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ARTIST'S ARTICLE

Without Visible Scars: Digital Art and the Memory of War

Lanfranco Aceti

REMEMBERING AND RUMMAGING IN THE WAR NEIGHBORHOOD

> Today Saint Benedict's structure again occupies its mountaintop serenely, a landmark visible from afar. Tourists speeding along the new superhighway between Naples and Rome can look across the fields and see it plainly in all its glory. There are no scars. Who can imagine that anything happened to the abbey during the war? [1]

Martin Blumenson penned the above remark in August 1968, when I was a 1-year-old child. In that same year, my father used a Super-8 camera to film my attempts to crawl on a lawn at the English war cemetery in the rebuilt town of Cassino, Italy. Color Plate A alludes to this history.

On 15 February 1944, the day of the destruction of Montecassino's abbey, my father was almost 7 years old and my mother almost 3. My mother was wounded by shrapnel during one of the many Allied bombings and was carried on foot through the battlefields to the nearest hospital, 20 miles away. My father's family lost their home and became starving refugees. With a group of other families they resorted to roasting acorns for sustenance, not realizing that this would cause them serious illness.

These vignettes are the beginnings of a summary of my family background. In the past, I have always dismissed, or attempted to dismiss, this history, as if were not influential in the development of my own thinking, as both an artist and an academic. I have introduced these incidents here because I now realize they relate to my personal art practice. I use the options provided by digital art to overlay diverse sets of narratives, different timelines and visual systems of representation. On-line digital platforms, such as Google Maps, aid in capturing memories through their capacity to display and compare invisible and contrasting narratives. Such narratives are expressed in my artworks by digitally superimposing visuals that represent different perspectives or by providing an on-line digital space where oral narratives can be placed and accessed. William James explained that we "search in our memory for a forgotten idea, just as we rummage our house for a lost object. In both cases, we visit what seems to us the probable neighborhood of that which we miss" [2].

My project *Without Visible Scars: The Memory Walk* (2007) represents a rummage through the memories of survivors. The virtual representations of physical spaces are placed on-line to give form to the processes I use to pin down the memories, oral narratives and personal interpretations of war events. Figure 1 offers an itinerary for the rediscovery of multiple narratives and interpretations of war events. This contemporary artistic rummaging in the "war neighborhood" represents an attempt to rebuild memory and identity. It is impossible to reconstruct the lost reality; it can only be enacted through the reconstruction of new "simulacra." Reconstruction through real and digital platforms, given form through creative efforts, re-presents a new "real" world to the viewers, one that is continuously compared to the memory and narratives of the lost world. Because of my creative activity, a world that disappeared through the forced abandonment of a set of cultural referentials and indexicalities is constantly present and re-presented.

These renegotiations and alterations of expectations change the nature of places and reconstitute identities in a way that allows new narratives to regroup around the invisible monument where historical destruction took place. The absence of visible scars from the war's destruction does not necessarily imply the absence of a scar in the cultural nature of the place or in the individuals' re-construction of a cultural identity as an expression of visual referentials and indexicalities. These invisible scars are expressed in forms of misplacement and alterations in the concept of belonging. The artistic activity becomes fundamental in representing an aesthetic and cultural identity that cannot exist in actuality and can only be experienced as a place of memory. "A monument makes present what it represents in a way that is obviously quite different from the way aesthetic consciousness does so" [3].

This culturally based art production serves as an element of both warning and of reconstruction. It provides an avenue for reconciliation with reality through the description of envisaged future scenarios. It also acts as a vehicle for a reconciliation of humanity with the devastation of the past.

The importance of this rediscovery in my art practice is reflected in the narratives I document. These offer a space to develop and manifest alternative war stories through a process of construction and reconstruction of relevant visuals that are based on memory and identity. Nothing is as revolutionary in artistic creation as the expression of a real vision. This vision is the aim of the art projects I discuss in this paper. It is not an attempt to incite violence. Indeed, it is my hope that the representation of my vision through digital reconstructions will build a different horizon, one that will empower the viewer

ABSTRACT

What is the role of the artist in re-creating a cultural landscape where the psychology and identity are shaped by multiple narratives of wars? The author's art practice attempts to demonstrate the role of digital media in providing a platform for visual representation of multiple narratives.

