Commissioning, photography and the crisis of territorial political representation

William Guerrieri

1. Public commissioning and photography in the 2000s in Italy

On the occasion of the signing of the European Landscape Convention in Florence, 2000, an exhibition was held entitled *Luoghi come paesaggi*,[1] with works from six of the most meaningful public projects staged in Europe in the 1990s.[2] The six surveys featured in the exhibition (Archivio dello spazio, Ekodok-90, Linea di Confine per la Fotografia Contemporanea, Mission Photographique Trasnmanche, Osservatorio Venezia-Marghera and Vinex Photo Project) fully represented a variety of approaches and production methods, with a significant selection of works by artists of national and international standing.

As had already emerged from the research into public survey projects carried out by the Nederlands Foto Instituut (NFI) in 1998 with *SubUrban Options*, in each of the projects presented, the local territorial dimension – or at most the regional character – of each of the commissioning studies stood out clearly, being financed largely by the political and administrative bodies of the respective territories. Nevertheless, in almost all the projects presented, the studies had begun to consider the effects that globalisation was having on the territories, and to observe how cultural identities were being threatened by such transformations.

While the European Convention in Florence established that the notion of landscape would also have to take into consideration the perception and experience of inhabitants, the exhibition testified to how contemporary photography considered all built elements as an already integral part of the landscape: urban spaces, interiors and even the images themselves stored in the archives. What's more, in the work of some of the artists on show (Lewis Baltz, Jean-Louis Garnell, Oscar Van Alphen and Hans Werlemann), an interest emerged for the integration of photography with various other media – video, writing and graphics – in response to the issue of understanding a reality which had become all too complex to be analysed through the classical forms of documentation.

Documentary photography underwent a period of great transformation in the 1990s. Two publicly commissioned projects set up in Italy – the first, Archivio dello spazio, in the mid '80s and the second, Linea di Confine, towards the end of the decade – expressed different positions on photography as a 'document'[3] and on the role of the photographer in the public survey that we are analysing here, and indeed they were to undergo further major development in the survey projects promoted throughout the first decade of the new millennium.

Since the early 2000s, the Museo di Fotografia Contemporanea[4] in Cinisello Balsamo, headed by Roberta Valtorta, has produced a series of research projects, going beyond the study methodology aimed at the documentation of architectural and environmental heritage in the province of Milan, which had characterised the ten-year project titled *Archivio dello spazio* (1987-1997). After *Milano Senza Confini* (1999), through *Idea di Metropoli* (2000-2002) the museum entrusted eight young Italian photographers with the task of working "on the notion of the metropolis," insofar as it was believed that photography, for the new generations, had moved away

[1] W. Guerrieri, G. Guidi & M. R. Nappi (eds.), *Luoghi come paesaggi. Fotografia e committenza pubblica in Europa negli anni '90*, published by Municipality of Rubiera /Linea di Confine Editore, Rubiera, 2000.

[2] The idea of staging the show with the selection of a group of European public commission projects started out from the research carried out on such projects in 1998 by the Nederlands Foto Instituut (NFI) and published in *SubUrban Options*, NFI, Rotterdam, 1998.

[3] In this regard, see also my "Attualità del documentario" in R. Valtorta (ed.), *Luogo e identità nella fotografia italiana contemporanea,* Einaudi, Turin, 2013, pp. 193-256.

[4] Museo di Fotografia Contemporanea (www.mufoco.org).

from the idea of the document, expressing itself ever more as an 'individual experience'.[5] This was followed by *Storie immaginate in luoghi reali* (2007), in which the photographers involved were specifically invited to develop their research on the basis of a 'personal motivation'. The theme of the freedom of the photographer subjected to various limits, debated at great length as part of *Archivio dello spazio*, thus seemed to translate into the acceptance of the end of photography as a 'document' and of the fact that the public commission – in the light of the new role played by the photographer as an artist within an entirely different cultural scene – would become "a container of creative solitude."[6] Around the end of the decade, the Museo di Fotografia Contemporanea in Cinisello Balsamo would whole-heartedly back projects, defined as 'public art', in which the commissioned artist was called upon to involve the public and citizens in the creation of the works, produced using various media such as print, video and installation.[7]

