

Notes on sentimental biology

Dear John,

Thank you for thinking about me to preface this book of yours. Maybe I should have written a text that simply guided the reader to the images' discovery. I could have tried to single out the correct door to access the meaning of your work with compelling reasoning and an elegant cultural background, I could have made my best endeavor to arouse the audience's attention. In short, I could have done my honest job of art writer with due commitment and without hesitation. However, no one ever reads these kinds of essays (everybody knows this and still nobody admits it), texts forcedly embedded by habit within glossy-papered volumes. Not a single, merciful, good devil. Never ever. Not even during summer vacations. Therefore, this time I chose not to pretend that many are dying to know my opinions on your artworks and thought it would be more honest just to write to you. A private correspondence, a letter to make you aware - if you'll wish to read it- of a few loose thoughts that have gone through my head regarding your work in the last few years.

From the times of Michelangelo to the present day, the concept of art has changed a lot, and with the birth of the new century the mutation has become radical. You could almost say that this ancient word -once holder of the spirit's many treasures- now only expresses the proliferation of random objects that are very poor in meaning but have easily recognizable features, aimed in a very exclusive way to gamblers' bets and tourists entertainment. Empty boxes with a showy label. Products of great cost but little value, mostly conceived to meet the expectations of show business, naturally more efficient if shiny, gigantic and tolerably humorous. Products that are anyway meant to be consumed and thus ephemeral, consistent with the sole temporal dimension of a present which is paradoxically torn between the hunger for innovation and the desire of conformity. An ensemble of things that has turned the idea of modernity into the ideology of fashion step by step. An inalienable luxury for wealthy ladies who crowd fashion shows, an affordable hobby (and yet a not less desirable one) for all the others who kill time at the hair salon flicking through the pages of lacquered magazines. In both cases, a mere gadget doomed to oblivion, where what was one-day à la page, becomes inexorably obsolete the very next day.

Art is not the "daughter of Hope and Memory" anymore, not as Yeats thought it to be at the beginning of the last century (1). Our time has given Art up to the foster care of calculations and amnesia. Its name is the same as always, but it has been given a brand new surname, never used before throughout its history. Today it goes by the name of Contemporary Art, proving the fact that this is all about a gimmick, destined to fade on the short term of the instant. Now that any kind of longing for eternity - and any kind of metaphysical or existential tension with it- have been left behind, Art has turned itself from ritual object into cultural gadget and stopped asking questions about the mystery (or mysteries) of life. It talks a lot about itself, its shape, its status and market. It shallowly talks about esthetic, economics, society, politics and current events, becoming every time an occasional instrument for reviewing, expressing opinions, arguing and making propaganda, much like daily newspapers. It has by now

become a wordy amusement, a catalogue of brilliant trivialities, tricks, clumsy handcraft or perfect ready-mades, either real or fictitious, but still in need of the instructions for use contained within endless - and essentially hollow- conversations. It dematerializes to be conceptual and then materializes at will, to find out it has become post-conceptual. It quotes, appropriates, imitates. It is a serial production, a reproduction and an industrial production. And it goes on until sickness, until forgetting once and for all its original reason to be, in the process making people forget just as well.

Your work, John, lives within our era without nostalgia, but in a region of the mind that is very, very distant from this mess - and here lies the first reason why I wished to explore it and get to know it. Fact is that right from the start I was intrigued by the great diversity of your artworks. There wasn't any hallmark on them. To me this was the hint of a poetry that is definitely more prone to being pervaded by the world - in order to understand the depth of it- rather than eager to sear the surface of it with its own, absolute mark. They were images that gently invited my thoughts to freely enter, without having to endure the arrogant strictness of forcing the eye to a stereotypical, narrow access. Almost as if they were clues, tracks on an unknown path within the open, kindred space of a mutual feeling. I accepted the invitation and let myself be transported by their aura, by their vague but constant scent, all the way through my detours towards other nearby and akin, much beloved twin universes. I heard them talk about the bloody, grim humanity depicted by William Hogarth, of the absurd bleakness in the lives of Samuel Beckett's characters, of the domestic, fabled dream drawn by Ensor. But at the same time they spoke with clarity and respect of little existences scarred by great wounds, forgotten loves, dulled spirits, mere illusions becoming surprising realities, fear and hope. In a few words, I listened to them while they were speaking life with extreme truthfulness. And that is the point: your art never talks about itself, it talks about life and life only. Your life and certainly everyone else's. Without complacency, but with passion. In depth, but without gravitas. Authentically.

