The inverted Disneyland by Olivo Barbieri

by Luca Panaro

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«There was a time when reality differed clearly from fiction, when people could scare each other by telling stories in spite of knowing they were all made up, when people used to attend particular and well-defined places (amusement parks, fairs, theatres, cinemas) where fiction duplicated reality. Nowadays it is the opposite that indifferently happens: reality copies fiction»[1] *Marc Augé*   Altering the point of view offers new perspectives of research, it allows to see known places as they have never been seen before. Edward Ruscha had around thirty empty parking lots photographed from above (*Thirty-Four Parking Lots*, 1967) showing an unseen Los Angeles, dominated by huge spaces built just for the cars. In 1826-27 Joseph-Nicéphore Niépce made the famous *View from the window at Le Gras*, commonly considered the first photograph in history. Louis-Jacques Mandé Daguerre in 1839 shot *Boulevard du Temple* in Paris from an elevated position realizing the oldest picture that has captured a person. The first photographer who shot from an aerostatic balloon was nevertheless Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, known as Nadar, when in 1858 he rose above Paris depicting the city as never before. From now on, as Paul Virilio states, «it is impossible to talk about art without mentioning the flight, the ascension, and this occurs from Beuys to Turrel going through many others».[2]

Last century, at the beginning of the Forties, Jackson Pollock laid canvas on the floor in order to perceive the painting from a different point of view carrying out his works as if they were landscapes observed from a plane. The environmental installations by Christo and Jeanne-Claude also favour an aerial vision. Suffice it to mention the wrapping of the Reichstag in Berlin (1971-1995) or the *Gates* (1979-2005) exhibited in Central Park in New York City for two weeks; in both cases all that remains are pictures including the most significant ones just taken from above. The same could go for *Spiral Jetty* (1970) by Robert Smithson or for other Land Art works. It all has to do with a revolution in perception that distinguishes the Old from the New Continent, «as regards the old continent, the vision over the horizon and its rail perspective; as regards the New World, the vision over the nadir from the aerial zenith: the abstract world of aeroscopy, celebrated by Nadar, which comes to the megaloscopy of television at the end of the 20th century».[3]

After the 11th September 2001 the aerial perspective has developed disturbing sides. Since then our world has become blurry, indefinite, chaotic. The view, once believed steady, has been questioned and rapidly replaced by the opposite one. The concept of Olivo Barbieri's project *site specific_* originates just following this unstable situation. Flying over the cities by helicopter allows the artist to understand how threatening is what comes from above. The work presented in this book, *site specific_NEW YORK CITY 07*, is the last part of a wider project started in 2004, consisting of photos and movies shot in several big cities around the world. Barbieri took aerial shots at a low altitude in Rome, Montreal, Amman, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Turin, Shangai, Seville, Petra, Pompeii.

Taking pictures of New York City is not so easy as it seems because it involves a certain amount of risk, first of all the risk of creating banal, ordinary images. On the other hand Olivo Barbieri succeeds in rendering a new city; shot from above, New York City keeps its memories at a distance and turns into a massive plastic model capable of transforming reality into something new, appearing changeable like a site at a planning stage. Barbieri assumes the hypothesis of a plural and fuzzy world because, as Gianni Vattimo claims, «in the aesthetics too we experience, in different ways and with different dramatic charge, what happens in science which has always been considered the place where the world appears as a single object; that is to say we experience the world is not just as one, but multiple; what we call world is perhaps only the "residual" and the normative horizon where many worlds take shape».[4]

The images achieved by the artist suggest a sort of inverted Disneyland: while at the amusement park we visit what does not exist but seems real, in Olivo Barbieri's works the reality of places is changed into a kind of oversized plastic model. In the days of Google Earth the whole planet has been mapped through photography so that the user can fly over and rotate it as if it were a planisphere on the table. A similar virtual aspect of movement may be found in the series *Atlante* by Luigi Ghirri; in 1973 this artist seized the opportunity to do a photographic trip over the paper pages of a common atlas getting a bird's eye view of them. «As the writing gradually fades away, the meridians and the parallels, mere numbers, also disappear, so the landscape becomes "natural", it is not recalled anymore but it unfolds before us as if a hand had replaced this book with a real landscape under our eyes».[5] Then Ghirri translates fiction into reality as well as it happens for the series *In scala* (1977-78) shot at Italy in Miniature in Rimini, an amusement park and a tridimensional atlas at the same time. From the top downwards visitors can have an overall view at the sights

of this miniaturized Italy walking as second Gullivers around an artificial landscape made of monuments, mountains, ruins, squares, churches and lakes. In Ghirri's pictures a *fake* landscape is taken as *true*. As cinema was the first to make fiction credible by rebuilding reality in studios, similarly in the works of Oliver Boberg, James Casebere, Miles Coolidge, Thomas Demand, Hans Op de Beeck, Edwin Zwakman, an artificial place, reconstructed in studio using light material, is rendered through photography as if shot from life.

Olivo Barbieri establishes the philosophy of his *site specific_* project by reversing these reflections. As Marc Augé points out, today «is the city of Superman and comics that real life tends to imitate. So we can metaphorically close the circle that, from a state where fiction fed on imaginary changes of reality, takes us to a state where reality tries very hard to reproduce fiction».[6] If at Disneyland the trick magically turns into reality, in Olivo Barbieri's works it is reality instead that turns into fiction, the *true* into *fake*, proving what many philosophers affirm; that is to say the distinction between reality and fiction is less and less recognizable in the urban and social space of today. *(Translation by Clara Carpanini)*