DEBORAH TOSCHI

ABOUT US, THE STRATEGIES OF COLLECTIVE SELF-REPRESENTATION*

Many studies have underlined how the current media landscape is crowded with traces of the self, paths of writing and representation of individual identities, personal profiles updated and constantly offered again on the web. In front of this culture of narcissism\(^1\) is natural to ask: are there forms of collective autobiography/self-portrait? This paper, which aims to be the initial piece of a wider project, explains the exploratory phase of the research. Examining some objects, it also aims to stand out the methodological issues and the guidelines came out for the retrieval of a corpus of works about the collective self-portrait.

Goffman argues that personal identity comes from being unique, and so different from anyone else, and the social facts are the sticky substance to which all the other biographic facts are clung\(^2\). But individual identity is partially a social construction – in the sense that relationship with others and with the contexts of life in which we are into, have a crucial role in the construction of the self\(^3\). Near an individual identity, each of us have a social identity which places into a wider destiny – of the family, the ethnic group, the class etc. But these communities are able to voice themselves, or better to express themselves through images? And if so, what can be called collective self-representation?

A preliminary theoretical survey has underlined few references on the subject. Mormorio relates about the encounter between the proletariat of early XXth century and photography: in his opinion, the conscious choice of showing and posing allows to define these images of factory workers as self-portraits\(^4\). Ferrari suggests that in some group photographs, each member not only expresses his individuality, but also an attitude of participation in an ideal, projecting and merging with the image of the community itself\(^5\): as consequence, these images can be considered collective self-portraits. But which photographs of a community are to be considered as a portrait? And as a self-

* My sincere thanks and warm gratitude to Buscio family, this paper is dedicated to the memory of Maria «a rusc».

4. “In this photographic showing of the proletariat, the photographer, beyond the simple click, has no active function […]. Therefore, we can define these images self-portraits” (my translation). D. Mormorio, *Un’altra lontananza. L’Occidente e il rifugio della fotografia*, Sellerio, Palermo 1997.
5. “Each of us, as we know, has an inner and ideal image of himself, that partly retains even when he is not alone. But, when he considers himself a member of a community, and this community wants to give
portrait? How the members of a group can express their support to the community and its forms of representation?

In order to outline a plan of collective self-portraits, our field of investigation will be the new media technologies that make out an interactive and participative space of action for the users\(^6\). We will also use some methodological tools from the paradigms of  *web and internet studies*\(^7\), and from *virtual ethnography*\(^8\), in a concrete perspective that allows us to investigate the meaning of visual communication\(^9\).

Our first analyses concerns the case of a group that has structured its visibility on the web with *Bonefro&friends’s Blog*, whose subtitle emblematically is «the Bonefro community narrates itself»\(^10\). The blog, active only from 2009 to 2010, allows to share photographs of the town, videos of the village fair and event information. It has also the merit to stimulate the users to interact on social network, facebook groups in particular: *Bonefro fan-club* and *Amici Bbun’frane*.

*Bonefro fan-club* is an open group consisting of 7 members, but takes the posts of many users. *Amici Bbun’frane* has been deleted, or probably converged in *Sono di Bonefro* – a close group that now has 500 members, Italian and foreign, with Bonefro origin; this profile is particularly rich, and presents in the section *Photos* a corpus of images that is based on two main subjects: the town and its inhabitants. For the town, there are albums dedicated to the streets, the stairs, the portals, the vaults... The inhabitants are immortalized in group photographs – often dated and in black and white – as in the albums *Feast*, *Crafts*, *Processions*, *School*, *Football Team*; there are also the descendants of emigrants in the ritual family reunions, as in *March 29th, 2012*.

More rare are the collages with a layout similar to the private photo album, in which are near old and new images of the town, portraits and postcards (image *July 14th, 2012, to all bonefrani in the world*), and the family albums of individual members (*Memories*, by Vince Vincent Vaccaro). This collection is particularly significant: sharing his private images, in the caption Mr. Vaccaro indicates the year in which the photo was taken and the names of the closest relatives, but sometimes he is not able to identify relatives or family friends, and calls for help to the members of the facebook group. In the answer posts, searching in the collective memory, the *on line* community reconstructs its history and formulates hypothesis – sometimes contradictory, as in the controversial case of the recognition of Raffaele Caiola «baffone» [«moustached»] or Luigi Vaccaro «fughetto»\(^11\). If the images condense micronarrations, the need of a shared

---


\(^{7}\) Photo n. 13 Caption Right-1959 My mom Nicolina Ricciardelli, my dad Francesca Vaccaro, no 3???, no.4???? Non ricordi nome [I don’t remember the name]”. Nick Lalli, Nicolina Ricciardelli, Giuseppe Montagnano and Antonio Colombo discuss at length on the third man, finally recognized as Raffaele Caiola “baffone” [moustached]. He was the grandfather of Colombo and Ricciardelli, who had initially mistaken him for
memorial reconstruction allows the members of the community to model and return their background\textsuperscript{12}.