In this same decade, Linea di Confine per la Fotografia Contemporanea,[8] a cultural association founded in 1989 with the support of public bodies from the provinces of Reggio Emilia and Modena, headed by Paolo Costantini, requalified a study model in the field of commissioning, revolving around the figure of the photographer and the 'project' itself. In Costantini's view, accepting the 'constitutive ambiguity' of photography as an intrinsic part of the medium meant eliminating the distinction between photography as a means of artistic expression and as a document.[9] The act of photographing, as the "redefinition of our field of observation and the regeneration of our reading capacities," would come full circle in the *Laboratori di fotografia* ('photography workshops') offered by Linea di Confine,[10] open to participation from young authors, in which the leading photographer is called upon to define his/her own visual 'project'. Coordinated by a workgroup made up of photographers, city planners and photography historians, Linea di Confine interfaces with public bodies and private subjects across the territory with whom it shares study aims and receives the financial support necessary to produce exhibitions and publications. The works produced and gathered in the collection represent a form of documentation of great cultural value on the socio-economic transformations of the Emilia-Romagna Region,[11] thus affirming the 'public' role that photography may take on through commissioning.

After a long series of territorial surveys accompanied by the *Laboratori di fotografia* in the 1990s and by the survey *Via Emilia. Fotografie luoghi e non luoghi 1 e 2*[12] in 1999-2000, on the Via Emilia road that crosses the entire region, the theme of infrastructures returned to the heart of an ongoing study from 2003 to 2009 on the construction of the new high-speed railway line (TAV), titled *Linea veloce Bologna-Milano*.[13] The provisional nature of the sites, the notion of progress and the 'risk' deriving from the environmental impact and the vulnerability of the work, and well as the 'reconstruction' of the landscape are just some of the themes addressed by the authors in a freeform dialogue. With the same study methodology, Linea di Confine went on to accept a commission

---

[5] R. Valtorta, "L'Archivio dello spazio", in R. Valtorta (ed.), *Fotografia e committenza pubblica. Esperienze storiche e contemporanee*, published by Lupetti, Milan, 2009, p. 75.

[6] Ibid, p. 78.

[7] In this regard, see Matteo Balduzzi, "Narrazioni collettive dello spazio pubblico", in R. Valtorta (ed.), *Luogo e identità nella fotografia italiana contemporanea*, op. cit., pp. 257-331.

[8] Linea di Confine per la Fotografia Contemporanea (www.lineadiconfine.org).

[9] P. Costantini, "Cultura dell'architettura, cultura della fotografia: feconde inquietudini", in A. Sacconi (ed.), *Beni architettonici e ambientali: l'immagine fotografica*, published by Unicopli, Milan, 1991, p. 83.

[10] The *Laboratori di fotografia* that accompanied the territorial studies of Linea di Confine were a space open to discussion and research into the documentary role of photography. Over a period of ten or fifteen days, the young photographers who took part were called upon to develop their own visual project, to be displayed in the final show of the workshop alongside that of the photographer leading it.

[11] T. Seelig & U. Stahel (eds.), *Trans Emilia. The Linea di Confine Collection: a Territorial Reconnaissance of the Emilia-Romagna*, Christoph Merian, Basel, 2005.

[12] W. Guerrieri (ed.), *Via Emilia. Fotografie, luoghi e non luoghi 2*, published by Municipality of Rubiera / Linea di Confine Editore, Rubiera, 2000.

[13] See the series by W. Guerrieri & T. Serena (eds.), *"Linea veloce Bologna-Milano"*, published by Linea di Confine editore, Rubiera, 2003-2009.

from the Consorzio Venezia Nuova for a research project on the construction of the MOSE: the work built to defend Venice from flood waters.[14]

Other public commissions were organised over the course of the decade in Italy by associations, public bodies, museums, festivals and foundations, though there is not room here to offer an adequate summary of all of them.[15] Of course, we must remember however that the intervention of the Italian state, which organised various surveys throughout the national territory from 2003 onwards, first with the *Direzione generale per l'architettura e l'arte contemporanee* ('General Directorship for Contemporary Art and Architecture', or DARC) of the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities and then with the MAXXI Museum,[16] undertaking a series of research programmes entrusted to a consistent group of Italian photographers on the sectors of interest of the museum, i.e. the landscape, the territory, urbanism and architecture, also with a view to putting together a photography collection.[17] While in Italy in the 1970s and '80s the transformations had been less widespread and apparent, from the 1990s onwards the changes which envelop a historically fragile territory – as also confirmed by the studies undertaken by the MAXXI itself – seem to be more impactful and spread over a supranational scale. These transformations would have major consequences also over the first decade of the new millennium also on public commissioning, on the establishment of new self-commissioning subjects and on the new documentary purpose taken on by photography in multidisciplinary projects.

