

Tangible Shadows

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Abstract: We are composed of the sum of our surroundings, of the physical and the immaterial world, of the people around us, of those who are not with us anymore, of those who were here times ago, and of those whose tears we only see in the news footage. The cities in which we lived, the conversations we had, the music we heard remain present and are parts of us. And of the imaginary personages from literary works and lyric operas who live within us in the cities. They follow us, they build us, and they hold us as if they were a rich cloud, full of unique shadows. It is the memory of our deepest experiences, our microcosm. How much does memory shape us, the memory of the place, of the past, of our ancestors? Do the trees hear and remember the voices, the thoughts, the sentiments of all those who have encountered; do we perceive this multiple reality? The current paper claims that since shadows of things past shape us psychologically, mentally, and ultimately physically, and despite not made of matter, they can be considered as being of a very palpable nature.

Keywords: matter, information, reality, art, Villa Pamphilij, exhibition.

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“Any kind of matter is about to vanish in favour of information” foreshadow Paul Virilio in early 1990’s (Virilio 1998). The disappearance would not only affect physical objects but “any kind of materiality”: the human body and the soil were bound to be rendered as irrelevant as buildings.

There are indications that this is actually happening. It has been repeatedly pointed out that although Airbnb doesn’t own a single apartment, it manages five times more rooms than Marriott’s 1,6 million; that Amazon is the biggest retailer without owning a single retail store; and that Uber provides almost 10 billion rides a year worldwide without owning a single taxi.

Disembodiment seems therefore, to be a current trend, the otaku being its most prolific representatives. These “socially withdrawn spectators yet compulsive digital communicators (Lamarre 2011)” construct personal worlds based on the advent of information technology and databases, that “rapidly weakened the sense that “reality” (or embodied communication) is more fruitful than “fiction” (or virtual reality)” (Miyadai 2011). William Mitchell was among those who believed that the new media lead to the visitor’s “disembodiment” (1994). According to this point of view, digital virtuality cuts off the viewer from the tangible, tactile sense of his corporeal integration in the world, absorbs him into the image and removes him from living reality

It seems, therefore, that we are in the midst of a de-materialization process. A process that affirms the alleged radical, almost existential dichotomy between matter and information, who supposedly are mutually exclusive.

In contrast others, such as Mark Hansen (2006) regard that the experience, which virtual reality offers is more complete since our body is also involved emotionally with the environment. The body continues to be the active participant who determines the image’s reference point. Our physical involvement with the new media allows immersion to virtual environments and is the basis of interactive integration in cyberspace. “In areas as diverse as virtual reality, video conferencing, MUDs (multi-user domain), newsgroups, electronic discussion lists, telemedicine, web-based education, flight simulation software and computer gaming, a sense of presence is vital for the success of the particular application” points out Esther Milne (2003).

Actually, people, young and old, of every sex and gender, invest a lot of money and time to keep their body up to the standards they themselves have set. However widespread is the application of filters on Instagram selfies, the number of plastic surgeries has increased manifold since the advent of social media. Painful and costly medical procedures are the order of the day, not to mention extreme cases such as Mrs Valeria Lukyanova’s who in the early 2000’s underwent several surgeries in order to make herself a lookalike of Barbie -with considerable success, actually; or Anthony Loffredo, who among other body modifications he amputated some fingers and his ears in his effort to look like a being from another planet.

How come people have such a schizophrenic attitude towards -visual- information? Towards images? A total dependence on their power to communicate, moreover to create new realities, and new identities on one hand, and a deep connection to the physical objects that form the anchor, or at least the starting point, of more or less every piece of information.

Such a “schizophrenic attitude” presupposes a dichotomy between matter and information. But does the supposed dichotomy run deep, and in the bottom line is it a dichotomy at all?

