diségno 12.2023

unione italiana disegno

12.2023

diségno

ISSN 2533-2899

english version

diségno

12.2023

POINTS OF VIEW FROM ABOVE

diségno

Biannual Journal of the UID Unione Italiana per il Disegno Scientific Society
n. 12/2023
http://disegno.unioneitalianadisegno.it

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Cover
Cesare Battelli, The flight of Icarus, 2023, detail.

The published articles have been subjected to double blind peer review, which entails selection by at least two international experts on specific topics.
For Issue No. 12/2023, the evaluation of contributions has been entrusted to the following referees:
Fabrizio Agnello, Adriana Arena, Marinella Arena, Fabrizio Avella, Laura Baratin, Fabio Bianconi, Maurizio Marco Bocconcino, Alessio Bortot, Pedro Cabezos Bernal, Cristina Càndito, Mara Capone, Alessio Cardaci, Camilla Casonato, Stefano Chiarenza, Daniele Colistra, Giuseppe D'Acunto, Manuel De Miguel, Laura Farroni, Isabella Friso, Giorgio Garzino, Gianmarco Girgenti, Manuela Incerti, Gabriella Liva, Paz Llorente, Concha Lopez, Maria Martone, Alessandra Meschini, Marco Muscogiuri, Lia Maria Papa, Assunta Pelliccio, Nicola Pisacane, Manuela Piscitelli, Fabio Quici, Adriana Rossi, Maria Elisabetta Ruggiero, Marta Salvatore, Salvatore Santuccio, Giovanna Spadafora, Ruggero Torti, Daniele Villa.

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The journal *diségno* is included in the list of scientific journals of the National Agency for the Evaluation of the University System and Research (ANVUR) for the non-bibliometric area 08 - Civil Engineering and Architecture and is indexed on Scopus.

Published in June 2023

ISSN 2533-2899

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High/Other Looks. Different 'Points of View' in 20th Century Art

Luca Palermo

In 1960 Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) published *El hacedor*, a collection of short stories and poems through which he narrates personal events and impressions, something unusual for the Argentine writer. In the *Epilogue*, he presents us, in a few lines, the story of a painter who, throughout his life, painted landscapes, kingdoms, mountains, islands, people; on his deathbed, the realizes that this tangle of lines, shapes and colors represents nothing but his face: his representation of reality is his self-portrait [1].
Our identity, therefore, is formed, or at least strengthened, also through the ways in which we observe the world, confront ourselves with it and cross it. The city and the landscape, essential components and integral parts of the world system, have therefore become mechanisms of representation and self-representation closely connected to (and perhaps deriving from them) their evolution and transformation. It is not a coincidence, in fact, that the interest of art for the city and for its complex and constant development has become a sort of *leitmotif*, especially starting from the avant-garde of the first decades of the 20th century. The one 'told' by the artists is a city that has lost, or is losing, its well-defined spatial unity; a city that has now become a metropolitan landscape; that city-labyrinth narrated by Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) in his *Das Passagenwerk* [Benjamin 1982], which, with its boulevards and buildings, creates new subjective and collective identities.
If the city and, therefore, the landscape change, their perception and representation also change: art, in line with the coeval technical-scientific discoveries, imposes

This article was written upon invitation to frame the topic, not submitted to anonymous review, published under the editorial director's responsibility.