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Article Frontispiece. *Destruction N° 3,* **mixed media and human blood, digital print, 40 cm × 53 cm, 2003. (© Lanfranco Aceti) The vision is that of a blood-covered sky within which the individual's narrative is rooted.**
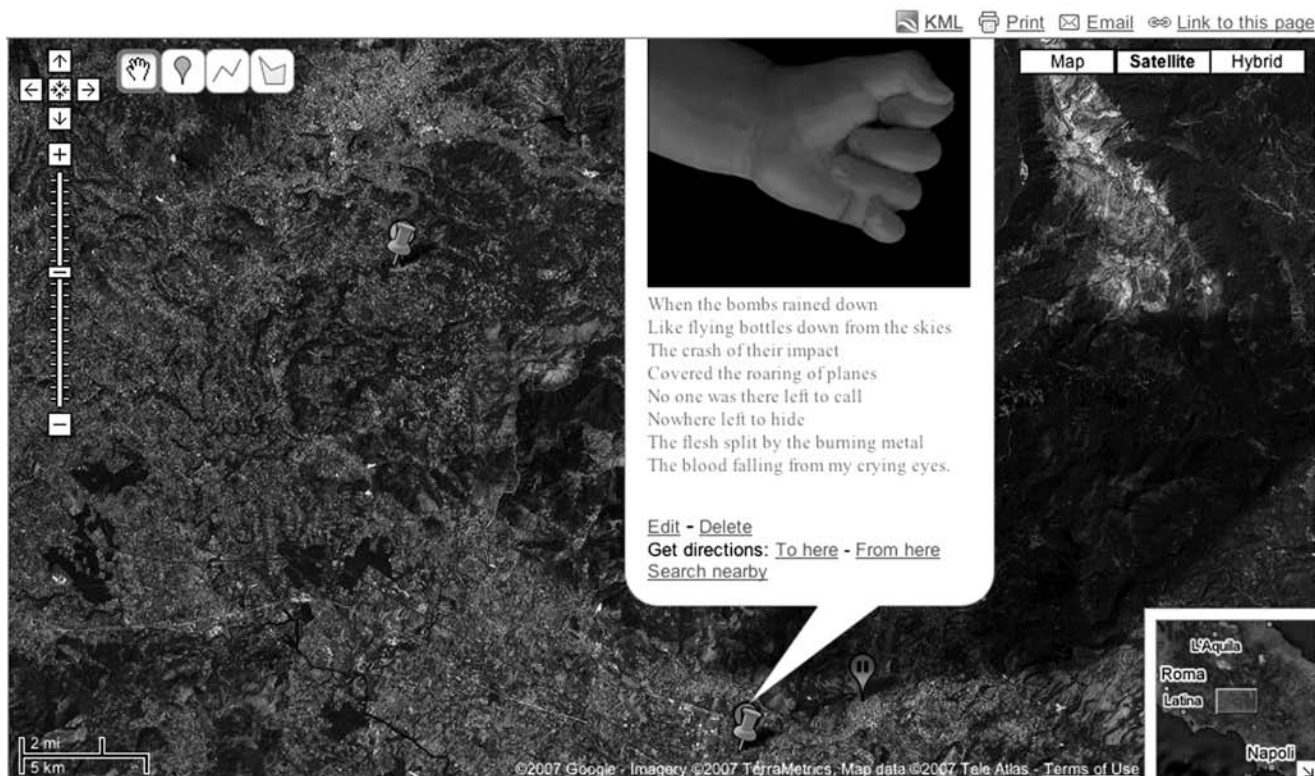
Fig. 1. *Without Visible Scars: The Memory Walk*, **mixed media and javascript, digital print, 40 cm × 25 cm, 2007. (© Lanfranco Aceti) Text by Lanfranco Aceti and Dolores de Alma Blanca. This is an itinerary of rediscovery of multiple narratives and interpretations of war events.**

to recognize the existential structures of reality and eventually to reconcile with them.

The reality and legacy of war and its destruction create a complex system of culture and memory. This system does not disappear with reconstruction. It remains ever-present in the archaeology of social structures, as individuals who are generations apart are still permeated with the original events, with multiple layers of invisible narratives. A continuous process of passing down memories of war and destruction shapes the interpretations of the witnesses and the descendants of those witnesses. This is a process of continuous reconstruction of destroyed visual coordinates, of multiple narratives and visual identities.

The site of destruction becomes a place of neurosis, where reconciliation of some kind is not just necessary but paramount for the reestablishment of the coordinates of a vital social system. Hans J. Eysenck described the neurotic symptoms in these places and how they may represent the negotiation between diverse "learned patterns of behaviour, which for some reason or other are unadaptive" [4]. According to Eysenck, wars become a part of the cultural structures inherited by the "descendants" of these catastrophes. They breed behaviors and cultural strategies that reappear years or

generations later. Had Eysenck been in Italy during the first Gulf War, he might have observed an example of the phenomenon of mass neurotic unadaptive behavior he describes. In that case, many people rushed out to buy food and other necessary products in order to face the supposed war emergency [5].