What is not less important is that - in an age of desperate search for new media and dim proliferation of new languages - you ended up choosing sculpture as the preferential form for your narrative, only in its most traditional meaning. That is to say the archaic, simply essential but extremely difficult craft of moulding rough matter or assembling different materials into shapes and volumes that are able to convey meaning through their sole presence within space. Which is no small feat, because true sculpture implies intelligence of hand and technical skill at the service of invention, which have always been the necessary vehicles to material imagination, from the age of Altamira until now. Namely, that primordial impulse through which art - since the beginning of times- has silently unveiled a meaning within every thing that was unknown to the ordinary glance.

Allow me a digression here. The idea of sculpture as an art form that pulls from the shadows that which is invisible to the eye, is rooted in the very distant past. It was already relevant within the origin myth first narrated by Herodotus and then revisited by Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia*: "[...] Butade of Sicyon was the first to discover the art of crafting portraits through the use of clay. It happened in Corinth

and he owed this discovery to his daughter, who had fallen in love with a boy. Since this boy was about to leave for foreign lands, she painted the features of his face on a wall, tracing their shadow that were thereon projected by the light of a lantern. Her father then applied clay along those painted lines, thereby recreating the boy's profile. Once it had dried up as the rest of the pottery, Butade cooked it in the kiln and hence obtained a first sculpture." (2) This quote, which seems to be suggesting love and the pain of absence as essential agents within the drive to mould figures, reminds me of an interview of yours that I recently read. "The imagery or the physicality I try to portray is not simply of the physical aspect of the body; I am much more interested in the invisible emotional landscape which emanates from and interacts within each of us. Like a form of gravity, each of us are held in orbit by each other and influenced by this indefinable mixture of personal history, personality and physicality." (3) Almost as if to you, sculpture were the art of making the sentimental structure of space visible to the eye, together with the psychic nature of the bodies that inhabit it.

Essentially, the image of life at work. In its overwhelming course through our existence, in its nooks and mazes. The inextricable tangling of thoughts and matter, which were already at the core of your concerns since those schooldays when you believed you could unveil its secrets through the study of biology, until the moment where it must have become clear that there was nothing science could not explain except the essential, i.e. the quality. That something which, despite making the world disposable, makes it livable, and of which only the instruments of art manage to capture and convey the meaning beyond the limits of any rational consideration. And so your work has gradually developed into a sort of sentimental biology, where flesh and marble, wax and ceramic, hair and glass, bronze and skin have become components to a sculptural experiment, carried out on a moving universe in which organic and inorganic or mineral and animal assume a fundamentally emotional value.

Then you started calling it the "Architecture of Empathy", and under this title you gave form to perhaps your most accomplished work to date. A statue of pure white marble that reproduces the template of Michelangelo's "Pietà", entirely covered by a cloth of drapery. A veil under which the figures' peculiar identity disappears, but the feelings of love and loss emanated from those motionless bodies are revealed. This sculpture shed such a light on both your previous and following works, it allowed me to understand how the raw material they are *eventually* made of is empathy.