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new strategies, new means and new methods to give back to the user all the complexity and semantic stratification, at times disorienting, of this apparently unstoppable urban expansion. Thus, the artist's gaze becomes a point of view able of creating strong connections and establishing references and relationships between the subjectivity of the creator and the objectivity of the urban and landscape context of reference. It is precisely through the subjectivity of the point of view that the spectator and/or the user perceive the infinite possibilities of narrating a reality that seems well framed in a scheme that is difficult to ignore.
Without going too far back in time, without bothering Icarus and the bird's eye view, the desire to change the point of view and to transpose the result of this change onto paper, canvas, film or other support, has undergone a sharp acceleration with the advent of industrial society: perspective space and historical time, typical coordinates of urban planning from the Renaissance to the 19th century, no longer seem to be essential starting points for artistic creation.
If the famous aerial image produced in 1855 by the French photographer Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, better known as Nadar (1820-1910), literally moves up (with the help of a hot air balloon anchored at eighty meters high) the artistic gesture, the evolution of the viewpoint tends to reach extremes about half a century later with the appearance on the European scene, but not only, of those that artistic historiography usually defines as historical avant-gardes: Cubism, Futurism and Dadaism became, in fact, an integral part of a wider socio-cultural renewal driven by the coeval technical-scientific transformations; above all Max Planck's quantum theory of 1901 and Albert Einstein's theory of relativity of 1905. Until then, as Giovanni Lista recalled, "the aerial view cannot yet offer a new visual model, nor stimulate the imaginary, because it is conditioned by the traditional canons of landscape and urban representation" [Lista 2009, p. 237; translated by the author].
May 30, 1912 Wilbur Wright dies (1867-1912); in that same year, Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) creates a series of works whose title, *Notre Avenir est dans l'Air*, taking up a slogan of the Michelin airship company, seems to pay homage to the pioneer of flight and reveal the interest in the airplane, considered, by the artist, both machine and device able to change the aesthetic point of view [2].

Fig. 1. P. Picasso, The Scallop Shell. 'Notre Avenir est dans l'Air', 1912. Private collection.

Fig. 2. P. Picasso, Still Life with Chair Caning Picasso, 1912. Paris, Musée Picasso.

In this regard, Pierre Cabanne (1921-2007) observed that aviation had fascinated Picasso –but also Georges Braque (1882-1963)– to such an extent that he took part in the first rallies dedicated to the flight of Issy-les-Moulineaux and to influence his Cubist research [Cabanne 1977, p. 142]. Moreover, Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) was early aware of this, and in her *Picasso* (1938) she wrote: "When I looked at the earth I saw all the lines of cubism made at a time when not any painter had ever gone up in an airplane. I saw there on the earth the mingling lines of Picasso, coming and going, developing and destroying themselves […] and once more I knew that a creator is contemporary […] [and] sees the earth as no one has ever seen it" [Stein 1938, pp. 49-50].

In the most famous work of the aforementioned series, *The scallop shell: 'Notre Avenir est dans l'Air'* (fig. 1), the "diagonal verve of the typography", of which Linda Nochlin writes, seems to mimic the act of flight and the whole composition seems to combine the dynamism of a whirling flight with the static nature of what is happening at ground level [Nochlin 1968, p. 109]. The letters 'JOU' also appear on the surface. These are the same ones that a few months later will appear in the famous *Still-Life with Chair Caning* (fig. 2) whose shadows seem to almost evoke a landscape seen from above, from the point of view of a pilot, a paratrooper or a "vertical invader" [Berger 1965, pp. 40, 49].

A few years later, in 1915, during *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10* in St. Petersburg, Kazimir Malevič (1879-1935) exhibited *Suprematist Composition. Airplane flying* [3] (fig. 3); on that same occasion he proposed the famous black square on a white background. It was the artist himself, as recalled by Christina Lodder [Lodder 2004], who retrospectively identified the origin of these works in the creative process that had led him to an extreme geometrization of forms on the occasion of the creation, in 1913, of the sets, for the opera *Victory over the Sun*: a story about time travelers able to go beyond the old concepts of space, time and gravity. The theme of space travel and aeronautical flight are, therefore, part of the cultural baggage on which the suprematist reflection is structured; this reflection also seems to look at the landscapes of aerial photographs widely disseminated by Russian newspapers since the beginning of the First World War. The title *Suprematist Composition. Airplane*