2. Globalisation and 'new realism' in multidisciplinary projects

The 1990s largely coincided with a growing interest in urban spaces and the development of megalopolises, into which most of the inhabitants of the planet began to amass. Around the contemporary metropolises, new political and economic interests began to develop. In the research activity carried out by architecture studies and artist's networks, photography began to be a key element of multidisciplinary work.

A meaningful shift away from photography, which in the '90s in Italy – and also in Europe – had largely represented the landscape and the contemporary city, came from the architect Stefano Boeri, cofounder of the Multiplicity collective.[18] On the occasion of the exhibition *Instant City: fotografia e metropoli* held at the Centro Pecci[19] in Prato, Boeri claimed that the "paradox intrinsic to the relationship between photography and the contemporary city is in fact rooted in the absolute futility or, even worse, in the concealing effect that is to be found today in most so-called

---

[14] A. Frongia (ed.), *Stephen Shore. Mose: a Preliminary Report*, Linea di Confine, Rubiera, 2011 and Tiziana Serena (ed.), *Walter Niedermayr. Mose*, published by Linea di Confine, Rubiera, 2011.

[15] In this regard see R. Valtorta, "In cerca dei luoghi (non si trattava solo di paesaggio)", in R. Valtorta (ed.), *Luogo e identità nella fotografia italiana contemporanea,* cit., pp. 3-108.

[16] MAXXI (www.maxxi.art).

[17] The projects produced are *Atlante italiano 003. Ritratto dell'Italia che cambia* (2003), which starting from the notion of the widespread city, diluted along the major infrastructures, identifies ten key points throughout the Italian territory for the study; *Sguardi contemporanei. 50 anni di architettura italiana* (2004), a study project on ten Italian architectural works entrusted to the gaze of ten photographers; *Cantiere d'autore* (2004-2008) on the ongoing production of photographs of the building site of the MAXXI; *Atlante italiano 007. Rischio paesaggio. Ritratto dell'Italia che cambia* (2007), which focuses on the theme of 'risk' deriving from unbridled economic development, unauthorised building, the abandonment of building structures and tourist consumption. See F. Fabiani (ed.), *MAXXI Architettura. Fotografia. Le collezioni*, Electa, Milan, 2010.

[18] Multiplicity is a research agency based in Milan, founded by Stefano Boeri, Francisca Inzulza, Francesco Jodice, Giovanni La Varra, John Palmesino, Lorenzo Romito, Carole Schmit and Paolo Vari.

[19] Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci.

'landscape photography', which continues unheeded to carry out a process of patient and pointless reinterpretation of the territory."[20]

It is clear from these statements that among those working in the fields of urban analysis and transformation, there is a general dissatisfaction with a kind of photography which is all too problematic, having become overly subjective and often used to pondering its own statute, and thus unsuited to participating in a multidisciplinary project.

With a view to carrying out an analysis or the urban space that might go beyond the traditional overarching paradigm of disciplinary representation, Boeri proposed building a series of 'eclectic atlases',[21] i.e. 'montages of representation' featuring texts, ground plans, graphic elaborations, photographs and videos. The loss of authoriality demanded of photographers, with a view to incorporating photography into the flow of information withheld in the 'eclectic atlas', emerges as one of the distinctive characteristics of Multiplicity as well as of other research projects of a multidisciplinary nature which were to be developed over the course of the decade.