The example of this Italo-American member allows us to underline how the Bonefro community has been proven over the years by considerable migrations\textsuperscript{13}. On one side, this diaspora has fractured the social body of the town; on the other side, it has also helped to create a virtual community which is particularly active and able to establish relationships with migrants\textsuperscript{14}. The potential of the web favours the opening of windows of visibility, in order to circumscribe the spatial – and sometimes temporal - distance. Like many diasporic communities, migratory groups from Bonefro have developed a particular sense of sharing for the collective identity, and a close bond with the community of origin – both off line and on line. Another website, ECHO Molise Emigration and Cultural Heritage of the Molise, almost exclusively dedicated to the migration from Bonefro, has – among the others – a space for the stories of immigrants or their descendants (ECHOs Immigrant Stories), a space for a photographic project (Immigrant Photo Project) and a forum (Guestbook)\textsuperscript{15}. The stories, narrated in first person and often accompanied by photographs, chronicle the adventurous trips of inhabitants of Bonefro, such as Melina Maucieri Akins in Calgary (Canada), Jennie Colombo Wherry in Grenville (Canada), Antonio Fantetti in Providence (USA)\textsuperscript{16}.

We can notice some recurring elements, that recover the same practices of the facebook group case. At first, for the various stories, we can mark that the autobiographical narration crosses the individual boundaries in order to re-establish a family genealogy: from here, it intersects with the story of the community of origin and the migrant population. This section of the website has a good interaction with the forum, in which the users give news or ask information about the inhabitants or the migrants of the Bonefro community – always explaining their degree of kindred and family membership. In this perspective, the actors put into practice the identification and the replacement of their personal experiences within a polyphonic warp, which can be reset only through a collegial effort. A second recurring element is the explicit reference to the local dialect and the traditions, handed down orally from the relatives. On one side, this practice consolidates and perpetuate the public memory of the community of origin; on the other side, it works as threshold of access of the individual members to the cultural heritage of the community itself. Under this point of view, it does not seem accidental that the

Luigi Vaccaro. See also the comment of photo n. 19: Caption 1969 Queste è mulo che arava con il ciuccio (#1 in Bonefro) di mio padre. Qualcuno può dire chi è accavallo? [This mule plowed with my father’s donkey. Can anyone say who ride?]. Follows, as answer, Nick Lalli’s post: «Z’giuwann denini», and then Vince’s: «Thank Nick! Z’giuwan and my dad were great friends???».


\textsuperscript{13} Recall that in the world there are about 143 associations and 5 federations of emigrants from Molise. E. SARNO, Geography of Group Association and Italian Emigration: A Case Study, 2007 - Documentazione sull’emigrazione italiana pubblicata sul portale www.cestim.it. On migration from Bonefro, see M. COLABELLA, Bonefro “gente foretana”, Quaderni sulle migrazioni, Cosmo Iannone, Isernia 1996.

\textsuperscript{14} Migrants seem to retain a «portable» identity, in the meaning used by Sweet Wong for Native Americans moved to reservations, «people are connected to the land in psychological and spiritual as well as in physical way», H.D. SWEEN WONG, Native American Visual Autobiography: Figuring Place, Subjectivity, and History, «The Iowa Review», 30 (2000/2001), 3, p. 147.

\textsuperscript{15} www.echomolise.org.

\textsuperscript{16} We can see also several group photos, without caption, with the members of Montreal Bonefro Association in picnic, village fair, convivial gatherings.
most appreciated facebook profile by the users is the closed one. Finally, we record in
the selection of photographs illustrating the history of Bonefro in the website, such as
those in social network, two trends: 1) historical memory versus recent events; 2) group
portraits versus views of the town. In the first case, we can see the intention to realize
a diachronic narration, in order to testify the growth and the life of the community. In
the second case, we can see a sort of «anthropomorphism» of the urban landscape, which
becomes a character in the collective history and an instrument of the virtual practice of
territorialization promoted online.