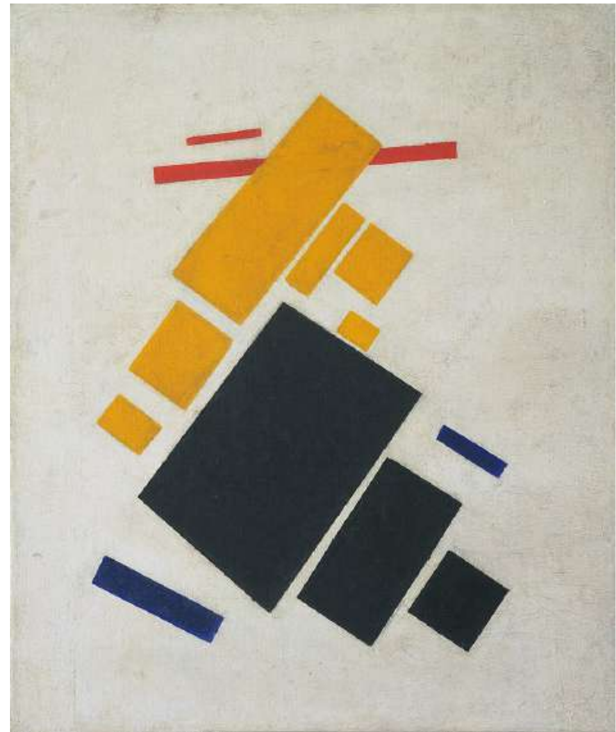
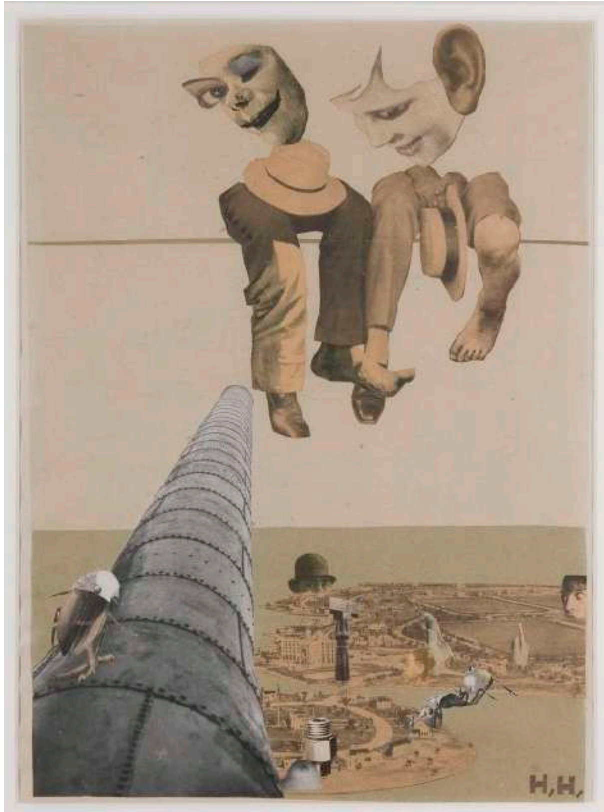


Fig. 3. K. Malevič, Suprematist Composition. Airplane Flying, 1915. New York, Museum of Modern Art.

flying refers directly to these subjects; however, most of the Suprematist paintings are structured starting from geometric figures placed on a white background that suggest a fluctuation of objects in space, in the cosmic infinity, in that void which, in those years, reflected the void of human consciences. After all, the combination of mysticism, spiritualism and technology was a characteristic that united the reflections of many artists in the first decades of the 20*th* century.

Between 1926 and 1927 Hannah Höch (1889-1978), a multifaceted German artist generally associated with Dadaism, created *From Above* (fig. 4), a collage in which two figures sit on a sort of slender scaffolding and from above look at the city and the landscape that unfolds below their eyes. If the figure on the right turns his gaze

Fig. 4. H. Höch, From Above, 1926-1927. Des Moines, Des Moines Art Center's Louise Noun Collection.