The project *Mutations*,[22] presented by Rem Koolhaas with Multiplicity in 2002 at *Documenta XI* in Kassel, was compared to a hypertext in which one may move through the vast documentary framework made up of texts, diagrams and photographs, all gathered and organised by architects, artists, city planners and economists over the net.[23] As Nicola Privileggio observed, *Mutations* intended to present "a vast audience with a series of themes without the filter that derives from the codified language and conceptual categories of architecture and urbanism. In this communicative effort, we may grasp an attempt to reset the tools and the vocabulary traditionally used by these disciplines to describe the city."[24] Privileggio's observations also appear pertinent to the role that photography takes on within the communicative context of the event. The resetting implemented of the vocabulary of the disciplines in fact concerns the medium itself, for it used here as a simple source of information both when it is authorial and when it comes from archival or journalistic sources. The net, as a data-gathering system of a post-ideological nature, plays an important role here, insofar as it seems to impose the strength of 'reality' – as expressed both by data and photography – over abstract constructions.

Another research project like that of Multiplicity which around the end of the same decade used artists' photographs, snapshots, the reproduction of images from local newspapers and archive photos was *Migropolis. Venice as an Atlas for a Global Situation*, produced within the teaching framework of the IUAV University of Venice. The study focus of Migropolis is migration, considered as a set of flows, taking the city of Venice as its arena of investigation, which serves here as the paradigm of a phenomenon of global dimensions.

Various observatories and reviewers of exhibitions over the course of the first decade of the new millennium speak of 'new realism',[25] of projects that soil their hands with the nitty-gritty of reality.[26] Even Wolfgang Scheppe, founder and curator of Migropolis, states the need to dispose of "a cognitive image" and that snapshot photography is perceived "as a sensorial certainty," unlike

[20] S. Boeri, "Alcuni paradossi nel rapporto tra fotografia e città contemporanea", in F. Maggia (ed.), *Instant city: fotografia e metropoli*, Baldini & Castoldi, Milan, 2001. In note 5 of the text, Stefano Boeri lists the landscape photography projects which in his view have this kind of problematic nature: the Archivio dello Spazio, Linea di Confine per la Fotografia Contemporanea, the Mission Photographique Transmanche, the Osservatorio Venezia-Marghera and the Vinex Photo Project.

[21] S. Boeri, "Per un 'atlante eclettico' del territorio italiano", in *Sezioni del paesaggio Italiano,* Art&, Udine 1997.

[22] R. Koolhaas et all. (ed.), *Mutations*, Actar, Barcelona 2000.

[23] Sometimes the photographs are professionally shot and grouped together in thematic portfolios, at other times they introduce the sections drawing on thematic imagery, or come from different sources to illustrate the texts, cited at the end of the publication. The section "USE (Uncertain States of Europe)"*,* curated by Multiplicity*,* presents twenty-six cases of research carried out by just as many research networks in various parts of Europe, representative of the processes of transformation of the urban space.

[24] N. Privileggio, *Tra "nuovo realismo" e ideologia: riflessioni dopo Mutations*, in http://architettura.it/files/20001206/index.htm.

[25] Ibid.

professional photography, which excludes, cuts and hierarchises.[27] If we consider that within the Migropolis project, thirty thousand deliberately non-professional snapshot images were produced, of which two thousand were included in the exhibition, alongside hundreds of thematic maps, infographics, as well as a great quantity of images from the local daily press, we can understand the attempt to produce a fruition of the materials on display in which the critical distance and the capacity for visual reading are inevitably excluded to make way for a 'cold shower of reality'.

The new 'realist' function taken on by photography in the studies of a multidisciplinary nature over the first decade of the 2000s reminded some of the militant photography of the '70s and the work of authors from the Marxist camp, such as Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler, who had taken up a critical stance towards modernism. As far back as the 1980s with *Fish Story*, Sekula had addressed the global dimension of the territory, in the sense of 'territory as capital'. While the process of his documentation does turn out to be fragmentary, made up of photographs, texts, reproductions of documents, it is pieced back together in a montage that produces a "cognitive space"[28] of a self-reflective nature, an approach that Sekula himself defines as "critical realism." As has been observed, the expression 'critical realism' brings together two words that in the 20th century were unwilling bedfellows.[29] Despite that, in Sekula's work, it stands for a working method which allows him to construct representations of complex phenomena, ushering in new research possibilities.[30]

Around the turn of the new century, the problematic nature of a photography all too used to questioning itself and its own limits and mandate began to be considered by architects, city planners, sociologists and contemporary philosophers as too self-referential and insufficiently useful when representing the transformations underway on a grand scale. While multidisciplinary research certainly offers the chance for an exchange of knowledge and research methods among various disciplines – as well as the scope to analyse complex phenomena – doubts and questions arise when the vocabularies of the disciplines involved are reset and the critical distance in the interpretation of materials is eliminated.[31] This critique most of all concerns the multidisciplinary projects which prefigure new and imposing narrative orders through the montage of information, while those photographers who adopt the "montages of representations"[32] strategy (i.e. without the 'communicative' aim of multidisciplinary projects) clearly have room to exert some form of control over their own projects.

