

Seven Parallel Notes

I. We Would Like

Exactly five years have gone by since I wrote the text for his first monograph. Much has changed since then, in both his art and my life. We always wish things would stay exactly as they were when we they appeared to us in such an appealing manner and when, either gradually or instantly, we learnt to love them. But things change. Even though we may remain attached to them because of the trust that their appeal emanated and that, gradually or instantly, managed to involve us emotionally, there is nevertheless something that, with the passing of time, we need to learn to abandon. When we do recognise this, a problem arises and sometimes this problem appears to be one of form.

These observations, which are entirely personal, do not so much emerge, even though indirectly, from a retrospective and distant look back over the work of Giovanni Ozzola, but rather they are induced by the actual substance of his work as a whole, in the way that it now appears to me.

So let us start out from here, considering how much Giovanni manages to capture and restore to us in terms of image. His works take the form of images, whether fixed (photography) or moving (video) or the result of a construction. This construction takes the form of installations and exhibitions, which are more than just a mere display of his works, for they are complex works in themselves, even though they are made up of individual works. The latter, however, always maintain their own particular and specific autonomy outside, inside, and after the exhibition. In whatever medium they might be created, they all invite us not so much to look at them from a distance as unmoving icons, as to become part of a shared environment in which, with all their differences, the work and the spectator enjoy the same level of autonomy.

According to one model of representation which traces its origins back to the theories put forward by Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise *On Painting*, the image is viewed as a window that both opens onto and separates from the world. Even though with a series of variations over the years, this model has extended down to the present moment, and one need only think of television as a “window on the world” or of computer “Windows”. Giovanni restores meaning to this ancient metaphor, but at the same time he subjects it to renewed investigation, though I will talk about this in more detail later on. Right now, I would mainly like to consider two aspects of the way the image appears in his works. These aspects are quite distinct but they often come together in the same work: image as object, and image as vision.

At least two important precedents will be considered to give meaning to the former. The first precedent is that of Cindy Sherman’s works, and particularly those from the 1980s onwards, in which the photographic image peremptorily occupies a particular portion of space, which is equivalent to what was traditionally occupied by the surface of painting. The second is Thomas Ruff, who comes somewhat later yet during the same decade, of which it must be said he is one of the most significant artists. The distinctive features of his work are based on the concept that size is a fundamental aspect in the definition of a work, an idea inspired by the teachings of his masters at the Düsseldorf Academy, Bernd and Hilla Becher, for whom the photographic image is an object-based and concrete construction. It is this same concept of a work’s status as an object that has acquired increasing consistency in Giovanni’s most recent art. In any case, the position that the image occupies within his installations and his exhibitions is based on a precise and predetermined formal structure, a design which is totally controlled by the artist. This design aims to relate his works with the spaces they are placed in and with the other objects that share this space with them. These may be other works – either his or by others – or existing objects or ones specially arranged for the occasion and, lastly, they relate to the possible user (foreseen, or at any rate taken into consideration) of the space, which is thus “prepared”, to adopt the term used by John Cage².

The other aspect concerns image as vision. Each image is the materialisation and fixation of a vision. While this is true for much, though not all photography, it is especially true for Giovanni’s for he always captures a moment of transition and accentuates its ephemeral and transient essence, and the way it is destined to immediate dissipation: “it will no longer be as it was” is for him more pertinent than Barthes’s “ça a été”.³ His vision thus originates in the continuum of visual experience and is captured in the form of an image. Even so, there was always a sort of latent expectation that prepares the way for the vision. It is a sort of openness, which is mediated by the nudity of perception, to the event and to the advent of the vision. This state of perceptive nudity is susceptible to being “impressed”, like a film in a camera: it is an inner void waiting to be filled by an event that, even though minimal, appears each time as an illumination. In essence, it is always light, the essential component of the photographic act, that brings about the event. There are no facts in the end, but just events, and each one is a luminous event. There is a shift from night [En una noche oscura, /con ansias en amores inflamada/(¡oh dichosa ventura!)/salí sin ser notada, /estando ya mi casa sosegada⁴ (San Juan de la Cruz)], in which the profiles of things stand out like vain shadows (Habibi and Vulcano, both 2006; Nuvola nella valle, 2007; Ultra Blue Night - horizon, 2008), to broad daylight, reflected between sea and sky, and acquiring other tones (Meloria, 2006) through countless nuances of dawns and sunsets, mists and fogs.