clearly downwards, the one on the left seems to wink at the observer, thus establishing a connection between what is happening inside the work and what happens outside it; between what is on our visual plane and what is happening below it. This work seems to be an invitation to look at the world from another perspective, from a different point of view than the one we are used to: change point of view, therefore, to be able to fully grasp the constant changes of man and the context in which he acts.
In those same years, in Italy, Futurism 'invents' *aeropittura*: for Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944) and his associates, modernity appears attractive and fascinating; a world at times unknown, to be explored through a radical rethinking of creativity and aesthetic; the points of view, therefore, multiply, become dynamic; they confuse spatiality and temporality; they rise up to the sky and hover in the air in the awareness that "the perspectives of flight constitute an absolutely new reality and that it has nothing in common with the traditionally constituted reality of terrestrial perspectives" [Balla et al. 1933, p. 4; translated by the author]. While on the one hand Futurist *aeropittura* aimed at a renewed relationship with the rules of traditional perspective, on the other it aspired to a clear overcoming of the representation of the physical world by proposing images that were the translation of psychic experience, the state of mind of conquest of space. The reflection was no longer only on the external data of reality, but also on the way in which the artist translated the results of his meditation into images [4]. The futurists therefore rethink the representation of the landscape looking at it through the transparency of an airplane cabin; the medium, to paraphrase McLuhan, thus becomes a message; it becomes an integral part of the work and communicates its essence. The landscape tends to become mechanized and this mechanization exhibits a strong geometric component: a geometric order that contrasts with the chaos of the crowd praised several times by Marinetti [5]; on the other hand, the individuality of the painter/pilot is counterbalanced by the amorphous mass that crowds the streets of the city.
The aerial gaze, as a new point of view, almost seems to cancel the frenzy, movement, and rhythm of the metropolis. To strengthen and make such a point of view familiar, in those years, will be, as mentioned, also the images connected to the war conflict; newspapers and

Edité par la Société Spad.

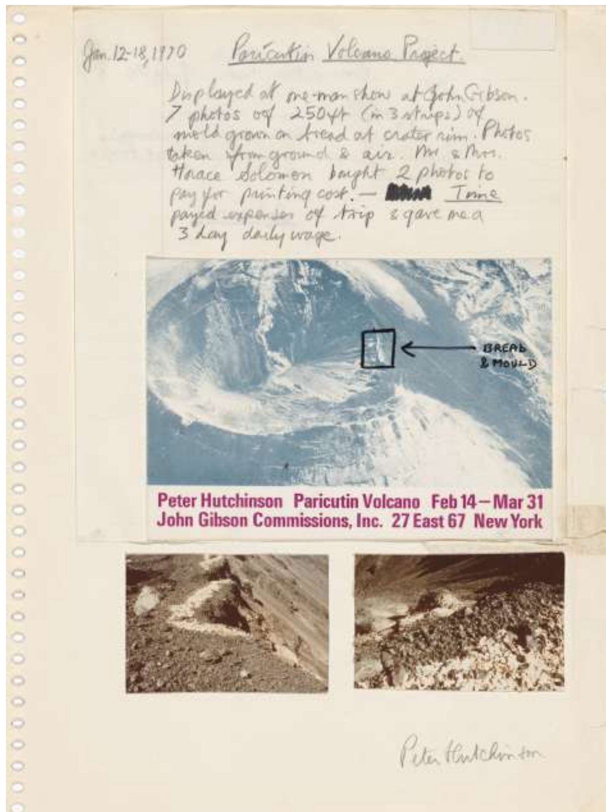
Les avions bombardent une ville. Les shrapnells éclatent autour d'eux. Ils se hâtent de pondre et de rejoindre leur route d'après le miroitement d'un fleuve.

Fig. 5. E. García Benito, Illustration for Dans le ciel de la patrie by Jean Cocteau, 1918.