While matter is more or less easy to define, being named as such by Aristotle (ὕλη=hyle, matter) and held to be the substratum of all things tangible by the Stoics, information it is difficult to define: the more generic the definition is, in order to include every form of information, the more indefinite and vague it is. C. E. Shannon, one of the founders of the mathematical “Information Theory”, believes that information is anything that reduces uncertainty about our environment and contributes to decision making (Shannon 1993).

Information is an active agent of change in the physical world, and can be therefore be said that it configures matter in the truest sense of the word, or at least causes its configuration. No human beings -actually no living organism- could survive without information, without knowledge or sense or whatever you may call it of their surroundings. For matter to continue being organized in the way it is, forming persistent individual living organisms, which do not dissolve into their most basic constituent parts, these individuals must be fed both with matter and information.

On the other hand, the fact that physical involvement with matter can convey crucial information seems indisputable.

It can be deduced as being central to Martin Heidegger’s thought, although the controversial mid-20th c. philosopher avoided using this term. Experiencing the “thingness” of things made us humans, he claimed: it is the cornerstone of our connection with tangible things, our bond with the physical world.

Frank Jackson in the 1980’s visited the issue in a way that was closer to a positivist cum anti-physicalist approach by proposing an intellectual experiment (Jackson 1982, Jackson 1986): Will Mary (a scientist who knows everything about colors that can be transmitted explicitly, but lacks the experience of color) learn anything she didn’t know before when actually sees color? The question sparked a far-reaching philosophical debate, which dealt with issues as fundamental as the very concept of reality.

However, as well known, the concept is notoriously difficult to define -philosophers are far from agreeing on a universally accepted definition and hold widely divergent views. Immanuel Kant famously noted that “it must still remain a scandal to philosophy and to the general human reason to be obliged to assume, as an article of mere belief, the existence of things external to ourselves (from which, yet, we derive the whole material of cognition for the internal sense), and not to be able to oppose a satisfactory proof to anyone who may call it in question” (Kant 1787, pr. note 8)

According to the Cambridge Dictionary reality is ‘the state of things as they are, rather than as they are imagined to be’ (2025); a definition that avoids juxtaposing material to immaterial things, matter to information.

Plato is knowingly among the first thinkers who directly confronted the issue by claiming Reality, consists of immutable Eternal entities -the Εἶδη ('Forms') or Ideas- accessible only by reason, and not by our senses. Forms do not exist in the perceptible world, but in the heavens (Ross 1951; Welton 2002). What human perceive through their senses are but unstable, blurred and distorted shadows of real things, or Forms. Physical things are shadows of reality. Tangible shadows.

The Platonic theory of Forms has haunted art since it was formulated, two and a half millennia ago. For, it holds that artists such as painters are removed two steps from truth, in that they imitate the visible, ‘external’ features of perceptible things, which in turn are false and incomplete copies of Forms, that is to say of reality. As is well known, though, Plato’s view on art seems to have evolved over the years, allowing for the notion that the artist might help us see the true nature of the subjects depicted, most notably Gods – a view that was adopted by later followers of his thought, and especially the Neoplatonists (Roochnik 1996; Murdoch 1979).

Artworks therefore may have been upgraded in the Platonic universe from distorted images of shadows to a means to bypass shadows on the pursuit of pure knowledge.

In more mundane terms, artworks create a virtual reality, whose resemblance to reality varies significantly, depending on the nature of the artwork, its style, the context in which it is being perceived, the attitudes and ideological preconcepts of the society where it is “consumed”. Virtual worlds created by artworks tend to be immersive. Immersion into the world created by an artwork may happen in any cultural environment, from the least technologically advanced to the one using the most sophisticated equipment. A painted Christ on a church vault, or the intricate sculpture on a Hindu temple can transcend people as much as the latest virtual reality equipment.

Immersion by itself is a triumph of the sublime over a detached perception of the object-artwork, often dictated by dominant ideology and logic. Immersion mobilizes the entire human body seeking to offer a full experience. In virtual space... “this suggestive power may, for a certain time, suspend the relationship between subject and

object, and the ‘as if’ may have effects on awareness. The power of a hitherto unknown or perfected medium of illusion to deceive the senses leads the observer to act or feel according to the scene or logic of the images and, to a certain degree may even succeed in captivating awareness” pointed out Oliver Grau (Grau 2003, 17).