THE CULTURAL ACTIVITY OF THE ARTIST AS INTERMEDIARY

The artist, as a creator and intermediary, can present alternatives to the official representation of war. This role is, therefore, fundamentally important in reformatting the memory of a locus of destruction, allowing a negotiation between different narratives. When the artist assumes the role of making both official and non-official versions visible, the new narrative short-circuits the officially established creed. Artistic negotiation merges the narratives of the military and those of the civilians. This new framework is an attempt to unite layers of contradictory meanings and events. Enriched by the complex cultural systems and web of relations of the parties involved, the multiple narratives and dialogues, in contrast to the monologues of winners and losers, offer an opportunity to reconstruct the past and act as a possible alternative to

the mediated official narrative, redefining the modality of engagement and the significance of the events. Contemporary media, enforcing and endorsing diverse re-combinations of these narratives, play very diverse roles within the sociopolitical arena by mirroring the aspirations of the political class. They create a public interpretation of war that is in opposition to the individual narratives often expressed through oral history [6].

Overall, the scope of these narratives is to reconcile the individual with the war event. The imperative to meld public and private narratives stems from the individuals' need to bridge the fracture caused by the traumatic experience of war, as well as the necessity to reestablish an individual and collective sense of identity and place.

> Children of refugees inherit their parents' knowledge of the fragility of place, their suspicion of the notion of home. The site of our encounter, where the fracture between eras was briefly bridged, could not provide the soil where roots of belonging could ever again take hold [7].

It is my belief that art can—and sometimes has the duty to—represent a locus of belonging and identification in order to re-create a bridge and recompose a cultural fracture. The work has the onus of re-stating the horror of destruction

and presenting the viewer with an emotive and rational engagement with the past, present and future through the interpretation of events and their ritualistic revival in a mythological and/or historical framework. It is with this engagement that the destruction and legacy of war, visible and invisible, can be temporarily settled and reconciled in the coexistence of multiple and conflicting narratives.

It is the artwork's display of referentials that allows the objectification and revival of the memory of the historical tragedy. Bringing both the pre-war locus and the war's locus of destruction into the post-war landscape, the artwork becomes a post-war locus from which to reconstruct the future. It offers a synthesized notion of cultural inheritance.

Digital representations of war, unlike any other space, become in the artistic process "the territory of the possible," the locus of *what if*. The locus of this artistry is based on the necessity of replacing the inheritance of war—in its context of permanent death, physical destruction, psychological alteration and generational scarring. It is also a locus of emergence where, through dialogue, multiple possibilities are continuously realized in an engaging process of revival, reinterpretation and revalidation.

> Sensing the unfolding emergence requires organizational members to be sensitive to heteroglossia in their organizational lives. We run the risk of closing off the emergent properties of dialogue when we engage in communicative practices that rely on, and call forth, abstract formulations or systems of thoughts laden with unitary and totalizing concepts for understanding human existence [8].

Heteroglossia, a concept associated with Mikhail Mikhaïlovich Bakhtin's work, is a series of multiple narratives and forms of communication. The concept is distinguished from the "general language" that is spoken with a single voice. My artistic approach favors a process of emergence, shattering the monologue of war speeches, which have no heteroglossia and, by nature, do not offer a choice between alternatives. The convergence of narrative processes through art and representation moves the conflict beyond the absolute affirmation of the war canons and the rejection of war ideologies. These are replaced with a personal dialogue of contrasting experiences and narratives. The heteroglossia of the narratives of both winners and losers, embodied in the representation of the war scars, can then move beyond the ideological monologues that, as totalizing concepts, offer no alternatives for cultural reconciliation.

Between the two extreme forms of war monologues, those of winners and losers, all other forms of dialogues are either trapped, dismissed or excluded. Disengagement as a form of total rejection of war monologues through heteroglossia may offer more possibilities, particularly when captured through the representation of personal memories and narratives of the war events. In this process, visible monuments, invisible memories and narratives clash and intermingle. As a result, the negotiation of the real is not based on the establishment of rights and wrongs, but on the experience of a locus of war where, once the civic ethics have collapsed, everything becomes a personal tragedy.

This approach re-presents a new con-

flict that, having been moved into the territory of the cultural, has to bring about new destruction in order to achieve a possible resolution. The clash is between the conflicting cultural narratives of the winners and the losers. The visible absence of a cultural negotiation between colonizer and colonized, winners and losers, reveals the inner destructive function of war that is erasure. Erasing a monument, erasing a cultural referent, is equivalent to erasing the identity not just of the place, but also of its inhabitants, who, almost like blank slates, are reformatted in accord with the cultural rules of the stronger military identity.