magazines become visual material for numerous artists: from the English vorticist painters Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957) and Christopher R. W. Nevison (1889-1946), to the French Herni Farre (1871-1934) and Aimé Félix Del Marle (1889-1952) up to the album *Dans le ciel de la patrie* published in 1918 by Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) and illustrated by the *tempera* of the Cubo-Futurist painter Eduardo García Benito (1891-1981) (fig. 5).
The futurist attempts to give life to the art of space postulated by Marinetti was absorbed and reinterpreted, since 1949, by Lucio Fontana (1899-1968) and his *Spatial Concepts*, a title, however, already used in 1932 by Luigi Colombo Fillia (1904-1936) for two of his aeropictorial works. First with the holes, then, from 1958, with the famous cuts, the artist seeks a solution to "open a space, create a new dimension for art, connect it to the cosmos in all its infinite extension, beyond the flat surface of the image" [6]: from the representation of a landscape seen from unprecedented angles, we thus arrive at the pure perception of a landscape/passage. After all, already in 1951, in the *Manifesto Tecnico dello Spazialismo* he had argued that "the true conquest of space made by man is the detachment from the earth, from the horizon line, which for millennia was the basis of its aesthetics and proportion" [Fontana 1951, translation by the author]: once again, therefore, it is necessary to rise above the trampling surface to break patterns and traditions and re-establish what, perhaps, for too long had been given for certainty.
An ascension that is sometimes physical, other times only mental, capable of radically changing the perception of our reality and our everyday life. The change of point of view, in the aforementioned cases, however, involves exclusively the artist: it is the artist who looks at things from above; it is the artist who represents its effects on a support; it is the artist who offers the user the result of his work. The user, however, always observes 'from below'; the user is not required to move physically: he observes with his feet firmly on the ground what someone else has seen from above.
In the late 1960s, however, the viewer's point of view also began to matter. Land Art, which in those years began to spread on a large scale, cannot, in many cases, be thought of and, above all, perceived without an aerial view: it is the only way for the public (but also for the artists themselves) to grasp all the 'monumental nature' of many interventions. Examples of such an approach

Fig. 6. W. De Maria, Las Vegas Piece. Desert Valley, northeast of Las Vegas, Nevada, 1969.

Fig. 7. P. Hutchinson, Project for Parícutin Volcano Project, 1970. New York, Museum of Modern Art.



are iconic operations such as *Directed Seeding* (1969) and *Devil's Hole* (1978) by Dennis Oppenheim (1938-2011), *Five Conic Displacements* and *Double Negative* (1969) by Michael Heizer (1944), *Las Vegas Piece* (1969) by Walter de Maria (1935-2013) (fig. 6), *Parícutin Volcano Project* (1970) by Peter Hutchinson (1930) (fig. 7), *Spiral Jetty* (1970) by Robert Smithson (1938-1973), *Observatory* (1971) by Robert Morris (1931-2018) (fig. 8), *Star Axis* (1971-in progress) by Charles Ross (1937), *Sun Tunnels* (1973-1976) by Nancy Holt (1938-2014), *Whirlpool (Eye of the Storm)* (1973), *Roden Crater Project* (1974-in progress) by James Turrell (1943). These are interventions on an environmental scale whose full understanding can only take place by changing point of view; you can move in them, walk them in all their greatness; grab a piece of it to remember before moving on to the next: It is, however, a partial view of a much broader whole. There is something almost mystical in the process of understanding these interventions: you have to ascend, detach, physically and mentally, from 'earthly things'; look at things differently: Smithson himself suggests that in his short essay from 1969 with the significant title of Aerial Art; here the artist wrote: "simply looking at art at eye-level is no solution" and "from the window of an airplane one can see drastic changes of scale, as one ascends and descends" [Smithson 1969, p. 117]. This is what Riccardo Venturi has recently defined as the aesthetics of "flying over" [cfr. Venturi 2022]: land artists don't fly to scrutinize the infinity of airspace, but to be able to see better and, therefore, better understand the space of their action; that land whose meaning escapes us, and will continue to do so, in its entirety. A conscious choice to be shared with the user of this "aerial art" that "could be seen from aircraft on takeoff and landing, or not seen at all" [cfr. Venturi 2022].

Looking at the landscape from above means, therefore, enjoying a privileged point of view; it means establishing a strong visual connection between above and below; but, at the same time, it bears witness to the need (or perhaps the difficulty) of the human being to never completely detach that umbilical cord that has linked us to the earth since its origins. From top to bottom, therefore, as happens in *Lightning Field* (1977) by Walter De Maria (1935-2013) (fig. 9): that connection that we have just defined as visual now becomes evident, albeit for very few moments; it is defined by the lightning which, falling, strikes one of the four hundred steel

Fig. 8. R. Morris, Observatory, 1977. Lelystad, Netherlands (photo Gert Schutte).

