Call for Papers

Viral Art: The New Imageries of GIF Culture

International Conference
Department of the Arts, University of Bologna
24-25 November 2016

The animated GIF (acronym for Graphics Interchange Format) has gained extraordinary popularity over the last few years. After the expiration of the patent on the format’s compression algorithm in 2003, its circulation on the web has gone viral. Such an easy and quick dissemination is due to the extreme usability of the format, which allows to make brief animated sequences with elementary tools and to share them online in real time. The animated GIF is transforming the way in which we experience the web. On the one hand, web users are appropriating GIFs as means of a superfast and highly effective form of visual communication, contributing to the creation of digital archives for a new universal iconic language, while, on the other hand, the recent developments of GIF art are relaunching the practices of Net Art beyond its original small niche. The rapid spread of this new visual medium can be felt in various other fields, such as advertising, journalism, fashion, and education. Moreover, GIFs illustrate in an exemplary way the phenomenon of “the Internet of Things” and, more generally, today’s trend toward the “descent” of the virtualscape “In the Real World” (as in the case of IRL GIFs). GIFs have become the object of many exhibitions in museums and art galleries worldwide. As a visual micro-object at the intersection of several contemporary cultural practices, the GIF image is an ideal case study to research the transformations of artistic languages in the digital age from a social, aesthetic, and economic point of view. Its particular temporal configuration, suspended between stillness and motion, makes it a perfect object to investigate the relationships between visual arts, media archaeology, cinema, photography, and applied informatics in the contemporary mediascape.

We invite proposals for presentations in English or Italian from different disciplinary fields. Papers will deal with a wide range of issues, including, but not limited to, the following:

Do you say “art” when you say GIF? Social networks such as Tumblr, Behance, Imgur, Instagram, Ello, etc. have contributed to the fast rise of the animated GIF (and other similar looping formats, like Vine) as a new means of artistic expression. An increasing number of (usually very) young artists make use of GIFs to gain popularity and followers on the web. We invite proposals that examine the work of specific artists or specific techniques, such as collage, glitching, creative coding, cinemagraphs, digital animation, motion photography, and so on. Other possible topics are: the aesthetics of the animated GIF, the impact of GIFs on the practices of Net Art, and the presence of looping forms in contemporary artistic practices.

The animated GIF in a transmedial perspective. Thanks to its extreme flexibility and usability, the animated GIF is the most reproducible image ever. Through the frame capture technique it has become a privileged vehicle for the remediation of fragments taken from cinema and television history, online videos, and even computer sessions. These scattered fragments, most often generated by anonymous users, provoke an archaeological reading of our media experience, by which media history is perceived synchronically rather than diachronically. One could thus describe the GIF image as a catalyst of different media temporalities as well as a privileged tool for digital cinephilia.
The GIF as protocinema. GIFs share many characteristics with so-called pre-cinema and early cinema: silentness, the looping rhythm, brevity, multiplicity, the sensationalism or exhibitionism of visual effects. Another common trait, which is also a major aspect in contemporary cinema, is the decisive role played by animation techniques. The progressive saturation of the web space with GIFs goes in parallel with the marketing of new optical toys that reproduce the visual experience of 19th-century devices such as the phenakistiscope, the thaumatrope, the praxinoscope, the stereoscope, and so on. At the same time, there also exits a GIF prehistory.

The screening of GIFs. How are GIFs screened on the big screen? Are they used in contemporary video productions? Are contemporary forms of audiovisual production impacted by the GIF aesthetics? And what about the sound of GIFs?

The social uses of the GIF. The “memetic” diffusion of GIF images on social networks is a clear evidence of their effectiveness as communication tools. We invite papers that examine the memetic functioning of the GIF language, with particular attention to its ludic functions (the animated GIF as joke, for instance). Online communities of GIF-makers also offer interesting examples for further analysis.

Other GIF uses. Today GIFs are widely employed in the fields of advertising, journalism, scientific visualization, and educational practices. Being so easy to use, they are a particularly valid tool for (new) film analysis.

GIF art and its market. The ultimate degree of reproducibility that defines the animated GIF drives the core contradiction of contemporary art, namely the dialectics of exhibition and valorization, to a point of explosion. This makes it very hard for GIFs to be exchanged on the market. We invite papers that examine recent attempts to sell GIFs on both the art and the digital market, as well as the artists’ reflections in relation to this particularly sensitive matter.

Conference organizers: Alessandra Chiarini and Monica Dall’Asta

Advisory board: Jan Baetens (University of Leuven), Guido Bartorelli (University of Padua), Michele Canosa (University of Bologna), Arild Fetveit (University of Copenhagen), Silvia Grandi (University of Bologna), Cristina Jandelli (University of Florence), Sandra Lischi (University of Pisa), Giovanna Maina (University of Sunderland), Peppino Ortoleva (University of Turin), Eivind Røssaak (National Library of Norway), Wanda Strauven (Goethe University, Frankfurt).

Submission deadline: 15 May 2016. Please send abstract (max. 250 words) and short bio in English or Italian to gifconference2016@gmail.com
Selected Bibliography


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