Allow me one more digression. *Einfühlung* (empathy) is the word coined by Theodor Lipps in his essay "Ästhetik, Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst". He describes it as "symbolic sympathy" or "the perception of our own vital energy through a sensible object" and names it "the fundamental psychological function of the esthetic experience" (4) In short, according to Lipps, the true meaning of art lies inside the affinity that ensues between creator and spectator the moment they share an artwork intended by both as an act of mutual compliance to life. This theory, constantly contradicted by the avant-gardes' washed out, self-referential formalism throughout the last century, became reality in the work of some great outsiders. First among all Francis Bacon, who wanted his paintings to kindle a feeling of organic being within their spectators. As if some kind of human existence had passed through them and left

its traces behind, and the sediments of life trailed across the canvas in the form of brushstrokes, just like a slug's glazy wake drawing its course onto the grass. That is to say, in all truthfulness, he wished his paintings could be a place where you can find the picture of a life. (5)

Hard to believe you were not influenced by that. And those who have felt some kind of emotion before one of your sculptures know that in that moment they were looking at a piece of their life. Whether it was simply pleasure or fascination, heartbreak, or even puzzlement and revulsion, that object was telling them something about themselves, and not talking to them about itself. Something strongly rooted within each personality, which in past times would have been called "universal". For what sets your creations apart from the countless items that crowd contemporary art shows is indeed that delicate, deep heed towards the human condition, that capacity to sharply penetrate it and express it with true feeling. In short, what we usually sum up with the word humanity.

Romans used to call it *Pietas*. Namely, the awareness that "the self is someone else", that the identity is born and bred through the relationship with the outside, and therefore that a common feeling of shared pathos constitutes its very nature. Or otherwise, to phrase it like philosopher Martin Buber, that "No man is purely a person, nobody is pure individuality. Everybody lives inside a double-faced self." (6) And indeed what would there be left of a man if denied the possibility to think and act for his peer? Nothing more than an "egoless ego", as Maurice Blanchot wrote about the animal condition the deportees were forced to endure inside concentration camps. The mere, short-lived feeling of strain for survival, the lowest degree of existence. (7)

But life, real life, not simply *Bios* but *Ethos*, that kind of life which breathes soul into art, is so much more and so much else. It is welcoming the other into your world, beyond the wall of indifference. It is expansion of space and time beyond the burdening boundaries of the *hic et nunc*. It is the invention of things and bodies, building the future and rebuilding the past. And all of this is exactly what gives shape and substance to your work. Sculpting to see the face of love and absence. Moulding figures to create the house of empathy, where you speak humanity and imagine reality.

But I might be gliding towards too much abstract considerations here. And, to phrase it like author Arturo Martini – who has been one of your illustrious predecessors – "[...] art cannot stand theories, genres, style. It is a spontaneous matter, enigmatic but fated, like the process of birth inside the motherly womb. A natural, unfading faculty, surprising in its inherent ability to repeat itself throughout time- just like a blade of grass." (8) A matter that deserves to be the object of our quiet, sincere attention to its movements. For it is the only way the image can reveal its whole, plentiful self, as well as an intangible atmosphere that the eye listens to, as if it were a swaddling music. Therefore, it is indeed better if I stop speculating now and just let my mind go, to "listen" to your works as if they were different voices blended in one melody.

You showed me an old coach jam-packed with blown glass-colored balloons. I felt the weight of the past and the airiness of boyhood. Left without either horses or coachman, it was clear only fantasy could have moved it. I dreamt of that wagon

running and those balloons flying high, but feared it would all crumble at the first asperity of the road. A coach that is solid as memory but frail as hope, the emblem of a journey through the land of our fears.

I saw a ceramic, slate-grey tombstone onto which you engraved the epitaph “Here is an empty kiss”. A headstone, split to its base, torn from the grave where the remains of an impalpable token of love lie. A multiplying of absences within the most poised silence: lovers are unknown, their intimacy weightless, the grave has disappeared, and there are no more dates or places. What remains is only a distant memory, a relic ripped from a shadow. Lost in time, frail and unchanging, indelible sign of a void which cannot be filled.

I lingered for quite some time in front of the wax sculpture “Carcass of desire”. A tangling of organs, partly covered by a rag, laid upon a closed book and exhibited on an austere plinth. A vanitas and laboratory trove for a museum of imaginary science. A proudly erect icon, a tribute to the jeering, glorious weakness of the flesh. Made of grief, dust and stories that nobody tells anymore.

