

Figures of the visible

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The metaphor used by Adorno as an approach to modern art: "The fragment is the intrusion of death into the work. While destroying it, it removes the stain of semblance", refers to the cultural conditions surrounding 20th century art, and at the same time to the boundaries of any attempt at interpreting modern art. At the beginning of his work *Aesthetic Theory* he affirmed that "along with the categories, the materials too have lost their a priori self evidence, and this is apparent in poetic language" – the boldest of testimonies being *Chandos Brief* by Hofmannstahl -, and he went on to develop the same assumptions, specifying that all 20th century art should be interpreted as a problem of language, based on the crisis caused by nihilism. The latter is interpreted as abandoning a fundamental dream, the dream that had governed the strategies of the culture of classicism, and which is no other than symmetry between the order of language and the order of the world.

Nobody knows for sure if paintings (art) are now a reflection of the world or if they are just an attempt to put a name to the infinite order of things. Nobody knows if they are just a visual appearance swept towards the exterior, or if they hide vast enigmatic secrets behind their appearance. At times, this half-complete order is presented to us in its plastic form and it is our senses that elevate the complexity of its meaning. At other times it is the eye that scrutinizes this half-complete order, analysing it and composing, to recreate an order combined with time, the essential time of nature. The time, or whatever it was, that concerned Goethe so much during his trip to Silesia to a point of making him question what was more real: the undulating autumn landscapes or the rusty gangue of mine dumps.

And it is through art that the complex order of the world takes on a plastic form, a representation in the space of the artwork: at times, a clean transparent glass, in the depths

of which all latency is immersed, along with the primitive foam identified by Paracelso. At other times a boggy area, a confusing place inhabited by thousands of decomposing forms, which will take over the discourse of art disturbing its reflection. It is either the scene itself that drags the memory of time along with it, or the landscape becomes fragmented, the depths of colour and material are interrupted, the magma of what all things were made of is cleaved by unfinished shapes, discontinued labyrinths that hint at other abysses. Time and time again, rather than guiding us on a search for the prehistory of what is visible, we are led to a time of things that, throughout the ages of mankind, has appropriated the signs of a shared living space.

Art has the privilege of being able to poetically represent the content of an experience that resists conceptual expression. This argument of evident romantic inspiration, -seen in Schelling's *Bruno-*, crosses all modern culture and, aware of the difficulties of a governing ideal of experience, (that is to say a cultural order, a system of forms that expresses and represents all aspects of life), entrusts art with the task of making that interplay of possibilities credible, if nothing else. In art therefore, behind the apparent history of tastes, preferences or ideals, there exists another history: the tension that lies in the experience of men, waiting for their chance to give shape to this tension as time and life go by, but never the same. Paul Klee wrote in his diary in 1914: "The more horrifying this world becomes, the more art becomes abstract; while a world at peace produces realistic art", referring to the experience that defines and organises the scheme of modern art. An obstinate person who renounces certain facts would have no other moral and aesthetic reason than to recognise the loss of transparency in the world, which in the ideal classicist world served to make the way of belonging acceptable, making it possible for us to see ourselves as just coming from nature. The strength of the artistic avant-garde of the 20th century can be found in its determined renunciation of this dream, initiating the search for new languages, capable of expressing the fragmentary experience of modern man. Since then, the scheme of art has focused on an endless experiment to spend interminable afternoons and evenings taking long walks, just like Robert Walser.

This unfinished journey undertaken by modern art echoes the proposal made by Klee in his *Schöpferische Konfession* in 1920, when he states that **"Art does not reproduce the visible; it makes visible"**. In other words, the old concept of art governed by the idea of correspondence and adaptation, the classic theory of the mimesis between language and the

world –symmetry that would make that beloved transparency possible, achieved by the effectiveness of naming and knowing–, now undergoes an inversion as far as its scheme is concerned. It becomes some kind of machine to project modern states of consciousness with the complicity, dissociation and ability of construction that govern the new system of perception.

And so the inversion of the scheme announced by Klee becomes real. **Art should not imitate the world, it should invent it.** And for that reason, a provisional and hypothetical path of knowledge of the world is embarked upon, adopting as epistemological criterion the general notion that no discourse, no form, no name will hope to be the discourse, form or name, but only one amongst thousands of possible names. This strict boundary, which forms part of the very soul of modern art, was to become the true horizon of all ways of expressing and recounting an experience.

The supposed facts of naturalism were abandoned a long way back, facts through which things were presented to us and their unequivocal presence was imposed upon us. An order of the world emerged that was recognised as being natural and habitable. That order has now been transformed, demolished. Goethe had already warned us of this metamorphosis of the way we see things, this difficulty, this condition of modern man. In his essay entitled Winckelmann and His Century he wrote: "Whereas modern man launches out into infinity (...), only to return eventually to a limited point, the ancients took a more direct route from the outset: they felt a characteristic need to remain firmly within the pleasant confines of the beautiful world". This different form of living in the world, which is typical of the modern subject, becomes nostalgia for the former way of living that considered the world, Earth, to be home. This idea of classicism, interpreted as nostalgia for home, for living in harmony in a beautiful abode on Earth, is now abandoned. Goethe knows only too well that modern thought is *Ummweg*: man's condition is to travel, roam, move from place to place, wander. **Modern man is a traveller, a passer-by, a wanderer, his path oblique. This wandering cannot erase his nostalgia for home and by various means he will try at least to reform, restore that place, that dream.** And it is precisely this purpose –found in the Goethean work *Dichtung und Wahrheit* – which now flounders. That order has disappeared, the order that was governed by the "profound, intimate, true form" that penetrates, orders and elevates artistic material, expressing the truth. And now it is this truth, the truth of perceptible appearance, which is insufficient; it is replaced by another order, another time, another discourse.