ARTISTIC EXAMPLES

The River of Time (2003) (Fig. 2) superimposes recent images of the re-constructed Abbey of Montecassino with an image of the destroyed abbey, sandwiching in the middle an image of the graves of the troops who died while simultaneously committing a war crime and freeing a country. The complexities of the narratives, both merged and differentiated, are offered to the viewer as discoverable parts of "the visual." It is in the visible absence of cultural negotiations that the textual and the visual become relevant as universal icons. It is in their description and the mixing of the loci, as in *Destruction N° 2* and *Destruction N° 3* (2003) (Fig. 3 and Article Frontispiece), that both achieve an iconic moment. B. Schneller was speaking of this kind of reconfiguration when she wrote:

> It relies on literary narrative to mix the real with the imaginary. Writers of "fictional stories" bear the responsibility

Fig. 2. *The River of Time*, **mixed media on digital print, 200 cm × 50 cm, 2003. (© Lanfranco Aceti) The image presents war destructions, war cemeteries and post-war reconstruction as a single undistinguishable event.**
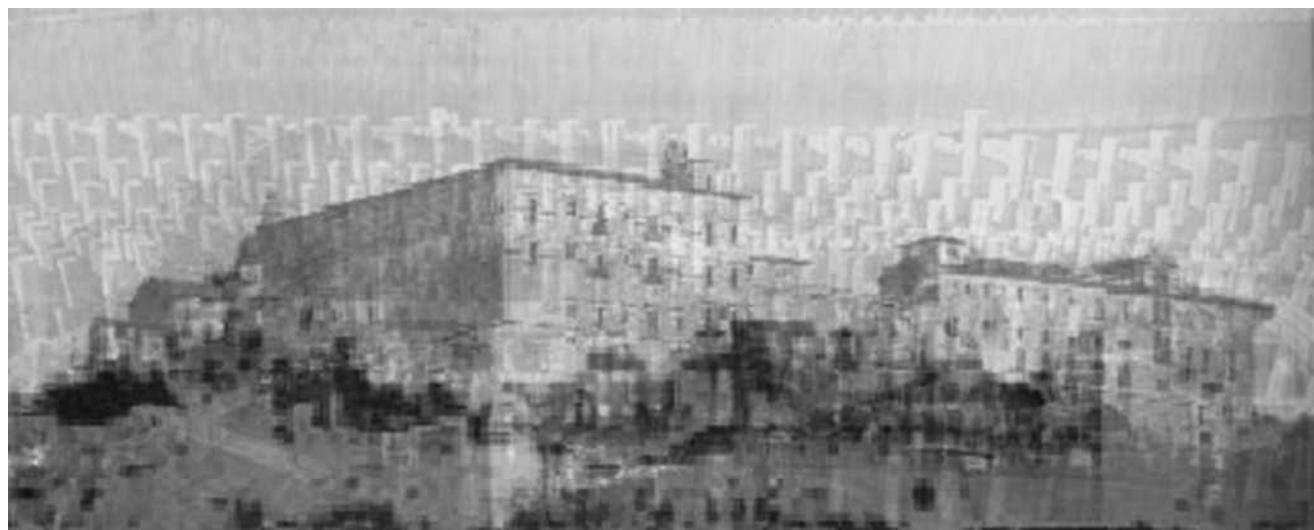
Fig. 3. *Destruction N° 2,* **mixed media and human blood, digital print, 40 cm × 53 cm, 2003. (© Lanfranco Aceti) Memories of destructions as a negative print create a space to search for meaning in a meaningless universe of war.**

Fig. 4. *A-venue*, **mixed media, digital print, 40 cm × 30 cm, 2003. (© Lanfranco Aceti) The image creates a space that juxtaposes an image of Los Angeles against the parallel background of destructions in Cassino.**

of telling the truth about the past. It is upon this responsibility that their ethos as novelists and those of their characters rest [9].

A.N. Kaul demonstrates how this ethos is represented in Mark Twain's description of a society based on "superstition, ignorance, witch-hunting, compulsive conformity, intolerance and brutality." In this analysis, *Huckleberry Finn* is considered a satire of "the permanent destiny of mankind in a fundamentally meaningless universe. It was intended to be a satire on the whole human race" [10].

In his exposé of mankind, Twain creates an opening for humanity based on personal engagements and personal narratives. It is through such individual narratives in art that confrontation and negotiation may provide an alternative to war. The world of digital art, with its visual representations and multiple narratives, could be constructed as the locus of a compromise, where the images, by layering a shared past, wage war against each other in the attempt to reconcile

the irreconcilable nature of the event that they represent.

Combining the digital images with digital online platforms can form a raft, a raft where the physical space is renegotiated and represented. It does not exist as a ghost to haunt the future but, instead, re-presents a necessary element made invisible by destruction, which must resurge in order for the loci of destruction to regain life.

Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* provides a useful analogy. To escape the world of actuality Huck invariably rediscovers and returns to the raft with a sense of relief. Similarly the *digital raft* represents the place where communities renegotiate beyond the structures of reality, beyond personal, painful narratives and cultural inheritances, both visible and invisible. The artworks, with their renegotiation and mixing of new realities and old historical events, offer the viewer the possibility of engaging with the artist, the community and multiple interpretations of war events.

