

Rencontres lors d'une promenade nocturne

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Prologue

According to a Greek myth passed down to become part of classical Latin tradition, Hecate, the queen of the underworld invoked by Medea in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*¹, possessed a lush nocturnal subterranean garden from which her priestesses, or daughters, gathered plants with wondrous properties. Hecate is associated with the moon, like the goddess Diana; merged and confused with Selene and Artemis, the personifications of the moon's different phases, Hecate represents the unification of the complete lunar cycle and personifies the entire arc of life. Statues or images that depict her show a figure made up of three joined women, or a woman with three heads; she is depicted in her tripleness of young maiden, adult woman and old woman². Fated by Zeus to inhabit the Sky, the Earth and Hades, Hecate serves as an intermediary between the sensory and the intelligible, seen and unseen worlds. In her lunar function, she is linked to the goddess Nyx, mother of dreams and of amorous pleasures, who is in fact none other than the night, of which the moon is queen.

The place

Villa Bardini, built in the 17th century above the Boboli Gardens, with its sloping, terraced park – which, making use of the incline of the hillside, offers numerous panoramic outlooks over the city of Florence –, its complex of Baroque staircases, its combination of decorative and useful plants, its English garden embellished with pathways, statues and fountains, its Kaffeehaus and its grotto, this villa and its park is a synopsis, almost a catalogue, of the various ways in which man related to nature from the 17th century to the beginning of the 20th. Nature is at times treated as an architectural system, or tamed and transformed into agriculture, or is viewed as the quintessence of beauty, a place for recreation or refuge. But the park is also a zone of passage, a place in which the private and public spheres meet and overlap. In fact, while on the one hand it is the heir of the Hortus conclusus – the place dedicated to Mary in mystic religious belief, and identified during the Middle Ages as a place for monastic study and meditation –, on the other, it is also the heir of the Renaissance garden, a place of courtly ceremony and, later, Baroque festivity, the place where a lord received his guests. The park is thus a place suitable for both contemplation and entertainment.

This same functional and aesthetic context also frames the very idea of the villa which, although built by its owner as a place to retreat from the city in the surrounding hills, is also conceived as an object of hospitality, and thus has a public function.

It is precisely this parallelism between private function and public function that the young artist Giovanni Ozzola has taken as his theme in completing his artist work, adding to the pieces displayed in the dim exhibition spaces of Villa Bardini and installation set in the park-garden: neon script that reads "sentire stimmung". Two words.

Between the park imbued with summer light and heat and the bare, dark, cold cellar, an extraordinary dialogue is established. Inside and outside, warm and cold, light and darkness – in short, night and day – are thus made to converse with one another.

This dialogue made up of contrasts – the dialogue established between the artworks and between the places in which they are set – speaks of and at the same time germinates atmospheres and sensations, in a game of cause-and-effect that creates diverse moods. "Mood" is a possible translation of the term "Stimmung", a term that indicates that idea so beloved of German romantics, used to describe that particular situation in which the human soul

hovered on the boundary between day and night, between the perceived and un-perceived worlds, between the real and the virtual.

Day and night

Giovanni Ozzola has arranged his works in the exhibition space of Bardini-Contemporanea, so as to thematize and reflect on both the cross-shaped architecture of the rooms and the motif of darkness, or rather of the absence of light, characteristic of the place. The overall rhythm of the exposition space is established by three individual works: two large photographic light-boxes and a video. The public enters the space after having passed through a curtain which, in addition to separating the entrance space from the actual exhibition space, also keeps natural light from penetrating and, protecting the dimness, contributes to defining the exposition area. The visitor who enters, leaving daylight behind him, will need a few minutes to get used to the darkness. The first light box, back-lit like a billboard but with a wood frame like a traditional painting, shows a view of a night sky with a full moon; the second light box shows a Judas tree in full bloom; and the video shows a dawn, with the first light of day dissolving the darkness.

In a subtle yet emotionally-charged way, Giovanni Ozzola thematizes the darkness of night and the sensation of solitude that comes with it, a sensation that changes tone in the presence of the moon, which transforms the night into Nyx, the mother of dreams and amorous pleasures; when the moon is present, the darkness of night is no longer solitary and frightening, but fantastical, and the moon reveals itself as a symbol of sensuality, of seduction, of love. The moon-Hecate, intermediary between the tangible world and the intelligible world, who, with her enthralling voice in Fellini's final film, *La voce della Luna*, serves as a guide on a dreamlike journey between reality and imagination³. The breaking of dawn brings light in; the video projection draws us away from the virtual night and attenuates the real darkness. Light has always been the symbol of knowledge fleeing ignorance, the rational in opposition to the emotional; in one of the fundamental texts of Christianity, the incipit of the Gospel according to John, the Word (Logos), which was present in the beginning and by means of which "God created all things," "was life", and this life is light: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. / The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."⁴