This first analyses raises a series of reflections about the methodological structure
of the research. In fact, the object of study brings together different fields: blog, social
network and portals. In qualitative terms, they provide very different interface and pos-
sibility of intervention for the individual user. How to highlight the specificity of each
instrument? Can be considered a single study case? The choice to consider these fields
as a total media environment is supported by the presence of internal references, and
by the observation that some members are simultaneously active on multiple platforms.
Moreover, in the three fields, sharing stories or photographs and comments on forum,
members can actively help to develop together a common image. The cross-reading of
the materials complicates the definition of the collective identity. But, at the same time,
its limit the risk of filter from a single point of view, and the insidious danger of stereot-
yping. Defining their identity, the immigrants have to compare with cultural stereotypes
of the new country. In my opinion, the communication between the members of the
diasporic community and the present community in Bonefro, avoids the risk of crystalli-
zation of a «nostalgic» and timeless image of native identity and territory. Finally, this
group is not only a virtual community or a «community of interest»; many users have
also offline relationships. How to evaluate the results of this interaction?

Our second analyses, always concerns the case of self-representation of a town
community: the art project «Self-Community» by Cecilia Pratizzoli, that aims to be
a photographic self-portrait of the community of Reggio Emilia. It has several phases
and areas of achievement: the event with the realization of murales, a video slide show
and a video about the backstage of the event – both loaded on youtube and on a specific
website. The performance provided a space in which every citizen could portray himself
in the foreground, choosing a black or white setting. The photograph was immediately
printed and cut: one half was for the subject; the other half was placed on a wall, and an-
yone could complete it with his own half-photo. The «two-faced» close-ups, near to the
passport photo size, have been combined on this wall up to compose a collective self-

17 M. GEORGIU, Mapping Diasporic Media across the EU. Adressing Cultural Exclusion, EMTEL
II, Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK, see http://eprints.lse.
ac.uk/26420/
18 «Community within cyberspace emphasizes a community of interests that may lead to a communal
spirit and apparent social bonding». J. FERNBACK, The Individual within the Collective: Virtual Ideology and
the Realization of Collective principle, in S.G. JONES (ed.), Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in
19 In addition to the various comments, on facebook page Sono di Bonefro has reported the first meeting
of members scheduled for July 29th, 2012.
20 «Self Community» by Cecilia Pratizzoli, 2012, 11-13 may, Reggio Emilia. Videos are available
on youtube http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bN-MtfnJz4 and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jz-
JafHid8N0. On web (www.ceciliapratizzoli.com/selfcommunity/) you can follow in real time the «growth»
and the development of the installation. For similar projects between performance and photography see also
NARDO GERMANO, Auto-Retrato Coletivo. Poéticas de abertura ao espectador na (des) construção de uma
portrait, then merged on the web. In our opinion, the relational dimension of the project seems to reaffirmed not only in the choice to draw near several individual self-portraits, but also in the proposal to unite ideally the faces of two participants into one self-portrait. The resolution of the face ideally refers to the stratification of our identities: not by chance, one half of the self-portrait (the most intimate and private representation, maybe?) is for the subject, while the other half of the photograph (the «public» image, in a sense) is for the common project. The choice of combination is never at random, and reveals an clear aesthetic care based on the opposition of the profiles (for ex. a man on black setting and a woman on white setting) or the counterfeit homogeneity (for ex. a gesture taken in both halves of the picture, or the combination of very similar shapes). If we shift the focus from the single images of the murales, the whole multi-faceted image of the community restores the opening, the fragmentariness, the temporariness nature of the group. The only unifying element is the photographic size, which harmonizes the heterogeneity of the subjects in a sort of process of collectivization of the singular. Moreover, the choice of the black/white setting unifies the pictures eliminating all traces of the general background – the urban environment, which is also the only connecting factor among the various actors. In this perspective, the gesture of the citizens, or better their choice to partecipate in the performance, and the assembling of these «partial» faces of the artist, define the membership in the community. Otherwise, the community would not have any distinguishing marks.