Kaul goes on to explain:

The raft, in [Karl] Marx's own words, "functions as the symbolic locus of the novel's central affirmations." . . . It embodies serious values of societal ethics: simple fellowship, mutual kindness and consideration, and a general harmony in human relationships: "What you want, above all things, on a raft, is for everybody to be satisfied, and feel right and kind towards the others." Here one has to realize that the raft is a created symbol, an imagined social construct, rather than a faithful transcript from some idyllic and bygone days [11].

In this framework the characteristic of the digital as a locus of renegotiation of narratives between the virtual and the real could become a way to engage with the future by offering a tool that aids in overcoming the fractures that generated the narratives of the winners and losers. It is the digital that offers the possibility of engagement, outside authorized narratives, by an audience of multi-generational people with multiple narratives.
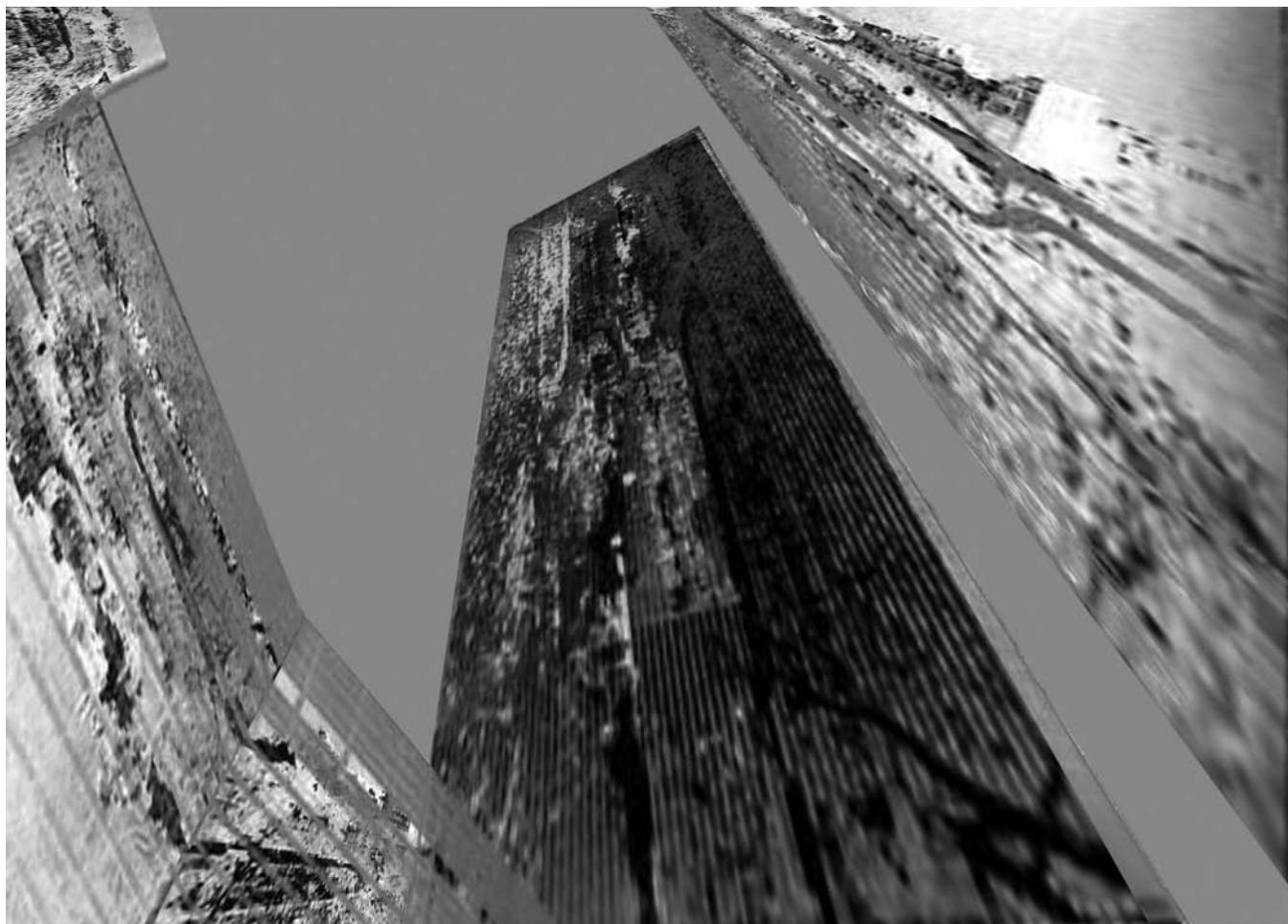
A-venue (2003) (Fig. 4) is the locus of

Fig. 5. *Under the Skin*, **mixed media, digital print, 40 cm × 30 cm, 2007. (© Lanfranco Aceti) The image reproduces a famous New York City skyline with images of destruction from the Abbey of Montecassino.**

the representation of the past and present in the reconciliatory structures of digital alterations. The spaces confronting each other are spaces of different times and existences. *A-venue* incarnates these spaces and times; on the left of the image stand the pre-war buildings of Cassino and on the right those of modern Los Angeles. Two different avenues, once digitally superimposed, create an impossible venue in this work by bringing together different timelines and distant physical spaces.