Materiality has historically been a prime means for creating virtual worlds. In the Greco-Roman antiquity, statues were widely considered as being possessed by gods and spirits and, consequently, as epiphanies thereof (Corso 2001). In the western cultural environment, phantasy (immaterial as it is) does not suffice for people to contact their Gods. Physical objects, material artefacts, were called upon to bridge the gap. Statues, temples and holy sites were devised to allow for people to approach the intangible. And when we do this, we immerse in both worlds, the real one made of marble and bronze and stones and mortar, and the imagined one.

We live in a period of time flooded with pictures, that succeed each other at fast pace, full of intensity, made with complex software tricking our minds; we are comfortable with this rich visual environment that entertains us but greatly contributes to our distancing from our deeper selves, our inner truths, our “souls”. By constantly looking at the world through the lenses of our screens, through the lavish choice of movies and TV series that subscription channels offer us with the help of algorithms, literally changes the world, since our taste for art, architecture, food, and aesthetics in general, changes.

But, in our times of extraordinary powerful and reality-like images, materiality is also key to not allowing virtual reality substitute for reality – for the beholder be totally transplanted into the world virtual reality carefully constructs, and therefore materiality is key to the creation of grey zones (Lefa and Parmenidis 2016).

In this context, it is important that art, and theory of art, contributes to the debate on the essence, the features and the limits of reality, and it is in this spirit that this article is written.

It is within this framework that Nora Lefa’s solo exhibition held in September 2024 in Casale dei Cedrati, Villa - Doria-Pamphili, Rome, and titled *Bodies of Shadows*, acquires its full meaning. The exhibition gives testimony to a perception of the world in all its multiplicity and to the production of artworks that tend to bring onto the surface the invisible as representations of the given reality. Essentially, they transform memory, attempting to leave its traces on “real space”; as signs of contact, meetings of people, the encounter of the past with the moment, often creating some painting not confined on a canvas, an installation; a “stage” for people to relive the moments lost as if they were “real”; moments that “they”, and many others, have not been able to force themselves upon, leaving them open to the projection of the desired and to multiple readings. To go back to the old tools, may be deducted, can help us make moving images that respect our true selves, our own fantasy, that let us time and space to exist. Texture and materiality can bring onto the surface those features that will make us feel simply there, where we truly are. And give images the capacity of being really felt– something that we can touch.

Rome is a city at once so familiar and so unknown. Its intensity, the density of information, the diversity of architectural and artistic languages, the condensation of time in a moment, and all this multiplicity of stories that the city narrates smoothly and harmoniously. This city immerses us in ourselves, opening our microcosm without restraining it, without threatening it.

This full experience it offers is like whirlwinds hugging us and changing us; the spirals being the engraved path of ephemeral footprints. Each one being different, they look like shadows of movement frozen in the moment as they wait for the new prey. They are probably the shadows of the movement of people who have been here once, who “are” here with us, or will be here at some point of time. Shadows that took flesh and bones; they wandered in parallel in the very gardens of the Villa Doria-Pamphili.



Bodies of Shadows, Solo exhibition by Nora Lefa. Villa Pamphilij, Casale dei Cedrati. Sept 1-10, 2024

When in 1644 cardinal Giambattista Pamphilij was elected Pope and took the name Innocenzo X, he transformed the small country house of his family into a majestic villa suburbana, which became known as Villa Doria Pamphilij, since a century later Giovanni Andrea IV Doria was named the heir to the name and estate of Pamphilij. Since the mid-17th c. the family had acquired the woods and vineyards at the slopes of the Giannicolo hill, south of St Peter, where once via Aureliana originated, to frame the formal gardens of their villa. Today Villa Doria Pamphilij estate constitutes the largest urban park of the eternal city, vibrant from 7am to late at night. Some five hundred meters from the villa lies the Casale dei Cedrati, the country-house of the Cedars, where the goods providing for the villa's kitchen were prepared. With solid walls and having incorporated a couple of the aqueduct of Trajan, the Casale dei Cedrati has been transformed into a cultural venue under the direct supervision of the Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali.