---

[26] Anna Detheridge speaks of 'new realism' on the of the exhibition *Arte pubblica in Italia. Lo spazio delle relazioni*. Fondazione Pistoletto, Biella 2003.

[27] See the interview by Antonello Frongia with Wolfgang Scheppe titled "Venezia globale", published in *Il Manifesto* on 15.11.2019.

[28] Allan Sekula designed his installation as a hybrid of three spaces: that of the art gallery, of the reading room and of film screenings, believing it important to respect the right distance between images and texts, and so to allow the spectator various forms of fruition.

[29] H. van Gelder & J. Baetens, *A Note on Critical Realism Today,* in *Critical Realism in Contemporary Art. Around Allan Sekula's Photography*, Leuven University Press, Leuven, 2010.

[30] We need to bear in mind that 'realism' in photography may be merely a project and not a characteristic embedded in the medium itself. In fact, we need to distinguish between 'naturalism' and 'realism', and recall how "a critique of naturalism in realist photography has to do with propaganda, implicit in every form of visual communication." In this regard, see also *Jorge Ribalta on Documentary and Democracy,* interview by Guy Lane, 2 July, 2009, in http://www.foto8.com/live/jorge-ribalta-on-documentary-and-democracy/.

[31] Speaking of which, it is interesting to recall the critical analysis of Hal Foster on the cultural superiority of cognitive mapping, which leads the observer to remove the layers of culture of the study, confirming the authoriality of the one who outlines it. H. Foster in *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1996, ed.it. *Il ritorno del reale. L'avanguardia alla fine del Novecento,* Postmedia, Milan, 2006, pp. 191-194.

[32] As a reflection and contribution to the practice of the 'montages of representations', I suggested considering the model of 'documentary realism', used as far back as the day of Raffaele Donnarumma in *Ipermodernit: Dove va la letteratura contemporanea,* Il Mulino, Bologna, 2014. As Donnarumma states, "in hyper-modern documentary poetics, the source is displayed in its reading and in its otherness, and the tale becomes pluri-vocal by statute. The document is the written word; indeed, it is the very foundation of sociality."

Lastly, I find little interest in the discussions on the end or 'death' of photography in the post-modernist area, ones which have long tormented the debate on photography also in Italy. These stances sometimes seem to be the sole theoretical pretext underpinning practices that conceal their underlying ideology.

3. Self-commissioning and the crises of territorial political representation

Two elements seem to have developed hand in hand over the first decade of the 2000s and to have accompanied the growing crisis in public commissioning in Italy: the new documentary function taken on by photography, as mentioned previously, and the self-commissioning nature of numerous subjects which in various ways have carried out territorial surveys.

The history of public commissions in Italy provides us with a huge number of study projects on which to reflect, and allows us to make considerations useful for understanding the cultural and political reasons which lay behind it (especially since the 1980s) and which led to the state of crisis felt since the end of the '90s. While the state intervened in Italy only from 2003 onwards with survey projects across the national territory, territorial bodies such as municipalities, provincial councils, consortia, public libraries, tourist information centres, healthcare providers and others have promoted and organised a great number of photographic studies of a local nature, especially on the transformations concerning the landscape since the 1980s. Although the fragility of such experiences and the scarce preparation of the commissioners have been underlined more than once,[33] this multitude of experiences shows how in the absence of the state, perhaps more than in other European countries, there has been a significant and widespread presence across the Italian territory of public bodies commissioning studies. The reasons for this presence of public subjects may be sought out in the actions that local administrations, especially in the central-northern areas of the country, have carried out in the complex management of the economic and cultural development of these territories.[34]