The digital raft then becomes a world of confrontations, of wars to be reconciled and wars to be waged. In this collective framework the digital representations "are not neutral cognitive instruments that simply assist us in our efforts to remember. Instead, we are often committed to believing, or not believing them, sometimes in deeply emotional ways having to do with fundamental issues of identity" [12].

In the construction of this panorama, in the creation of the cardinal points of the new locus, in the erection of the foundations of Giandomenico Amendola's Fantasy City as a fluid space of oneiric

imagery between real and virtual, the absence of the artist's voice is the equivalent of abandoning visual cultural identities. These visual identities should be represented in the reconstruction and portrayal of a society that needs to reflect the heteroglossia of its social structure and of the events that have ravaged it.

The freedom to take the past and touch it up is evident in the work of scriptwriters, producers, performers, sponsors, and the viewing audience. All play their part in shaping the content of media productions. In the interplay among the agents shaping popular history, the distinction between fact and fiction is of little concern. Pseudo-events are elaborated as if they were real-life situations, and celebrities are created for winning audience identification with splendid displays and performances. Entertainment is promoted at the expense of historical accuracy [13].

Aesthetic and cultural participation in the construction and reconstruction of collective and individual identity, through the blending of visible and invisible monuments within digital platforms, are important elements in reconciling and offering cultural models to shape

future identities. In *Under the Skin* (2007) (Fig. 5) the blending of historical events of destruction from World War II in Cassino and the skyline of New York City prior to September 11th, 2001 generates an artwork by using culturally distant elements of collective memory.

Although also affected globally through collective memory, artists make and remake themselves locally with every true work they create. Art has many truths, but among them and perhaps the most pervasive is the truth of artistic self-expression [14].

The recalled memory of destruction changes, thereby affecting the territory of renegotiation in the realm of the real. The visual and narrative renegotiation of the war event is based on the emotional status perceived by the community and not on the objective existence of the event. What the event has become in the collective imaginary is as important as, if not more important than, what the event really was. The images become possible encounters between the real and the digital constructions. Although these new images are the result of a series of inexplicable war events, they offer the

opportunity to identify links between the individual microcosms and the heteroglossia of greater collective events by re-contextualizing the narratives and experiences of war.

This conflict between the greater collective official narratives and the narrative of the individual is forced onto the visual as an artificial image that is rendered unidentifiable in its indexicality. It is meant to become a meaningless representation: atemporal, delocalized, derealized and unrepresentative of the truth. This is the image that provokes the adverse reaction of refusal: "It was not like that, because I was there and I saw it."

Multiple Renegotiations on the Digital Raft

The digital raft can be nothing other than a new and constant renegotiation of heteroglossic forms of engagement to preserve personal war narratives and share the knowledge of "serious values of societal ethics" [15], shattered in the events of war. It is, therefore, a necessity for the artist to engage with the events as a witness of war, as a carrier of past, present and future possibilities, as a narrative decoder and reconstructor of the scars of war's destruction. It is the negotiation of the artist that embodies the visual representation of the invisible monument, the invisible personal narratives and the negotiations within the social structures by creating new spaces that are both real and imaginary, as in *At One Point in Time* (2007) (Fig. 6).

The lack of subjective remembering confirms the importance of the artist's participation in the construction of a digital raft that, independent of the conscious activity of monoglossic representations and narratives, visualizes both the personal and the community's struggle to reconcile with war's destruction. The subconscious and creative activity of the artist is the medium through which society's subconscious is able to visualize and represent connections between facts and emotions. The artist's role absolves this function and has the onus of connecting and visualizing the invisible monument with the visible monument, integrating the monoglossic and heteroglossic discourses into a metanarrative. The possibility of re-creating and comparing narratives through digital artwork in an on-line setting offers the opportunity of reshaping thoughts. On-line digital platforms such as Google Maps can provide a platform for connecting, negotiating and shaping thoughts, superseding past events of destruction and overcoming distances in both time and space. This is the basis for my choice of the digital as a medium to construct alternative narratives of war enacted solely on the level of cultural representations. The digital allows the creation of new visual spaces that, as in *Connections and Disconnections* (2007) (Fig. 7) are based on loci of destruction and contemporary constructions and reconstructions. These visuals provide new multiple meanings and narratives and extend the relevance and repercussions of war events beyond the limitations of space and time.