I looked into the eyes of that clumsy, big, blue ceramic head you titled “Pool of Narcissus weeping (*moving closer to a spiritual and transcendental god of a likewise sadness*)”. And in his cloudy, melancholic glance – which you could call “melancomi-”- I saw sweet tears and sour tears, profusely poured, just like the beer about to spring from the tap fixed to his mouth. Demi-god of the neighborly bar, at the corner of Gin Lane and Beer Street, half self-portrait half sacred idol, part Narcissus and part reflection of his sadness.

I had to brood to understand the meaning behind that rainbow-colored porcelain urinal titled “Ngorongoro”, which at first sight seemed to me like a not-so-relevant nod to Duchamp’s “Fountain”. I realized that it was actually the exact opposite. Not an homage, but a rebuttal. Not a ready-made, but a sculpture that you had moulded from clay with your daughter, just like Butade the potter, before she was able to glaze it and you to fire it in the kiln. Almost a manifesto, destined to convey the longing for a return to the infancy of art and to its existential movements, beyond the orgy of doodles that plagues our present.

In this way, in each of your creations – and I would have mentioned a lot more of them if I hadn’t decided to take the time for a short letter - I heard you speaking with strength and tenderness to a sincerely loved “You”, whether that was a single person or every one of us. I heard you screaming and whispering, trying to find some kindred being whom to share your lust for life with. Sometimes violently, clutching their flesh, and sometimes turning to the intangible energy of their imagination with great subtlety, almost from a distance. I followed you with all my attention when you essentially asked art to transform from a way of doing to a way of being. And I think that hints of your maturity as a man can be found all over your works in these last few years. But you are not really ageing as much as you are living a second childhood, considerably more aware than the first one. With less irony and more melancholy, less alcohol and more spirit, less provocation and more evocation. If I wanted to phrase this through the icons in Kierkegaard’s theories, I would say I witnessed your metamorphosis from Seducer to Husband.(9) In other words, your sculpture has

gradually moved further and further away from a purely aesthetic perspective to access an ethic or - if you prefer – existential dimension.

A dimension where every piece of art is returned to the duration, to the long time of reflection, the continuity of a feeling, and does not wear out in a momentary glance anymore. A fermentation of the thought that builds art as an actual architecture of empathy, that makes the paradoxical coexistence of both sense and sensibility possible within one single work. As I was saying, some sort of sentimental biology, an inward journey behind life's outward look, through the whereabouts of your own biography, all the way to that core meaning which everyone shares. Beyond sensation, searching for sense.

And at the end of the day that is the point, Dear John, the sense of life and art, in an age where the obsession for quantity and pure form has set aside every consideration of quality. Your work has the priceless virtue of constantly calling for everyone's attention upon this point, expressing in the most vivid way the belief that Malraux summed up in a few, powerful words: "Art is the shortest path from man to man". (10)

I do not think I have anything to add, and I apologize if this letter is not what you expected in order to appropriately preface your book. Whatever you may think, know that you can publish this nonetheless without the worry of disappointing anyone, because nobody will read this anyway.

Sincerely yours

Didi Bozzini,

September, 2017

Notes

- 1 - William Butler Yeats – The celtic twilight - 1893
- 2 - Pliny the Elder – Naturalis Historia - AD 78
- 3 - John Isaacs - The hand that rocks the cradle - 2014
- 4 - Theodor Lipps - Aesthetik. Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst – 1906
- 5 - Francis Bacon and David Sylvester - Interviews with Francis Bacon -1962/1979
- 6 - Martin Buber – Ich und du – 1923
- 7 - Maurice Blanchot - L'indestructible – article about Robert Antelme's L'Espèce humaine on Nouvelle Revue Française – 1957
- 8 - Arturo Martini – La scultura lingua morta - 1945
- 9 - Søren Kierkegaard - Enten-Eller – 1843
- 10 - André Malraux – Psychologie de l'art – La monnaie de l'absolu - 1950