I believe we may state that, in terms of the quantity and quality of the interventions carried out, the crisis in public commissioning felt in Italy from the 1990s onwards may largely be attributed to a crisis of territorial political representation. As well as the general discredit that politics fell into following the various judiciary enquiries in Italy from the early 1990s, in the wake of the globalisation process, a series of far-reaching phenomena such as the eclipsing of the public sphere, the transformation of the social space[35] and the transformation of the political sphere into a media sphere emerged.[36] Many *fin-du-siècle* analyses underlined the dematerialised nature of the new spatiality, the predominance of 'flows' over 'places',[37] and the general 'liquefying' process of the contexts of human action. The consequence of this was the crisis of the political space and its material sphere of reference, i.e. the territory, and along with it the crisis of representative

---

[33] With regard to the public projects carried out in the 1980s, see R. Valtorta, "Fotografia e committenza pubblica", in *Casabella*, No. 560, September 1989. For those carried out in the 1990s and 2000s, see R. Valtorta, "In cerca dei luoghi (non si trattava solo di paesaggio)", op. cit.

[34] In this regard the role carried out by the Istituto per i Beni Culturali (IBC) of the Emilia-Romagna Regional Council in the 1970s is emblematic, with a series of photographic surveys aimed at the protection and reappraisal of the town centres of the main cities in the region, a project on which, among others, Paolo Monti was asked to collaborate. See Andrea Emiliani, "Paolo Monti e i centri storici dell'Emilia Romagna", in R. Valtorta (ed.), *Fotografia e committenza pubblica. Esperienze storiche e contemporanee*, op. cit.

[35] It was observed by Marco Revelli as the "social space," a space of human relations, both "in strict symbiosis with and direct dependence on technique," ultimately becoming a "technological product" and thus undergoing profound change. M. Revelli, *Post-Sinistra. Cosa resta della politica in un mondo globalizzato*, Laterza, Bari, 2014.

[36] M. Revelli, *Post-Sinistra. Cosa resta della politica in un mondo globalizzato*, op. cit., pp. 52-64.

[37] M. Castells, *The Rise of Network Society*, Blackwell, Cambridge (Mass.), 1996. See also A. Bonomi, *Sotto la pelle dello stato. Rancore, cura, operosità*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 2010.

democracy, which in particular concerns forms of territorial organisation and their capacity to be politically representative.

As well as the crisis in public commissioning, over the first decade of the new millennium the emergence of various initiatives of self-commissioning may be noted. We refer here not only to the projects described above, such as Multiplicity, Migropolis and others, which were largely expressions of the professional activities of networks of architects, urbanists and sociologists, but also the spontaneous appearance across the national territory of groups and collectives of photographers.[38] In order to fully understand what is probably an entirely Italian phenomenon, we first of all need to distinguish between these activities of self-commissioning and those which have historically been undertaken by photographers as part of their own personal research activities, including those in the social sphere, insofar as such activities displayed a 'public' nature, probably designed to fill the void left by the lack of public commissioning.

One initial consideration is that these photography collectives are often formed in response to the precarious conditions of employment in which many young photographers, architects and arts graduates find themselves at the end of their training. More often than not, they are constituted on the occasion of workshops, group shows or as a spontaneous form of solidarity in the light of tragic events, in a sort of 'emergency approach', as was the case with Confotografia:[39] a research project that involved over fifty photographers, forming spontaneously after the earthquake that hit L'Aquila in 2013. Other collectives came together around the theme of the 'risk' inherent to major infrastructures, such as Calamita/à[40] which was founded to recall the tragedy of Vajont in 1963; Planar,[41] which came into being as an archive of the photographs of the 'No TAV' groups; or Exposed,[42] founded in 2013 on the occasion of the EXPO in Milan, ceasing activity at the end of the event. The theme of the territorial survey, associated with the staging of workshops that serve to finance the activities of the collective, is addressed with a certain degree of continuity by groups such as Dehaphoto,[43] Osservatorio Fotografico[44] and Lugo Land,[45] whose activity also involves the production of exhibitions and the publication of photography books.