Conscious remembering involves making a connection between the thoughts one is presently having, and the past events that are shaping those thoughts; myriad studies of implicit memory have

Fig. 6. *At One Point in Time*, **mixed media, digital print, 40 cm × 30 cm, 2007. (© Lanfranco Aceti) The visual space is made of emptied building structures filled with a pre-war image of the bell tower in Cassino.**
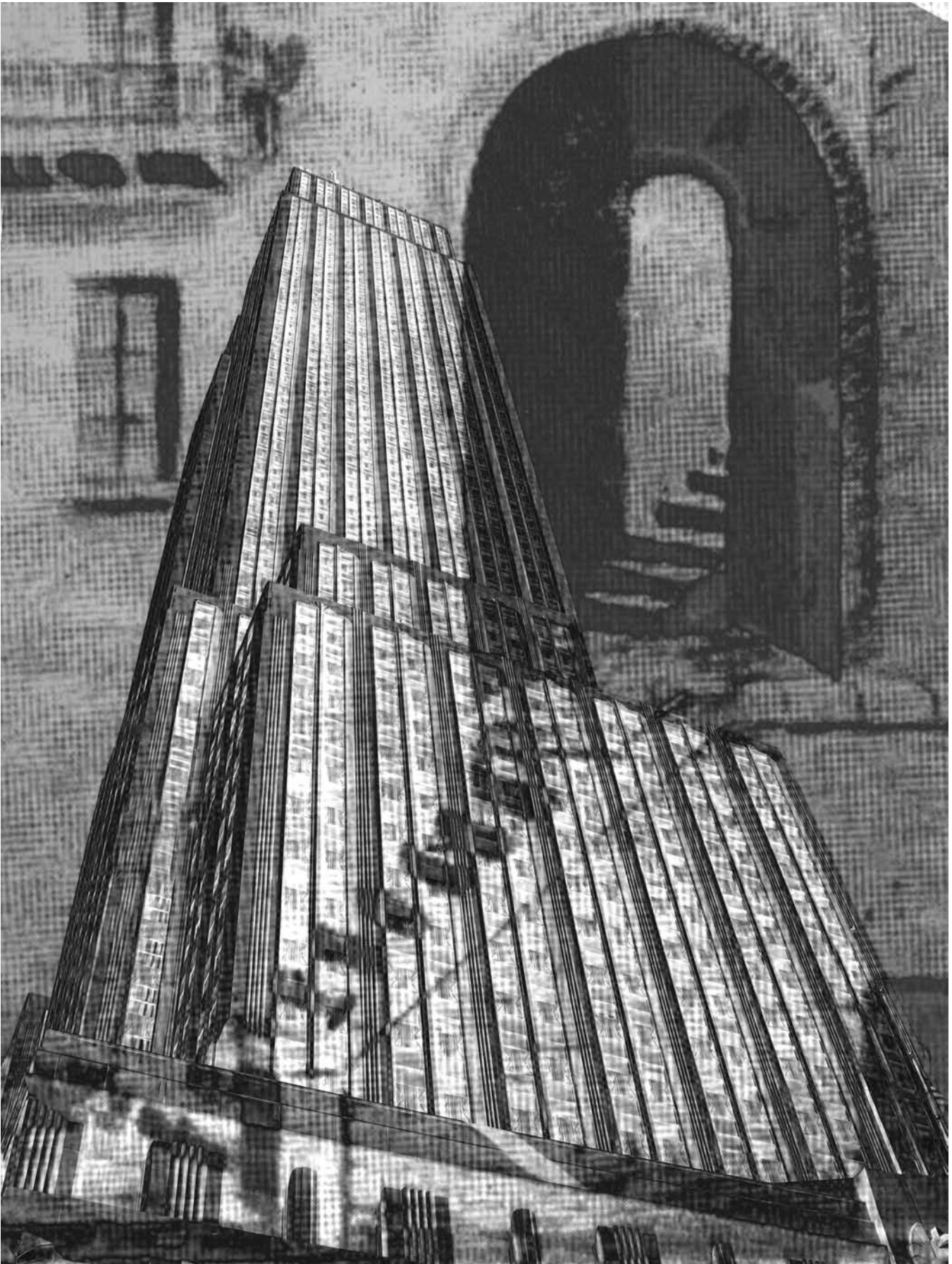
Fig. 7. *Connections and Disconnections,* **mixed media, digital print, 30 cm × 40 cm, 2007. (© Lanfranco Aceti) The architectonical space of the image is created by connecting an image of a building destroyed in Cassino with an existing building in a different landscape in the USA.**

Fig. 8. *Extensions,* **mixed media, digital print, 40 cm × 30 cm, 2007. (© Lanfranco Aceti) The image is based on the displacement and replacement of people's visual documentation from World War II in contemporary settings. Visual memories from the old city of Cassino are re-lived and replaced in the contemporary narratives of metropolitan life.**

demonstrated that specific past events can have specific effects on present information processing, even when subjects are completely unaware of the relevance of these past events to the task at hand [16].

