The relationship between journalism and art is a difficult territory to chart. What I call aesthetic journalism involves artistic practices in the form of investigation of social, cultural or political circumstances. Its research outcomes take shape in the art context, rather than through media channels. Press and broadcast news are realms in which our concept of truth takes form. Visual art, on the other hand, is increasingly present in the communication of urgencies; hence, the hypotheses about the idea of truth shifting from the sphere of news media to the territory of art, moving out from the private realm (of the object, the person who produces or consumes it, the meaning carried through the object) to enter the public sphere (the issue at stake, the process undertaken, the distribution of knowledge). This attitude sets a new horizon of sense, bringing the matter outside the established traditions of formalism (for art) and reporting (for journalism). Albert Einstein reportedly stated that we cannot solve our problems at the same level of thinking that generated them. With art and journalism, if we open up and re-think our conception of traditional information formats, allowing imagination and open-endedness, we might perceive things in ways we remain unaware of. In this sense, while journalism reports, and fiction reveals, aesthetic journalism does both.

In aesthetically approaching events in contemporary life, what appears to be real, true or verifiable cannot be detached from the system of representation adopted. What can we initiate with elements of reality brought into art? Is a witness account — which involves time and participation — a viable substitute for a reporting position? A witnessing experience is centred on the issue of time. Art is one of the few realms in which time is still a negotiable term. The fundamental difference between a journalistic work that reports and one that witnesses is in the approach of the producer to the mode of a revelation that exposes and represents facts without anesthetizing them. This line of thought makes evident the paradox of mainstream journalism covering complex issues with twenty-second soundbites, in order to make them digestible for an audience.

In an ideal system of representation, the spectator adds subjective meaning to the images and sounds proposed, and in this way overcomes the immediacy of the report (the bodily impression created by the senses). The viewer grasps a fragment of things and from there builds upon this, engaging their own perception, producing little actions, being aware of the impulses that provoke them, not imposed from the outside, but generated from within. In our daily digest of representations via TV and newspapers, however, this does not happen: the current trend of event reporting is problematic because it renders no space for critical distance. This concern is no new thing for media critique, yet is vaguely perceived when it comes to journalistic art. More than ever, we need a witness attitude in art, for it might inspire a witness attitude in journalism: a kind of knowledge looking beyond what is immediately visible, a latency, so to speak, an imagina-
tive reading of what is not directly accessible to the senses. Witnessing is not reporting: it implies a plurality of points of view, and the passage of time, which is not permissible in the current media news environment. Artists and art institutions, instead, can produce works over a span of months rather than minutes, and can adapt their agenda (because they have time) to the witness approach. This way, it creates the time to add idea upon idea, returning in several steps to the same subject, and allowing the space to think, digest and re-work what has been the object of investigation.

Cultural producers could use the passage of time by applying an attentive eye to current and manifest aspects of the matter analysed, but also to the historical background that produced it, to what is concealed to the eye and to its possible or imaginary development. To pursue an aesthetic approach in a journalistic representation can reveal aspects of reality otherwise buried beneath real-time coverage of occurrences. It takes time to decide how to (and if to) relate to all aspects of a situation and the people and stories told in the work. It takes also time to assess what could be true or false, right or wrong, and ultimately to decide where one — as a viewer — stands in relation to ethical and aesthetic issues. It is a matter of adding knowledge, linking what we already know with what we do not know and putting the new in sequence with other knowledge. Two aspects are equally important: for the author not to be forced to adapt to the speed of the news industry, and for the spectator not to be required to accept or refuse it on the spot. Come and go in front of a representation at one’s leisure, be irreverent to the format of the reproduction of things, take time to make sense of what is presented — all these opportunities must be kept alive in artistic practice, to eventually expand back into traditional journalism and other news formats. De facto, the journalist is an artist, despite the completely different timeframe in which they work. In these terms, aesthetic journalism is a given fact, not a supposition. It just needs to be timed.

The representation of objects and situations from many angles, on the same canvas or in a film scene, introduced the elements of time passing, which became a fundamental element of our age: the (often controversial) principle of simultaneity, which goes beyond its time-element. The World Wide Web and real-time transmission depend on this principle of organisation, in which it is not the simultaneity with the real that is important, nor its speed rate, but the development of an essence of reality that works at the level of imagination. This idea of simultaneity, and of the participation of the final user in the production of meaning, was further theorized at the beginning of the 1960s. The Poetics of the Open Work by Eco provides not only the general idea of performativity by the reader, which results in the completion of the work by the gaze of the spectator; it gives also the theoretical framework for the use of documentary, reportage and lecture in artistic practice. In a passage of the essay, Eco gives the example of the dictionary: "Now, a dictionary clearly presents us with thousands upon thousands of words which we could freely use to compose poetry, essays on physics, anonymous letters, or grocery lists. In this sense the dictionary is clearly open to the reconstitution of its raw material in any way that the manipulator wishes. But this does not make it a 'work'. The 'openness' and dynamism of an artistic work consists in factors which make it susceptible to a whole range of interpretation."

62–63, Eco Umberto (1979)
For Eco, these factors are the mechanisms of interaction set by the artists during the creation process, and by the audience during the reception process, in a mutual exchange that gives meaning to the work. The interpretation is to be understood as a productive process: reading a text, or watching a video, means essentially to produce another text or video. This combination of points of view is what we call interactivity. What counts is the position of perennial re-work, research and reading of things, avoiding what we could call the statement of reality; it requires us to suspend our notion of the experienced as something fixed and immutable. This attitude does not create fiction, but changes the mode of reading a work. This goes hand in hand with the disappearance of art as a distinct autonomous and coded (with specific media and tools) practice, and with the idea of interactivity explored above. The facts themselves are artworks, precisely because they are processes. What we are is attributed by others; what we see, by ourselves. That is also why I call this new mode of journalism aesthetic: it happens when we take facts as artworks and artworks as aesthetic facts. In fact, to ground the idea of reality in its reception rather than its representation is one way to retain the ability to build our own truth claim for what is represented, instead of the material making such claims for itself.

Could aesthetic journalism be the next horizon of meaning? I do not know, and cannot claim such a thing. What I have done, rather, is to sketch an articulation of the relationship between artistic and information activities; not to construct a theory, but to instigate responses; not to freeze art into concepts, but to find possible ways of working. Hence, in my view, the necessity to expand access to aesthetic journalism by acting upon both art and journalism, broadening their respective practice to the point of including other formats as agents of change. Potentially, the term media worker could be used not only for journalists, TV or internet producers (the so-called content providers) but also for artists, performers, storytellers and poets. Producers who include in their work possibilities such as the use of imagination, open-ended meaning and the individual interpretation of documents can expand fruitfully the journalistic attitude. Aesthetic journalism works by combining documents and imagination: the necessity of the former and the desire of the latter, since desirability is almost an antidote to the often senseless accumulation of information. This would counter the attempt to be objective at all costs, and would not discard creativity in favor of neutrality. It is useful to remember that creating fiction does not mean telling fancy stories; it means undoing the connections between things, signs and images which constitute what we intend as reality.

Whether or not this aesthetic approach will be the essential feature of our understanding of the world, only time will tell. In any case, it could provoke a state, or perhaps more a process, of sustained curiosity, and in turn change me, as user of information, through an attempt to comprehend what I am curious about and therefore unaware of. I see aesthetic journalism as an instrument with which to render sharper and more persistent my curiosity, and make more visible the contours of reality.