Exteriors, thus far, but then light penetrates into an interior: frontally, and it is then often screened by diaphragms of various consistencies (from *With the Wind*, 2002, to *Camera rossa*, 2003, to *Finestra and Tenda - verde*, both 2009) though not always (from *Poltrona*, 2003, to *White Image*, 2004, *Wiesbaden - primavera*, 2007, *Early Morning*, 2008, *Untitled and Tenda - azzurro*, both 2009); or from the side (from *Camera verde*, 2003, to *Poltrona in un'altra camera and Camera gialla*, both 2007, through to *Shining Curtain and Interno*, sole, giallo, both 2009), revealing their most harmonious and secret intimacy, at times partially erasing the profiles of things and bodies. Lastly, in certain works as from 2008, such as *Omnia munda mundis*, *Albero di notte*, *Vinco*, *Foglie di notte* and *Bouganville*, the light extracts a filigree of branches, flowerings, and leaves from the densest depths of night. The mechanical effect of the camera and the act of photography – and this confirms the effect of epiphany that over a century and a half ago the inventor Joseph Nicéphore Niépce⁵ revealed to the world – Giovanni adds the marvel of vision. It is the vision of a fleeting moment that, through its very manifestation, reveals its own transience. The

ecstatic wonder of light brings both revelation and a sense of its passing. The work does not aim to halt this passing but simply indicates its indescribable transit.

We wish the things that are captured in that evocative instant of presences and memories would remain, but they inevitably change and the fleeting nature of the instant is but an effect of their evolution. Even though we remain attached, by a sort of emotional dependence brought about by that barely perceptible moment, and even though we would like it to last and prolong its duration beyond vision, this desire of ours does not in the slightest obstruct its actual disappearance. When, with all its harsh inescapability, this understanding is imposed upon our consciousness, it clearly reveals a problem. And, at times, this problem appears to be one of form. And it may be that all of Giovanni Ozzola's work revolves around this.

II. On the Very Substance of Images

[Nudo e crudo]

Every image emerges from a background.⁶ The background is not the image, but rather the substance from which the image emerges. Whether it is the crystalline surface of a photograph or the moving, liquid surface of video – and it makes no difference if they are projected or shown on a monitor – or even if it is an environment that covers all or part of a given space – and again I refer both to installations and exhibitions – we experience this form of emersion. It is a gradual or sudden floating to the surface, from the indistinct bottom to the distinct image. It is as though the image were a radiant and radiating manifestation of deepest density, about which we know nothing except when it generates the image.

III. Any Vision

Any vision has a sense of a revelation, of a profane epiphany, of a disclosure not so much of what the world is made of, but of the substance of our own ability to perceive the world, of our innate propensity for reiterated amazement.

Any vision does not annihilate the contingent data in which it is given, the constant triviality of existence, and indeed it gives them visual form with the most objective clarity. In actual fact they are the sole object, and the sole content of vision. No story ever justifies their presence or uses it for self-representation. In their flagrancy, they are not summoned up, evoked, or brought in to testify or to prove any fact or event that lies beyond themselves, or any feeling or sensation other than those that are aroused by their very emergence into the light.

And yet, in the visionary end result and in the form that the vision acquires within the work, this does not mean all those contingent data do not accumulate memories that expand the meaning beyond their appearance, and suggest a new time.

So each vision plunges its roots into experience and into the indistinct in the instant it appears and,

ultimately, in the instant it projects itself beyond itself as the certainty of a promise. This confluence of times can be likened to a state of ephemeral ecstasy that the work stops without holding on to. It is as though everything we have seen so far as the object of this vision, were being imbibed of this ephemeral ecstasy.

IV. Forever

Nothing happens other than in an ever-repeating cycle, in an everlastingly, cherished “forever”.

V. Interior and Exterior

One of the many dichotomies on which Western Culture is based is central to the work of Giovanni Ozzola, and it is the one that opposes interior and exterior.

The approach that Giovanni adopts might be referred to as “anti-perspective”. Indeed, the use he makes of it is heretical with regard to the canonical model of perspective, even though he maintains an asseverative arrangement of the viewpoint – for the key instruments in his art are the camera and video camera, in both of which a single lens is what enables images to be captured. The original model actually involved selecting a single, stationary point of view that corresponded to the position of the subject – a desexualised subject, the aisthesis of which was reduced to no more than the sense of sight and, what is more, that of just a single eye.⁷ Protected by the representation machine, the subject could have a pertinent vision of the world, of bodies and of things, and it could be so pertinent that the world, bodies, and things became susceptible to increasingly precise measurements, and thus to increasingly sophisticated domination. And we know how this model of representation later became a model of culture and thus, we might say, of civilisation: of Western Culture and Civilisation.

According to this model, the only interior that might be conceived of was that of a subject complete with instruments of perception that had become increasingly sophisticated through the prostheses that technology and science continued to supply. The exterior was the *res extensa* that Descartes saw in opposition to *res cogitans*, a world in which venturing forth would put at risk the identity of the subject and the effectiveness of his instruments of perception and his technological prostheses.