Fig. 9. W. De Maria, The Lightning Field, Western New Mexico, 1977.

Fig. 10. E. Burtynsky, J. Baichwal, N. De Pencier, The Anthropocene Project, 2019.

poles planted in the ground. Natural and artificial stems contribute to creating a work made up of opposite but complementary concepts: full and empty, tangible and intangible, terrestrial and celestial, verticality and horizontality, observer and observed object.
What land artists were warning us about was to place our gaze and our attention on the ecological theme and on the impact of man's action on the landscape and on the spaces he inhabits; a question that, in the following decades, took on a new consistency with some artistic experiences connected to the questions of the anthropocene, or rather of that "present, in many ways human-dominated, geological epoch" [Crutzen 2002, p. 23]. Useful for my argument are *The Anthropocene Project* (2019) by Edward Burtynsky (1955), Jennifer Baichwal (1965) and Nicholas De Pencier (1966) (fig. 10) and the photographic work of Tom Hegen (1991) (from 2016 to 2021) (fig. 11), both focused on looking down on an ever-changing landscape. In the first case, the artists use the ortho-mosaic technique applied to aerial photogrammetry with a drone which, in addition to clearly altering man's normal point of view, becomes a tool and method for implementing the natural human sensory: the observer is offered a wealth of information otherwise impossible to grasp at eye level; in the second case it is aerial photography that becomes an aesthetically attractive genre able to highlight criticalities and collective urgencies: also in this case the images taken from above, better than any other, are able to highlight the upheavals produced by the action of the man over the landscape.
At the conclusion of this rapid excursus which does not claim to be exhaustive, what emerges is, perhaps, the need to train the gaze to look for different angles; it is necessary to practice raising the point of view and observation of things to raise questions and to try to build a new narration of the landscape in the awareness that, quoting the English anthropologist Tim Ingold, "walking perhaps should be considered bipedal flight: a way of flying that has yet to get off the ground" [Ingold 2021, p. 74; translated by the author].

Fig. 11. T. Hegen, from the Spanish Farmland Series, 2019.

Notes

[1] Borges writes: "A man sets himself the task of designing the world. Over the years, he populates a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fish, houses, instruments, stars, horses, and people. Shortly before his death, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face": Borges 1999, p. 84 [translated by the author].

[2] The series consists of three works: one of unknown whereabouts; the second is part of the collection of the Center Georges Pompidou in Paris; the third, The Scallop Shell: "Notre Avenir est dans l'Air", is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York.

[3] The painting is, however, dated 1914 on the reverse.

[4] For further information about *aeropittura* refer to Crispolti E. (1985). *Aeropittura futurista aeropittori*. Modena: Galleria Fonte d'Abisso; Duranti M. (a cura di). (1996). *Dottori e l'aeropittura. Aeropittori e Aeroscultori futuristi*. Montecatini: Maschietto e Musolini; Fiz, A. (a cura di). (2003). *In volo. Aeropittura futurista*. Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana; Rebeschini, C. (a cura di). (2017). *Aeropittura, la seduzione del volo*. Milano: Skira; Duranti, M., Baffoni, A. (a cura di). (2022). *Dall'alto. Aeropittura futurista*. Fontanellato: Franco Maria Ricci.

[5] Ever since the founding manifesto of the movement in 1909, Marinetti had claimed that he wanted to sing "the great crowds agitated by work, by pleasure or by revolt" [translated by the author]: Marinetti, F. T. (1909). Manifeste du Futurisme. In *Le Figaro*, 20 Février 1909, p. 1.

[6] Cited in *Lucio Fontana*. (1970). Catalogo della Mostra, Parigi giugno 1970. Paris: Claude Tchou. Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, p. 9.

[7] Cfr. Smithson 1967, p. 116; the artist had already been interested in the airplane in a 1967 essay: Smithson, R. (1967). Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site. In *Artforum*, V, 10, pp. 36-40.

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