The topic of the exhibition was appropriate for a venue with such a past. The embodied experience of things that are not present. The presence of the past, and maybe of the future. The materiality of the shadows through which the non-present is represented.

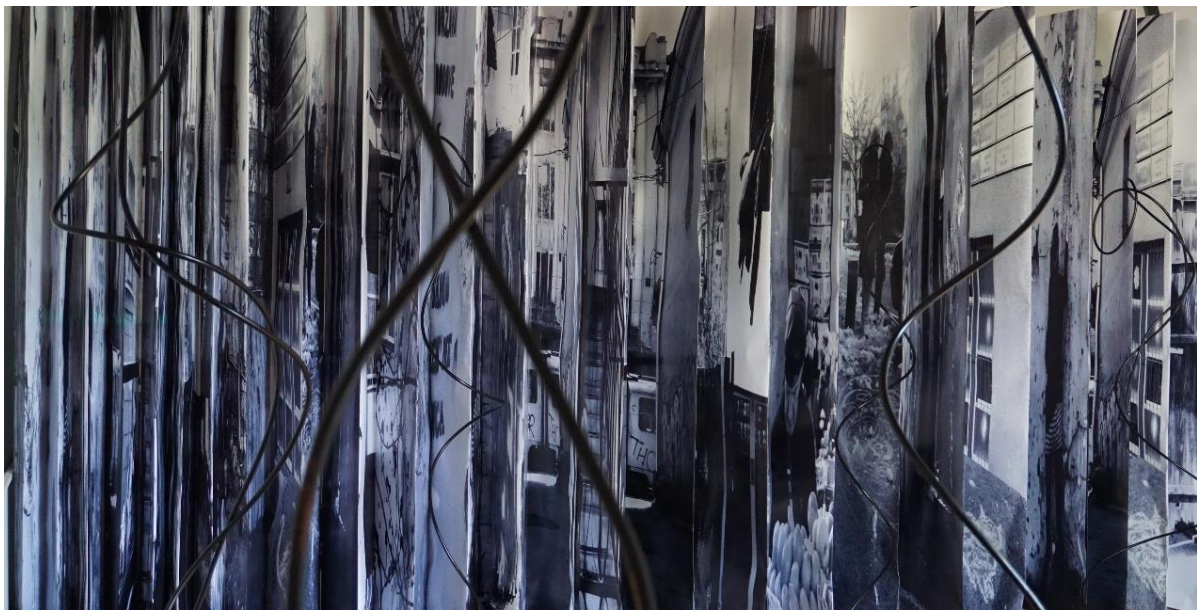


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The exhibition spoke of the time passing by, of the life we lived and that we didn't live, the dreams we made and the nightmares we are attempting to escape from. It is a narration of her young years in Sarajevo, the war that crushed her world in the 1990's; it let the visitor sense the affinity of the artist's personal experience with what happens always and everywhere. The never ceasing transformation of the present into past, the elbowing out of the feeling, the thoughts, the facts of yesterday by those of today, that nevertheless carry the mark of what they try to substitute for.

In the first hall casts of the scars made by shrapnel were juxtaposed to the scars left by the centuries passed -and possibly the Ostrogoths a millennium and a half ago -who can tell- on the ancient aqueduct. On the right-hand side, a video was playing of a performance, also in Sarajevo.

A tram with mannequins on it made its way from the city center to the suburb of Ilica, accepting regular passengers, who sat among the motionless, white figures that had taken the place of those who were no longer there, those who were killed or went far away, or those who are there, but are not: because the most human part of them has not been alive for thirty years... In the background, scarecrows dressed in wedding dresses swayed, brides who never became brides, elusive apparitions of a joy that was never experienced or that was experienced only to be canceled the next day.