The artist's narrative and visual representation re-presents these unconscious and apparently irrelevant heteroglossic discourses. It reincarnates the invisible monument in a metastructure able to engage present and past in a nonviolent dialectic and visible structure. In this context Kelley and Jacoby explain that "subjective experience serves as a basis for judgments in a variety of domains, and along with others, we speculate that subjective experience arises from a non-analytic and unconscious inference or attribution" [17].

The influences of war extend beyond the destructive events and occur because in war all manners are forgotten. War is chaotic; laws and morals are debased

and with them the values of hospitality and kinship, the concepts of honor and friendship, the divine and basic universal laws. Below I counterpose a passage from Euripides' tragedy *Hecuba* against a newspaper report on the destructive and unethical events that have been taking place in Iraq, which have inspired and will inspire the development of mythological narratives, both on- and off-line. Nashwan Khazraji, an Iraqi citizen, in an interview with reporters, said: "At the same time, Uday and Qusay gave us nothing. We have been saying they should get rid of them so things can get better in Iraq. But not this way" [18].

On Monday night, an informant,
Perhaps hoping to collect a $30 million reward
From the U.S. government
For information leading to the capture
Or death
Of both men,
Told the U.S. military that
The brothers were in the house.

The identity of the informant
Has not been disclosed [19].
[Rendered in this format by the author.]

I speak: of Priam's house was one, the youngest,
Polydorus, Hecuba's child, whom his sire sent
From Troy to me, to nurture in mine halls,
Misdoubting, ye may guess, the fall of Troy.
Him slew I [20].

A fourth occupant,
Believed to be Qusay's
14-year-old son, Mustafa,
Apparently survived the missile strikes
And shot at the entering troops
Before he was gunned down,
Officials said [21].
[Rendered in this format by the author.]

It is from this violent destruction of all that is sacred that wars generate narratives where death becomes a constant repetition, a ritualistic enactment of a past that will contribute to a mythological repre-

sentation in the future—a representation that, unfolding from the narrative of the winner, is built on the displacement of the losers. The representation becomes re-presentation, re-vive and re-mort (re-dying), which need to be renegotiated on a visual digital raft of personal history to become *re-conciliation* and not *re-avenge*.

André Bazin states that the toreador dies every afternoon in the repetition of cinematic representation.

> [Stephen] Heath deploys Bazin's insight that cinema's fundamental obscenity is never as vivid as in its unique ability to reanimate dead bodies, that remorse (in Bazin's pun re-mords / re-morts) lies in projecting on-screen the singular moment of a change to inert matter again and again [22].

The continuous projection, reenactment and negotiation on the platform of the digital raft allows a construction of alternatives, explanations, idiosyncrasies, half-truths and half-lies that, when mixed with the official version, the propaganda and the representation of realities, have to be renegotiated by the individual, in a symbolic battle that is the digital war between the locus of existence and the memories of the representation of death. This is the case for *Extensions* (Fig. 8), in which visual memories from the old city of Cassino are re-lived, re-placed in the contemporary narratives of metropolitan life, continuously extending historical narratives and creating new meanings by floating between historical and contemporary contexts.

These memories of war are an intergenerational cultural inheritance for those who lived and fought in the war and for their descendants. Some of these children have had to renegotiate their own memories of experiencing war; for others their experience was of hearing stories of war and living the narratives of war indirectly. In either case, these experiences explain why people look at wars and their destruction as the undoing of humanity and the threshold to a descent into an Inferno.

> Through me ye go unto the dolent city;
> Through me ye go to everlasting pain;

> Through me ye go among the lost for ay [23].

Acknowledgment

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21. Sullivan and Chandrasekaran [18].

22. I. Margulies, *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) p. 6. If cinema is characterized by remorse in watching the re-presentation of death as re-mort (constant re-dying), digital media offer the opportunity of re-creating the heteroglossic narrative as a constant re-vive; a re-living of imaginary alternative loci.

23. "The gate of Hell. The antechamber to the abyss: the neutrals between good and evil." Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno of Dante*, trans. Lacy Lockert (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1931), canto 3, lines 1–3.

Glossary

digital raft—the symbolic locus of collective representations that embodies the values of societal ethics.

heteroglossia—a series of multiple narratives and forms of communication, differentiated from a "general language" that is spoken with a single voice. The concept is derived from Mikhail Mikhaĭlovich Bakhtin's writings.

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