ENCODING PORTRAITS
by Roberta Bosco and Stefano Caldana

"I and my companions are appearances, we are a new kind of photographs"
(Adolfo Bioy Casares. *The Invention of Morel*)

"All we know is an impression of ours, and all we are is someone else's impression"
Fernando Pessoa

Portraits are the oldest and most essential artistic expression. From the hands in the cave paintings of the Palaeolithic and the art of ancient Egypt with the portraits of the Fayum dynasty, through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Baroque to the 19th and 20th centuries, we are dealing with an artistic practice whose techniques of representation have changed over the years, but which has never ceased to be present. Not even the arrival of photography has been able to put an end to this traditional form of representation of the individual and the unlimited ability of the artist to visually codify an identity in relation to its own time frame. Its meanings and connotations and its use throughout the centuries keep changing, but portrait is still a timeless classic and a format that allows us to observe ourselves, to let ourselves be seen or even to show off as is currently the case with the phenomenon of social media. A portrait is also a memory for posterity, something like a message in a bottle for future generations — sometimes somewhat cryptic and impenetrable for societies very distant in time. We have been talking about it for centuries, so it is not going to be a revelation but it is indeed a rediscovery in the light of the latest artistic research based on new technologies and the opportunities they offer in the creative realm.

If up until now in artistic practice portraits have been the representation of an absence, with electronic and digital art this absence is redefined thanks to the constructive and enriching presence of the public. Electronic art has proved to be easily comprehensible and understandable for our society and has given the viewer a new prominence, making him an active part of the creative process. The public is no longer a passive and absent subject. We are used to navigating in a world full of technological devices, and therefore we find that an electronic and digital art, capable of subverting the static relationship between the work and the viewer, is close and empathetic. The members of the public quickly lose their fear and overcome their natural distrust, unreservedly accepting the invitation of some artists who ask them to come closer to their works and interact with them. In fact, one of the foundational principles governing interactive art says that the work does not exist without the presence of its natural interlocutor: the public.

Under these perspectives, the use of new technologies has provided unprecedented opportunities for creation. It is not only a process of codification of the work in terms of the computer programming language used by the artists, but also a surreptitious level of coding related to a language that the public can finally understand. One of the inescapable factors of information technologies is their emancipatory power in every aspect of everyday life. As the British theologian, philosopher and scientist William Whewell (*The history of scientific ideas*, 1858) pointed out, our ideas envelop perceptions and shape and regulate our sensations, giving them coherence and meaning within the daily experience of reality. All knowledge has both a subjective dimension (or opinion) and an objective dimension (or sensation) and consequently we appreciate things for what we know of them.

There is no doubt that the contemporary viewer has a perfect understanding of their role in relation to electronic works of art. Faced with devices, sensors, screens and digital elements, people instinctively accept to become a responsive and participative subject. Digital natives are now adults and the rest of us have adapted to the digital society, which is why the works in the BEEP Electronic Art Collection connect so well and so quickly with the public. In recent years we have realised that never before have visitors to electronic art exhibitions been more aware of what they are observing. There is no denying that art has always been an exclusive environment, whose interpretation seems reserved for the initiated and privileged. Nowadays perhaps not everyone understands art history, brushes, chisels, pigments and artistic techniques, but they undoubtedly know the meaning of broadband, virtual reality, cloud, hashtag, open source, webcams, streaming and Bluetooth.

Portraits and the interpretation of images have changed radically with the emergence of the Internet and the new technologies. There is no longer any talk of photography, cameras, reels, development, diaphragm, lenses, lighting or posing. The terms are now social networks, post-photography, ubiquity, self-representation, reproducibility, memetic processes, social media, mashups, selfies, retouching and virality. The very way in which we express ourselves has evolved and our writing has condensed, replacing the traditional syntax with stickers and emoticons, whose stylised faces and expressions have imposed themselves as a new universal and transnational language of immediate interpretation.

Attitudes towards how we represent ourselves have changed. Now we tend to flaunt ourselves and adopt hitherto unseen postures in front of mobile devices that are infinitely more complex than a simple laptop. We usually get to know ourselves through the other in a continuous process of exteriorization, where the eyes of others and how they look at us define who we are.

Based on these premises, the exhibition "Faces. Un diálogo entre la Colección de Es Baluard y la Colección BEEP de Arte Electrónico" [Faces. A dialogue between Es Baluard's Collection and the BEEP Electronic Art Collection] proposes a constructive and transversal reading of the creative processes of different generations of artists and their research into the concept of portrait. Our aim is to find common ground and unexpected readings of the contents of works that are often very different in

their artistic genesis. On the one hand, we have the traditional and contemplative works of Es Baluard, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Palma, and on the other, the interactive works of the BEEP Collection of Electronic Art.

