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PUBLIC RESTROOMS AS CONFLICT ARENAS

1. Piccolo Opificio Sociologico is an informal research group, formed by students stemming from different disciplines. We aim at producing open access knowledge and divulgation of social sciences. Participation is open, free, and voluntary.

2. When entering a public restroom, one can see a bunch of writings, signs, graffiti: Latrinalia, as Dundes (1966) called them. We are used to take them for granted. This research is an attempt to problematize these writings, by examining their dynamic interaction as a marker of conflicting narratives. Of course, these latrinalia are in Italian language: we tried to translate them while maintaining their original spatial composition.

3. We examined the restrooms in the University of Firenze, consisting of 15 buildings, dispersed in 9 "campuses". The observations have been recorded from January, 2015 to April, 2016, with occasional returns on the sites, so to detect overwriting phenomena. By overwriting, we mean that the phenomenon is not

static: new latrinalia appear here and there, some latrinalia have been erased, the walls may have been whitewashed.

The perspective we choose to focus on, is that of the conflicting narratives of identity that are displayed on the walls.

4. We choose to develop this research relying upon a visual approach for some different reasons: a) latrinalia are temporary in nature, because of this overwriting phenomenon we just recalled. So photography helps in creating a stable collection of empirical evidences, helping also in developing a before-and-after approach to graffiti; b) compared to written texts, images offer a greater potential to summarize and give a direct testimony of reality (Mattioli 2007, Nöth 2011). It is very important here to show the handwriting, the erasing, the overwriting, the spatial positioning of latrinalia on the "canvas", the cross references between different pieces of text.

5. A first interesting thing we detected, is the fact that in women's restrooms there are no latrinalia. This is a finding which is strikingly in contrast with existing literature (Birney 1973; Farr & Gordon 1975; Bates & Martin 1980; Dombrowski 2011), according to which females write slightly less than male stu-

dents. Due to the impossibility to interview writers, we are currently struggling to find an explication.

We are wondering if it might be linked to a difference in socialization of females in conflictive behaviours, public expression of self, and a different relationship to restrooms as social spaces.

6. The first thing that meets the eye in this table is the “geographical” distribution of latrinalia through different sites. We are not able to provide a clear distinction between faculties, as some of them are united in the same buildings. We may see how the latrinalia are highly concentrated. The great majority of them is political in content, but also football and Jokes/miscellaneous are quite present. We tagged as jokes/miscellaneous all those inscriptions which were ironic, derisory or otherwise non-ascribable to other categories. The column “contested” is reflecting our major point here: the latrinalia which are somehow undergoing a dialogic processes of conflict, expressed by the act of rebutting and contesting.

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7. Public restrooms are very accessible and public places, which, in turn, have a spatial configuration that favours a “private area”: that of the cubicle. There, people can indulge in socially sanctioned behaviours (writing on walls, expressing radical and/or violent thoughts), while having a relatively high degree of safeness. This may affect the act of expressing opinions and ideas, by radicalizing both

the contents and the rawness of the language used. As an example: it is quite rare to hear someone shout in public “Fascist clubs should be burnt down” . The anonymity and safeness of the restroom’s cubicle offers a privileged sphere where to expose such a thought. This kind of interaction might be seen as very similar to some practices in online expression, as it happens in flaming. Public restroom is transitory, tough, in universities and schools, they leave room to a community whose presence in the space may span over the course of several years. This means that there is the possibility of prolonged interactions between anonymous actors, as the restroom walls were threads in a forum.

8. The public restroom is a situated activity system (Goffman 1961; Denzin 1975; Gazi Islam 2010), where human interactions are mediated through the usage of writings and figurative signs. There is no selection of the public because there is no control on who can access this space.

9. What we are trying to highlight, is the ongoing conflict between competing narrations of the social world. When politics is involved, the reaction is stronger, and, somehow, the high presence of this theme may be connected to a socialization to the restrooms as a conflict arena. Like some kind of informal community of practices (Brown and Duguid 1991), where the function of learning the rules and codes is demanded to the eye of the individual. Anyway, we developed a hypothesis about conflict, to explain why there is a strong predominance of ‘overwriting’ and ‘contested’ latrinalia in the social sciences campus. This is also the place where political preferences are more scattered.

10. In conclusion, we sketched a model for the conflictual interaction. We detected three modalities of expression, depending on the function of the latrinalia itself. The ‘attack’ is the latrinalia which “opens” the discussion. It normally is something written in a central area of the wall, in larger font. This can be contested, what we call “counter-attack”, the act of speaking up against the first saying. This can happen by the means of overwriting/erasing, answering, of-

fending the category to which the writer is believed to pertain. The counterattacks are usually very stylized in their expression of contrariety, dealing with standardized views of the identity of the attacker/attacked and often following institutionalized patterns of expression: as an example, “burn the fascists on the stack” becomes “burn the antifascists on the stack”.

It is easy to imagine how this process could go on until there is enough blank space on the wall, resulting in an open-ended battle for the dialectic hegemony of the expressive space. Last type is that of ‘interruption’ (otherwise said, for the Italian speakers here, “buttarla in caciera”). Not always present, this is a kind of reaction that breaks the chain of attacks and counterattacks, by inserting an ironic or cynical term in the discussion. This “freezes” the conversation: it is a breakup of the ongoing frame of interaction to which is not possible to return from. As an example, we see here: “Marò filthy assassins”, which becomes “Moroccans filthy assassins”. Another example “say no to the badge”, implying the contrariety to control measures for football supporters, which becomes “no to the university canteen badge”.

11. Through the comparison between the observed latrinalia and previous research some differences emerged. We did detect a small amount of homophobic or racist content, while there was a great number of writing related with football and politics. As we showed before, another interesting fact is the absence of latrinalia in women’s restrooms. We hope to have conveyed our core idea in developing this research, that studying trivial and vernacular elements as restrooms’ graffiti is a way to testimony the conflictual anonymous interaction among students on themes they perceive as relevant.

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C. GASPARO
R. MAIULLO
M. VENTURELLA
T. FRANGIONI
C. FALCHI
A. DI MARCO
N. SIRLETO

