings, people in a park, but who knows if the family is European, American, African? Who knows why there is a cross-dresser in this photo? Who knows if this photo from above are really taken over Cypriote lands? Who knows where this park is placed? Or, if these information are partly revealed by the paratexts, what do they mean? A reflection on landscapes, a reflection on the way people rest in park, a reflection on sexual discriminations, and so on?

If not for the context, photos themselves seem to remain uncertain. But even in the context, despite the paratexts, the result is undetermined and not so explicit: some of the photos need to be read with the help of the catalogue to be coherently interpreted (cf. Bodzianowski, Link). Why are they here? Do they tell something about Europe, even conceptually, or not? Besides, answering these questions, we should also consider what Clifford says about fictions, pretences: something that is culturally and historically partial, that has been fabricated, shaped (Clifford 1997: 29). This is the reason why we prefer to find the particularity of one photo rather than the specificity of the photography (cf. Rouillé 1985, Floch 1986): the shaping and the interpretation of a photo is due to cultural conventions. *European Photography* aims to stress and to go beyond these conventions, disclosing new interpretations, new connections and so enhancing the cultural *Encyclopaedia*.

Our aim has been to analyze how photography means in the context of *European Photography*. In this paper we have decided not to deeply analyze each series of photos, but at least we should point out useful features to account for the heterogeneity of the visual solutions, of the ways chosen to represent the relation between cities and Europe. We now present very briefly the six series.

Maria Ballo Charmet has shot immigrants people from eastern Europe in the park of Milan. Jean Louis Garnell has chosen families in an apartment of a condominium in Paris suburbs right after the riots. Cezary Bodzianowski is a Polish photographer that dress up like an eastern European prostitute finding connections between Reggio Emilia, Italy, and Emilia, near Lodz, Poland. Aino Kannisto is a photographer that comes back to Helsinki, her hometown, after years spend working abroad, for a reflection on Europe through her own intimate relation with Finland capital, framing herself in fictional scene. Armin Linke is a photographer who brings in surface books of pictures fostered by the Nicosia Municipality that show cities, houses, landscapes along what is not possible to represent expect for technicians, the green line that divides Cyprus in two parts from above, under which a series of water mains branches out, connecting what on surface is divided. Klavdji Sluban has realized a very white and very black gaze on Berlin that seems to come from years and years ago, revealing its dual essence, through the clash of opened and closed spaces.

If we observe the six series of photos (cf. Appendix), we could appreciate the relevance with the theme proposed by the event: the relation between cities and Europe. In the beginning, we should recognize the thematic isotopy⁷ of the border, in so far it is the theme of the event as pointed out in the “proposal of deliberation”. The photos (cf. Appendix) display situation on the border (a road, a house, a door, a park). Similarly, a border is identifiable in the *past* of the place photographed: the images refer to a shared cultural horizon (Berlin, the city of the wall; Nicosia, divided by the green line in a Turkish and a Greek part). The relevance of the isotopy of the border may be thematized in various way (immigration, cosmopolitanism, intimacy, past, geopolitics) and gives us the opportunity to recall the

7 The term isotopy in semiotics theory means the recurrence of sign category, both thematic than figurative or plastic, within a text or one of its part. It reveals an interpretive coherence and accounts for the constancy of a path of sense (cf. Greimas-Courtés 1979; Eco 1979; Pozzato 2001).

Lotman's concept of *semiosphere*, a heterogeneous cultural universe in which different elements are in a reciprocal and dynamic tension so that they can create new paths of sense and elaborate new information. Then, it is possible to recognize a second isotopy: the dialogue between spaces and human beings that comes out from the photos. The people represented gain value in relation to the special context they stand in.

Conclusion

What comes out in Reggio Emilia is a comprehensive discourse about photos concerning Europe.

If we meant Europe as a restricted area of *Encyclopaedia* in which texts, interpretations and intertextual connections that might shift or cross the borders of Europe itself, settles, we could grasp the benefit of this conceptual perspective: Europe is not only a geographical space, a half of the Euro Asiatic continent, the results of a historical, temporal progressing, but also a cultural universe that coheres, bringing together multiple perspectives and identities, reciprocally and unceasingly in relation of unity and distinction. If it has been possible by photography, will it be kept as possible by social and cultural policies? Or is the shadow of an encounter still waiting? At least, art should contribute to point to our European horizon, searching for a common well.

Summing up, what we have done in this presentation has been starting from a global level of analysis to comprehend the local level of textuality. That is also the target of the event itself: placing photography within a global discourse concerning Europe and checking what of the image makes intelligible the idea of Europe. By a sociosemiotics approach, we have tried to account for a) the way photography functions within such event; b) the reason why the Municipality has chosen photography to create a discourse about Europe; c) the results obtained. We have mixed a semiotics of culture perspective with a semiotics of text perspective to analyze the place of photos and their interpretation in the event. However, this paper misses to not have deeply targeted a more exhaustive plastic and figurative analyze of the photos, but at least the main features, considered as isotopy, have been marked. This gap comes from the choice to focus more on the reasons why photography becomes central to the cultural policy of the Reggio Emilia Municipality. That is why we have largely referred to Eco's theory rather than Floch's category of analyze.

Our decision is due to the necessity, in this first step of research on the event, to see how photography helps understanding the core of European identity, defined by social and cultural differences, and the interconnected experiences which the photographic discourse with its variable perspective refers to. The next step will be focusing more on the images as textuality to verify how they relate to the discourse strategy of the event.

In conclusion, could we know more about Europe now? The event aims to open a permanent inquiry on Europe and to appreciate the expressive capacity of photography. Lévi-Strauss once confessed that the artwork permits to realize an improvement of knowledge. Its essential contribute is to offer a semantic reality (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1961). Thus, photography, as Floch pointed out, has the capacity to create meaning rather than recording or reproducing. What results from *European Photography* is a sense of suspension, of indeterminacy that comes out from the theme of the border. If we would want consider the knowledge as a sharing of differences in a pre-given world (cf. Fabbri 2001, 2003), *European Photography* accounts for the planning stage of Europe, represented with different figurative solutions or interpretations, represented as culturally many-sided, in search for an identity that evidently seems to be found *in between*.

Appendix

Mariana Ballo Charmet

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Jean Louis Garnell

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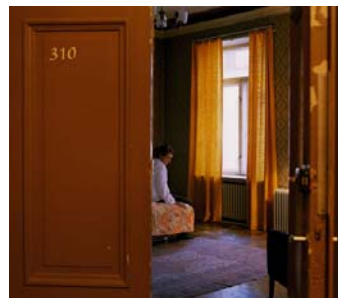
Cezary Bodzianowski

© Comune di Reggio Emilia 2007



Aino Kannisto

© Comune di Reggio Emilia 2007



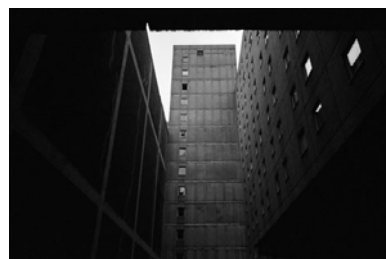
Armin Linke

© Comune di Reggio Emilia 2007



Klavdji Stuban

© Comune di Reggio Emilia 2007



Per l'autorizzazione all'utilizzo delle fotografie riportate in appendice, si ringrazia il Comune di Reggio Emilia.

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