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In the second hall, the visitor was greeted by figures made, as it were, with three-dimensional monograms, abstract renderings of people who, again, were and were not there. Wandering among them gave the visitor this strange feeling of being among real people, people next to us, or people who never existed, who we wish had existed, people who once were and are not now, or are now and will not be tomorrow, like all people. And - strangely enough - a radically different image could not but come to the visitor's mind: that small room in the Pamphilij's civic palace in the center of Rome, with the portrait, made by the great Velazquez, of Innocent X in red robes and austere appearance, and his masterful marble bust, made by Bernini, with the sunken cheeks, the piercing gaze, the almost living presence of a powerful man who no longer exists.

On the wall on the right, a folded structure, with fragmentary images of a city -or multiple cities?- traces of the artist's interventions in the urban space, chalk drawings on sidewalks and walls, destined to disappear with the first rain, photographs of faces that projected from windows, ruined walls, all in an uninterrupted unity, like the reality around us. Shadows passed in front - a projector projected abstract two-dimensional figures, that were distorted with every fold of the background, elusive, but present, fleeting, but always there. On the opposite wall, human figures, also projected, floated in the sky - an eerie, but also so familiar, human cloud. From everywhere, voices from the past could be heard, like the voices that have marked us, but which the passage of time has turned into whispers. Whispers, then, whispers everywhere, incomprehensible to the visitor, but whispers, certainly, that told us something that we could not understand - and that perhaps we did not need to understand. And, in the third hall, a projection played in perpetual repetition a wandering in Sarajevo. A scene of building facades without buildings behind them, scarred by war, without people, empty tram cars, an eerie landscape,

with dogs barking in the background, but also divine music, Jascha Heifetz performing the Chaconne by Tommaso Antonio Vitali.

Outside in the garden, other human figures, like three-dimensional monocots, one under each arch of the aqueduct that served as the villa's outer wall. From hidden speakers, the whispers that accompanied us to the rooms could also be heard here. Further on, right at the entrance to the Casale courtyard, in a fountain with a grotto like those used in the Renaissance, a scarecrow dressed in a wedding dress tried to remain afloat. Perhaps the conclusion of a drama that will remain forever unknown to us, yet always present.

We are not alone, even when we are -thankfully. We are composed of the sum of our surroundings, of the physical and the immaterial world, of the people around us, of those who are not with us anymore, of those who were here times ago, and of those whose tears we only see in the news footage. And of the imaginary personages from literary works and lyric operas who live within us in the cities. The cities in which we lived, the conversations we had, the music we heard, remain present and come with us. They follow us, they shape us, and they hold us as if they were a rich cloud, full of unique shadows. It is the memory of our deepest experiences, our microcosm. How much does the collective memory shape us, the memory of the place, of the past, of our ancestors? Do the trees hear and remember the voices, the thoughts, the sentiments of all those who have encountered; do we perceive this multiple reality? Everybody has their own small cloud, their small world which meets with that of the person nearby. And then, there are bigger and bigger ones and deeper and further away; no, we are not alone, even when we are, and this is probably good.

The magic happens when history is present in the moment, when people seem to have been there forever, when buildings seem to be extensions of nature, just to complete the picture; it is the state of two distant moments being related; the experience in which the past intertwines with the present and is brought back to life. In such a milieu the artist can feel the tension of the invisible condensed information and represent it with the stroke of a brush, opening new horizons, making a comment, giving a new interpretation, or awakening our dead parts into feeling, into breathing, into reviving people living there.

Theodor Adorno writes in his *Aesthetic Theory*: “Art is utopia, the counter-factual yet-to-come is draped in Black, it goes on being a recollection of the possible with a critical edge against the real.... It is the possible, as promised by its impossibility. Art is the promise of happiness, a promise that is constantly being broken” (Adorno 1984, 196).



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