Under this point of view, the work of Pratizzoli can be related with the interesting work of artists such as Cindy Sherman and Nikki S. Lee. The latter, in particular, is known for her photographic projects of individual self-representation within a community. For ex. in the series The Hispanic Project (1998), in a snapshot (n. 1), we recognize the artist in a group of Hispanic girls; in another snapshot (n. 20) she is sitting with a girl in front of a row of washing; even in another (n. 25), she is on the beach with her curly hair tied in a ponytail, wearing big golden earrings. In these images, the communities can be identified by the skin color, the somatic types, the style of clothes etc. membership has a visual evidence. Or not? The naturalness of the shot misleads us only briefly: the Asian features of Nikki Lee are extraordinarily disguised, but raise some doubts about the authenticity of the membership. The process becomes evident if we analyze other series of the artist, for ex. The Punk Project (1997), Young Japanese (East Village) Project (1997), The Yuppie Project (1998), The Ohio Project (1999), The Exotic Dancers Project (2000), The Skateboarders Project (2000), The Hip Hop Project (2001), where Nikki Lee takes pose, gesture, style of clothes of a community. This performance is not limited to the appropriation of the stereotypical representation of a community or a subculture, but is also connected to a sort of «ethnographic» experience – a period of time spent in contact with a group, in order to assimilate the typical traits and the deep values. Lee’s chameleonic self-portraits may seem anonymous and false, considering her personal and social identity. But they resurface the process of interiorization of the social membership and the habitus that each of us, as subject, lives more or less consciously.

21 D. McLEOD, Stretching Identity to Fit: The Many Faces of Nikki S. Lee, «Ciel Variable: Art, Photo, Medias, Culture», 2004, 63, pp. 22-24. The interesting idea is that the stereotype is a simplifed representation – and sometimes distorted – elaborated by a member outside the community. But here Nikki Lee embodies literally, descending into the community.

22 A set of dispositions for action, offers a dynamic view of knowledge which is permanently used, constructed and restructured during practice and for practice, P. BOURDIEU, The Logic of Practice, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1990.
In this perspective, also Pratizzoli – especially with the assembling – makes visible the closeness of the members of the urban community, underlining the basic element of their sense of membership. Here the closeness does not mean a deep, stable, significant bond, but rather a relational momentum that reflects the state of agglutination\(^{23}\) of the community in its temporary resetting. Now some methodological doubts. The self-portrait of this community is born as a photographic project of an artist: what are the implications, the filters, the limits imposed on the participants in the performance? First, we note that the actors do not have possibility to interact with the portal. Second, in this collective self-portrait, the only voice in the interviews about the project is Pratizzoli’s. In our analysis, is not necessary to interrogate also the participants? As result, the collective self-portraits of our analysis are very different. In its definition, Bonefro community creates a *choral self-portrait* from which unequivocally emerges the intricate mesh of relationships, also visible on facebook. The community identifies in territorial roots – displayed and costantly evoked – its primary component and the distinctive element in front of external subjects. While Reggio Emilia community, through a photographic project, proposes a *multiple self-portrait* in which the actors maintain a strong individual dimension – as visually underlined by the reassembling of close-ups in a wider picture. In the first case, the strong presence of narrations reflects the diachronic development of the community in an «autobiographical» way. In contrast, the second case assumes the form of a fragmentary self-portrait with the crystallization of a moment. In our research about «plural» self-portraits, these study cases are only two examples into a wider, varied and increasing corpus of materials – from the groups on social network to the time-lapse of village fair and family gatherings, up to artistic projects. In all, remains central the exploration of the concept of membership and the visual construction of the community.

---

**RIASSUNTO**

La ricerca si propone come riflessione sulla possibilità dell’autoritratto collettivo, le sue problematiche metodologiche e i percorsi di analisi che mettono a tema il concetto di appartenenza e la costruzione visuale di una comunità. Utili strumenti metodologici si sono rivelati i paradigmi dei *web e internet studies* e dell’etnografia virtuale. La ricerca è stata articolata a partire da due casi di studio: il primo riguarda la rappresentazione e il racconto di sé messo in atto attraverso social network e blog della comunità locale di Bonefro che ha subito nel tempo importanti fenomeni diasporici. Il secondo caso verte invece sull’autorappresentazione della comunità cittadina di Reggio Emilia attraverso un progetto artistico fotografico: *Self-Community* di Cecilia Pratizzoli.

**SUMMARY**

This research aims at a reflection on the possibility of collective self-portrait, its methodological problems and paths of analysis that theme the concept of belonging and the visual construction of a community. Useful methodological tools have proven to be the paradigms of web and internet studies and virtual ethnography. The research was organized from two case studies: the first concerns the self representation and narration implemented through the social networks and blogs of Bonefro, a local community which has undergone important phenomena of diaspora. The second case concerns instead the self-representation of the town community of Reggio Emilia through a photographic art project: *Self-Community* by Cecilia Pratizzoli.

---