It is almost impossible to compare such diverse stages and styles and to compare works by Picasso, Miró or Barceló with the robotic and electronic art pieces of artists such as Lugán, Marcel.lí Antúnez or Daniel Canogar. Therefore, we want to approach portraiture from an anthropological perspective, because, as we have said, through the approximately sixty works that cover more than one hundred years of our most recent history, these faces represent and define us.

Faces aims to establish a dialogue between works in different media. Dialogues can arise from common interpretations, similarities, subliminal or only alluded analogies that can inspire the public, favouring a creative interpretation of the works. We aim to knock down the unmovable fourth wall of contemporary art museums and open it to an audience accustomed to touching the pieces of electronic art, making them perceive other interpretative nuances in the works created with traditional disciplines. The exhibition itinerary is conceived as a continuum, where the visitor will be able to perceive similarities or differences that unfold in the exhibition space in an open and rhizomatic way.

We are talking about connections that can be more or less perceptible or that merely constitute an evocation of an atavistic reflection. How can we forget the hand prints in the Palaeolithic cave paintings and not get emotional in front of Lugán's *Mano térmica de artista*? This 1973 thermal sculpture, something like the Palaeolithic of the Silicon Age, is a pioneering piece of electronic art that establishes an obvious empathic interactivity with the viewer. With it Lugán was two decades ahead of his time, anticipating the creative boom associated with the interactivity model, which flourished in the mid-1990s. Suddenly, and perhaps for the first time in Spain, in 1973 the viewer had the opportunity to touch a work of art, an unusual portrait of the artist and the very metaphor of the interactivity implicit in the piece, which manages to convey some of it without any apparent reading codes other than sensory stimuli.

At present, Lugán's *Mano térmica de artista* and *M3X3* by Brazilian artist Analivia Cordeiro (1973) are the two oldest works in the BEEP Collection, while Sommerer and Mignonneau's *Portrait on the fly* (2015) and Solimán López's *Bioma* (2017) interactive installations are two of the most recent. In the exhibition itinerary they share space with works of Es Baluard Collection, which range from a drawing by Modigliani from 1910 to photographs by Marina Abramović and Pilar Albarracín, from 2008 and 2009 respectively.

As we have said, the exhibition "Faces" aims to articulate a rhizomatic dialogue between the artworks while at the same time remaining fluid, a key feature that helps us to emphasise the very nature of electronic and digital artworks, which are not usually unchanging and immutable, but often evolve through the presence and intervention of the public. We find it more interesting that the proposals operate in the same common space, without limits or barriers. For the same reason we have

tried to select pieces that mostly do not require separate architectural spaces. We want the works to dialogue with each other, to break down barriers and for the public to be able to take in new perspectives at a glance and to develop transversal readings.

We have chosen not to delimit any areas or sections and instead place the works in a continuum, in spite of the fact that along the way the visitor will find thematic groupings such as identity, gender and post-photography (Daniel Canogar, Eduardo Kac, Eulàlia Valldosera, Shirin Neshat, Marina Núñez, and Solimán López), together with common iconographic approaches such as the series of hands (Lugán, Marina Abramović and, Manu Arregui), the faces (Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Jordi Abelló Vilella, Alberto García-Alix, Amedeo Modigliani, Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau, and Antonio Saura), the eyes (Miquel Barceló, Evru, Picasso, and Anaisa Franco) and the bodies (Antoni Miralda, Marcel.lí Antúnez, Joan Miró, and Jaume Plensa). In this way we hope that the exhibition itinerary appears as a visual flow as close as possible to a harmonic, evolving and never static narrative, just as we want the visitor's experience to be when interacting with electronic and digital art. It also seems to us that this is an opportunity to enliven and give new life to the more traditional works.

Since this is an exhibition that has an element of kinetics in it, we are curious to see what synergies can be generated with the public and between the works themselves. It will be interesting to discover the relationships that will emerge between the brutalist body by Marcel.lí Antúnez, the hieratic presence of the sculpture by Jaume Plensa and the puppet-like *ninots* by Joan Miró, as well as what dynamics can the visitors' faces transformed by the pieces of Sommerer and Mignonneau and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer generate when confronted to the disturbing faces of Jordi Abelló, Antonio Saura and Picasso. We like to think of *Faces* as a living exhibition, a sort of organism, in which the works establish a certain degree of symbiosis.

We would like the works to establish links among themselves and challenge each other, and we invite the public to move freely around the exhibition, carrying out a critical analysis and participating in the dialogue proposals that are suggested without the need to define strict reading parameters. It is not about comparing electronic art and traditional plastic art, it is not about winning a match between different disciplines, the aim is to offer a creative and participatory narrative inviting the public to relate to the works and to maintain an active, or better put, an interactive attitude.