We need only think of the Enlightenment and its iconography. Even up to the time of Nam June Paik, the father of video art, light has continued to be a transmitter of information: in a 1990 interview, when asked what the theme at the basis of his video or laser works was, he answered: "Light is the most efficient form of information transmission."⁵

In our context, the context of Giovanni Ozzola's work, the dialogue between day and night speaks of a cycle – night is replaced by day, which will in turn be replaced by night. The observer finds himself inside this cycle as well, with the singularity created by the uniqueness of his emotions, his associations and his memory, but who at the same time, in the cosmological immensity presented, in an atmosphere created by different sensations and associations, in a very particular "Stimmung," becomes aware of his insignificance, drifting in Leopardian memory.

In this life cycle of beginning and ending, the feminine lunar cycle in which the elements of new life are generated, we seem to hear an echo of the myth of Hecate, like a lunar voice – certainly not a quote, "but we are convinced that the myth is a language, [...] a seedbed of symbols that contains, like all languages, [...] an essence of reality that vivifies and nourishes an entire conceptual whole."⁶

Time and space

Between the moonlit night and the break of day, between these skies and distant horizons, we find the depiction of a Judas tree, in the center of the exhibition, a symbol of life, representative of the earth. The individuality of

this single tree, the monumental image of which is underlined by the light box technique of reproduction, makes this presence not only a symbol, but truly a monument to life, that singular life that each of us lives. The erect position of the tree, stretching towards the sky, can be compared to that of a human figure; the lone tree recalls the solitude of the individual. In the foreground is the trunk of this Judas tree, and the particularity of this trunk is its “Y” shape, like a road that splits in two, the fork where one must make a decision, the dilemma of decision, the honor and the burden that Man has of always being able to choose between (at least) two alternatives, Promethean solitude. Giovanni Ozzola depicts the tree plunged into the same darkness that reigns in the room; he brings inside and adapts to the real, luminous context of the place the presence of that nature that the observer has just left outside, in the park. The flowering tree and the moonlit sky suggest the idea of a garden on a summer night, the classic setting for love stories great and small, from Romeo and Juliet’s balcony to the film *Notting Hill* where, inverting the roles with respect to the Shakespearean play, it is the female protagonist who declares her love.

In this interweaving of interpretations of such different natures, in these references and hints the artist makes to the sensory sphere of the human soul, the temporal dimension – the passing of time, living in an awareness of time – plays a central role. The visitor who enters the exposition area from outdoors needs time to become aware of the space, and must stop and wait a few moments before his eyes adapt to the darkness of the room and allow him to take it in. But the three works that make up the exhibition also thematize time, units of time, its fleetingness as well as its eternity: the fourth dimension, that of time, is the only possibility Man has to “localize himself,” to position himself with respect to the other three dimensions. Giovanni Ozzola highlights this motif; the visitor is invited to walk through the garden, to transform himself into a leisurely walker, the temporally-limited situation of a visit to an exhibition is expanded, the speed of the rhythm with which we are used to experiencing everyday situations is slowed down, and the neon script “sentire stimmung” refers back to the situations experienced in the exposition space, prolonging them. The neon writing shines like the sun, with its own light; the figures in the light boxes shine like the moon, with reflected light; the dialogue between inside and outside, between day and night, continues.

Reality and poetry

In the interior exhibition space, the artist concentrates the theme of light as a metaphor of human life, but also that of darkness as a mental space of emotions and fantasies. The walk through the external space of the park is part of a walk through the emotional worlds each one of us carries within himself. In his works, as in the “dramaturgy” of the entire staging, Giovanni Ozzola makes use of hints, references, impressions, atmosphere: the artist becomes a seducer, a lunar voice, seeking, in the banal reality of everyday life, that which is fundamental, that which remains; seeking the essence that this reality nourishes.

Notes

1. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VII, vv. Xx-xx.
2. One of the best-known depictions is the *Ecate Chiaramonti*, a Roman sculpture of Hellenistic origin, Vatican City, Chiaramonti Museum, Vatican Museums.
3. *La voce della Luna*, Federico Fellini, 1989.
4. John 1, 1-5.
5. K. Bussmann, F. Matzner (ed.), *Nam June Paik, eine DATAbase*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern 1993, p. 278.
6. Cesare Pavese, *Dialoghi con Leucò*, Einaudi, Turin 1972, p. 2.
7. *Notting Hill*, Roger Mitchell, 1999. Lead actors: Julia Roberts, Hugh Grant.