Giovanni maintains this dichotomic distinction, and indeed accentuates the difference. Now, in the canonical perspective model, the interior was the place from which the will of the subject, which is that of knowledge and dominion, and that was unrelated to the substance of the subject itself, and from those passions and pleasures that were not susceptible to being expressed by that very same will. All the considerable rest was relegated to a dark zone, which took from Sigmund Freud the name of “the unconscious”⁸, but right from Gottfried Leibniz⁹ and Immanuel Kant¹⁰, through to Friedrich Schelling¹¹ and Arthur Schopenhauer,¹² the importance of its power over will had been clearly illustrated. The exterior remained an open, hostile land of conquest, and this conquest was to be achieved only by remaining at a distance in the same zone of subjectivity, without attempting any forays outside.

Here, the world was conceived of as will and representation¹³.

In Giovanni's art, the interior is an area that is subtracted from any process of total abstraction, in which the subject is revealed to himself through memory and desire in the blissful conscience of his own intimacy. Giovanni's intimacy is not contaminated by the dark shadows of the unconscious. On the contrary, it is brought to life by the warmth of an experience that is always refreshing and that arises anew as a never-ending discovery. It is a constant rebirth, and a new awakening that is more than anything that of conscience.

The interior is indeed still protected, but not so much by the machinery of representation (which nevertheless has not abdicated its own power) as by the intimacy of experience. The "self" is always there, but it is as though radiated by the light that has opened up to his eyes.

Similarly, the exterior is not so much a land of conquest, as an area towards which the subject is drawn by a desire without name – the *désir sans nom* of which Jean-François Lyotard spoke.¹⁴ So if the interior is an expression of intimacy and conscience, the exterior is an extension and projection that expands out from this interior towards undefined and unfathomable limits: the night, the sea, mornings, high noons, and sunsets, fogs and mists. This constant indefiniteness is however halted at times by (often minimal) signs that come between longing eyes and boundless expanses. They may be the profiles of heights, islands, plants, clouds, or rocks, or like apparitions rising up out of a diaphanous substance. However, rather than undermining it, they only accentuate its incommensurability and immensity. Unlike Alberti's window, which opens out from the obscurity of the subject to the luminosity of the world outside, and acts as an impenetrable diaphragm between one and the other, in Giovanni's work we see an osmosis that defies any form of separateness. There are no few works in which interior and exterior collide, and these range from *Camera rossa* (2003) to *Tenda - verde* (2009), where the outside applies all its pressure to the diaphragm that separates it from inside, and there are those, from *Camera verde* (2003) to *Interno, sole, giallo* (2009), in which the exterior penetrates in the form of a light which is so dazzling that at times it cancels out the profiles of the bodies, as we can also see in *White Image* (2004) and *Early Morning* (2008).

Giovanni can thus be seen to have a Pan-like vision – that of the mythological Greek Pan, as reinterpreted by James Hillman¹⁵ – which is always positive, and which arouses neither the fears of Pan nor the anxieties of Freud, but if anything announces and recalls an uncontaminated state of ephemeral ecstasy.

VI. Windows

We have already seen how Giovanni often uses the motif of the window, and how this directly links back to Alberti's concept of a painting. But it is as though he subjected it to a sort of critical revision.

In actual fact, his images are not so much windows in the symbolic sense as the representation of real windows, or at least the effect they have in forming the picture itself. It is like shifting from metaphor to objective fact.

The arrangement of his works in exhibitions and the use of space in his installations, and the very fact that the object/image rests on the ground rather than being hung up, all reveal this objective fact that makes the illusionistic quality of the picture confront the concrete nature of the physical, material, and structural object, and its precise and established occupation of space.

The subject that looks is indeed this side of the window, while also and contemporaneously occupying the same space as what has materialised in the object. And this, in the case of Giovanni, is what each work ultimately is.

We find a *mise en abîme*, which is not Yves Klein's "vide" or the "sublime void" of so many artists of the 1980s, from Anish Kapoor to Jan Verduyck. It is more of a suggestion and the offer of an area of experience in which, even in its pronounced difference, the work opens up without imposing any subordination to the privilege of art. The vision given to us in the work is a gift devoid of the haughty sacrality of excellent vision. The art that is being ushered in with the third millennium, and that is not the offspring of the Western universe alone, shares a spirit of partiality and identity minority that has no ambition to achieve any totalising absoluteness. Should a god ever mythically preside over this state, it would be a god of small things.¹⁶ Once again in the form of Pan, the god without offspring¹⁷ and no longer a Nietzschean Apollo or Dionysos¹⁸.

VII. Awakenings

[At times his reawakening consisted solely of this light, which in any case always came before any other act of consciousness: it brought a fullness that later, in incipient wakefulness, the process of thought would dissolve, dividing and forming opposition and differences. But at that initial moment, it was all together: the reawakening itself, in its wonderment, the world in its endless splendour, life that flowed like a warm stream in a flourishing land, leaving traces of other lives, other voices, other rooms,¹⁹ the sound of which came in like a vast echo, both near and far, from within and from an outside space that seemed to be waiting for him, like a promise].