There is a difference here from the activity of groups or collectives of photographers that form actual agencies, like Cesura,[46] Planar,[47] Terraproject[48] or Urban Reports,[49] operating in Italy and beyond, with approaches lying between documentation and reportage, often publishing the outcome of their studies themselves. Lastly, along with many others, among the initiatives carried out via web by groups or collectives, we should signal the activity of platforms such as Documentary Platform,[50] in which the presentation of research projects on the territory sets out to foster the exchange of experiences between photographers on research themes and approaches.

An obvious observation, yet one with manifold consequences, is that many of these experiences are characterised by the absence of any kind of relationship with a commissioning subject. We must remember that the public commissioning model foresees the presence of three subjects: the

---

[38] For an overview of these collectives, groups and agencies, see S. Rössl and M. Sordi (eds.), *Sifest#23 laboratorio Italia atlante.it.*, published by Pazzini Editore, Rimini, 2014.

[39] From 20 to 26 September 2013, more than fifty photographers met up in L'Aquila, without a commission and at their own expense, to take part in Confotografia (www.confotografia.net).

[40] The project *Calamita/à* (www.calamita.net) is a territorial study tool, operating in the field of analysis of the morphology of the territory, orography, infrastructures and architecture.

[41] Planar (www.planar.ph).

[42] Exposed (www.exposedproject.net).

[43] Deahophoto/Notturni urbani (www.deaphoto.it) also carries out research on the metropolitan area of Florence.

[44] Osservatorio fotografico (www.osservatoriofotografico.it) organises workshops and studies in the area of Ravenna.

[45] Lugo Land (www.lugoland.it) organises territorial studies in the area of Lugo.

[46] Cesura (www.cesura.it).

[47] Planar (www.planar.ph).

[48] Terraproject (www.terraproject.net).

[49] Urban Reports (www.urbanreports.org).

[50] Documentary Platform (www.documentaryplatform.com).

commissioner, the photographer and a mediator, who serves as an artistic or technical-scientific director. The latter plays a role which is distinct from that of the exhibition curator or catalogue editor, and is an important – yet often overlooked – figure in the commissioning process, reappraised only recently in the experiences of public art. We must therefore bear in mind that self-commissioning experiences are characterised by the fact that, rolling together the three roles into a single subject, they become commissioner, interpreter and at the same time mediator of the needs of the territory and its inhabitants. Therefore, apart from the occasional and fragile nature that characterises these largely self-supporting study experiences, there is a constant problem in the approach to their 'ideological patronage', as highlighted by Hal Foster with regard to the artist acting as an anthropologist.[51]

Nevertheless, from this multiform activity a persistent interest also emerges among the new generations of photographers in the fate of the landscape viewed as a common asset, although for them it would appear to represent an element of 'local' rather than national identity, unlike for the generations of photographers in the 1980s.[52]

While the forms of communication adopted in the sharing of study results and in the promotion of publications largely – though not exclusively – make use of the web and social media, the territorial dimension, in its actual physicality, is still present in the perception of young photographers, and so perhaps there has also been an excessive emphasis on theorising the 'dematerialisation' of the social space, meant as one of human relations. This consideration finds further confirmation in the fact that many of these research projects make use of a kind of documentary photography – both in multidisciplinary projects and more authorial practices – which in the solutions adopted, also presents the photographic image as a 'document' and tool of analysis and of relationship with reality.

If like Aldo Bonomi we acknowledge the contemporary nature of the conflict between economic, human and cultural 'flows and places', i.e. local contexts and societies,[53] then even in the most spontaneous forms that have emerged through self-commissioning, territorial surveys respond to the need to produce a knowledge process, one which has all the makings of an 'awareness of place'.[54] In our era of 'disintermediation' and of deep-seated crisis in the political sphere, the needs for re-territorialisation aimed at rediscovering communities, in my opinion, have to evolve and relate to their territorial political representation, and to contribute to its renewal themselves as an essential element for the functioning of any civil and democratic system.

---

[51] H. Foster, "Il ritorno del reale. L'avanguardia alla fine del Novecento", in op. cit., pp. 201-203.
[52] I owe this observation to Antonello Frongia.
[53] See A. Bonomi, *Sotto la pelle dello stato. Rancore, cura, operosità*, op. cit., p. 35.
[54] A. Bonomi, *Coscienza di classe, coscienza di luogo*, in Various Authors, *Sinistra senza sinistra. Idee plurali per uscire dall'angolo*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 2008, p. 128.