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Extended Abstract:

## **Vestiges of Material-to-Material Contact – Exploring the paradigm of experimental one-to-one analogue imprints**

Photographs have been discussed in terms of vestiges or traces that extend beyond the bounds of visibility (Krauss, 1977; Didi-Huberman, 2008; Batchen, 1997:2016; Larsson 2020). My paper elaborates on the capacity of the imprints and impressions, such as epigraphic squeezes, *frottages* and cameraless contact prints, to mediate the invisible with techniques that reveal aspects of time and materiality at various stages of their phenomenal existence – structured and articulated by the image making process, and animated through the observer’s performative (inter)action.

The contribution is based on an artistic research project that involves case studies of my recent works entitled *Autografi di Roma* (2023) and *Free Fall* (2023). The *Autografi di Roma* includes a collection of approximately 400 pieces of *graffiti* imprints and wall rubbings of various sizes, executed on substrates of recycled hand-made paper. The material for the papier-mâché originates in discarded newspapers, product catalogues and advertisements gathered from bins and recycling containers in the city of Rome. The different shades of grey discernible in the paper mass result from the mixing of colour pigments used in printing press, accentuated by various degrees of yellowish stain, characteristic to pulp exposed to light during the aging process.

My urban exploration of Roman graffiti and wall inscriptions turned into performative image-making happenings full of unanticipated events, surprises and suspense. Whenever I spotted a suitable graffiti to record, I grabbed a compactible sheet of papier-mâché to cover the inscription, and from that point on, the work proceeded haphazardly and blindly. Sometimes the pressure of the pencil revealed rubbings that I otherwise would not have noticed, and vice versa, an inscription that on the first glance seemed clearly discernible, would just not render itself on the substrate due to uneven wall surface or other material obstacle, e.g. the choice of an unsuitable pencil or a too fragile sheet of paper. There were also instances when the work was suddenly interrupted by outer circumstances such as traffic, officious policemen, suspicious local inhabitants or a furious vagrant.

The techniques implicated in the making of the *Autografi di Roma* borrow from two nowadays almost obsolete archaeological methods, originally devised for the study of antique inscriptions; namely the *epigraphic squeeze* and rubbings, also known as *frottages* or *calques*. In the heyday of epigraphy, the practice of making a paper cast copy of the original stone inscription using thin sheets of tobacco paper constituted a pragmatic tool for recording, accessing and archiving the inscriptions. Squeezes allowed disseminating copies of the antique inscriptions amongst the international research community simply per post. Some of the old paper squeezes preserved in the archives may still be of great value, especially in cases where the ancient stone is lost or when the recessed or embossed marks happen to carry traces of the original wall pigment. Today, old squeezes can be scanned and digitised which enables studying the inscriptions even if the original remains inaccessible. Epigraphists who try to read the marks and to decipher their meanings may also use the squeezes and calques to learn from specific aspects that are not directly visible to the naked eye. With the help of the imprint, various unclear, missing or additional information, such as weathered marks or previously undetected incisions may be unfurled and become readable. The

squeeze may e.g. allow the researchers to identify the carver's personal style by his habit of using the chisel in the making of the inscription.

The second case study, entitled *Free Fall* (2023) is a cameraless cyanotype contact print executed on a long piece of polyester fabric. The tediously contrived print-in-progress measures 3 x 10 meters. I started by spraying the light sensitive cyanotype solution directly on the canvas in plain sunlight and then proceeded to apply dried birch leaves onto the wet surface where they stuck as if glued. The process of spraying and applying the leaves was repeated several times, shortly interrupted by washing the fabric in the sea to develop out the white leaf patterns against blue background. The final result was displayed in the middle of a staircase, mounted vertically from the ceiling to hang in the form of a free-floating cascade which invited the observer to climb the stairs to explore the cinematic effect of the unfurling leaf patterns.

My case studies indicate that experimental one-to-one contact imprinting techniques enable generation of traces which record more than meets the eye. The result of the material process is always a surprise for everyone, including the author. To second Didi-Huberman's conception of *l'empreinte* (Didi-Huberman, 2008), my inquiry elaborates on the heuristic potential of the epigraphic squeezes, rubbings and cameraless monotypes to translate haptic aspects and/or *asemiomatic* writing into vestiges. The imprints render and replicate the physical features of an object through an analogue chain of operation which pertains to the concreteness of the techniques, and culminates in traces that often carry more information than what may be extracted by visual observation or other ways of studying the original object.

In producing an impression through direct physical contact with the actual object, *l'empreinte* adds to the phenomenal world a new layer of *autographic* traces. Didi-Huberman argues that the surreal dimension brought about by these *archeipoietic* vestiges (Didi-Huberman, 2008: 90–91), generated mechanically 'without hands' nor artistic style, implies a general epistemic "revision of representation" (Larsson, 2020: 100). According to Didi-Huberman, the anthropological paradigm of *l'empreinte* relies on an archaic form of technicity, conditioned by the blind concreteness of the material "cooking" (*la cuisine matérielle*). A simple technical invention such as the dispositive of *l'empreinte*, may challenge the hegemonic regime of art history, grounded on ideas of *disegno* and intentional mimetic representation. In contrast to the idealist stance where the operation of the index is understood as an immaterial luminous trace, Didi-Huberman's account summons up its dismissed, non-optical counterpoint. (Didi-Huberman, 2008: 60–63). An open-ended experimentality inherent to the haptic afterlife of *l'empreinte* becomes manifest through the atopic and anachronistic vestiges, generated by material-to-material contact.

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