We look once again to nature, but from a distance: a distance that stems from the loss of that language or form capable of naming the world. The artist now becomes lost in the order of hypotheses and linguistic games, which project onto the infinite order of the world, the provisional system of forms, gestures, proposals, knowing that none of them is its measure, its *metron*, its truth.

It is this radical temporary character that makes a new artistic experience necessary, one that transforms art into the discourse of possibility and infinite interplays and combinations. A new material now flows across Mallarmé's blank page: a system of unexpected affinities and connections, settling upon it and providing, as if it were enlightenment from Rimbaud, the strange kind of light that comes from an impassable space. The new language is interpreted as a state of condensation of the material, the secrecy of which protects the enigma of the beginning of time and the movement that drags it to its fate. At times it is an infinite sequence of planes and surfaces of bright transparent graphic art, scarred spaces, unfinished figures which, with the logarithm of their construction, announce interplays of appearing or concealing nature. At other times, each form becomes an organic entity that flutters and vibrates, driven by the urge of the defenceless. The complicity of extremes dominates in both cases, making art the place *par excellence* to represent or show the world just how it is.

From Cézanne to Picasso, from Kandinsky to Pollock... a persistent will and effort to cover Mallarmé's blank page, a true allegory of the world. Upon it, an obstinate will of intervention. In the heart of the Bauhaus experience, Klee was an exceptional witness of this will when he spoke about the need to build new entities, new gestures, new projects, leaving them abandoned to the moment of their time, to the automatism of their expiry. The fact that nothing is definitely given and cannot be considered a closed horizon, like *natura dissecata*, entails a radical modification of the way we see the world, opening it up to new possible orders, the sequence of which no language can establish. All that remains, Klee would say, is to "let yourself be carried to this life-giving ocean along broad rivers and delightful brooks - like the branches of concentrated graphic art".

It is an interplay of presence, abstract interior landscapes, recognisable morphologies, determined by a combinatorial analysis of allusive formal elements, which takes us, drags us towards a supposed origin that nobody dares to name. Behind them, the enigma is

restored. A kind of cosmogony, which only myths can recount, is transferred to the walls and vault of the old temple to make visible the account of a guarded history.

This narrative obsession follows clear allegorical strategies that can easily be interpreted as approaching the baroque. Indeed, allegory is like the inaccessible soul of things and governs the discursive strategy of the modern. "Tout pour moi devient allégorie", wrote Baudelaire beyond all rhetoric. If the baroque naturalizes history and gives an air of artificiality to nature, it does so with the awareness that all knowledge is subject to the same difficulty, the difficulty of putting a name to things, a name that transmits their essence. From there, both epistemology and aesthetics drift towards a powerful will of form, the *Kunstwollen* that Alois Riegl would recognise as the disturbing and efficient artistic will of the age. From there, the representative flight and passion, the gesture, delirium, the invention of infinite labyrinthine and rhetorical forms, of excessive sensationalist proportions that become one before our eyes being to stray like in the optical games of the baroque. But here it is contrasted with the apparent main thread of a narrative that only myths can help us understand.

Once again, myth wraps the world in a veil of fog and light, restoring the memory of origin. And by invoking the origin, it is recreated with its visibility, at the time when things become apparent. The chromatic intensity is witness to this moment of revelation. And so, once again, a history is revealed in all its grandeur, the account of which had been interrupted. "Is there just shadow?", wondered T. S. Elliot. Each sign behaves like a moment in time, or part of a genealogy that springs from the origin of time. Once again, a painting makes the other part present: the radical difference, the tension of time. Behind the painted history that absolute other can be seen, in which the random order of the world germinates. Living with no specific time, in the past and the present, and with no specific place, everything is transformed into absolute and entity, birth and death, affirmation and loss. No task is more arduous than putting a name to this action of hurling things into the abyss of time. At times they burst onto the fabric of the painting like an epiphany, at other times they perish and are lost in the abyss of the void, and the painting becomes a metaphor of their silence. It is this eternal cycle of returning to the beginning that surprises language, impeding all aspirations of eternity.

The blank space of a painting cannot be understood as a place of revelation for the word, but of the fugitive expression of the world. Thus, language is shaped like a kind of alchemy that keeps the fate of the world secret. Its snares and schemes trap the numerous journeys of the multiplicity of what is natural, that zigzag in which the system of material is determined. Rather than searching for a method to understand it, the important thing is to imagine supposed orders, compositions that recreate the hypothetical ways of being. **If the artist is a creator, it is due to the artist's ability to see nature in a different way. Nature is offered to us as a place of possibility, infinite games and combinations.** "Each portion of matter can be conceived as like a garden full of plants, or like a pond full of fish. But each branch of a plant, each organ of an animal (...) is also a similar garden or a similar pond". This is Leibniz speaking, but it could be Klee. Rather than establishing a code, an established knowledge, it is important to dissociate it. If an established syntax is destroyed, other languages emerge and, due to their provisional nature, they become the true discourse on the world. They are fleeing structures that renounce the transparency of an ideal order, and accept being lost in the effort of using new names.

Georges Bataille discovered in the lines of the Bird Man of Lascaux, -in the primitive forms whose gestures revealed the times of a new human age- , the initial moment that would enable man to construct representative models of his world, however rudimentary they may appear to be. The Lascaux paintings depict a time when man drew the forms of living beings he could see and also of spectres that invaded his dreams. This power to represent things was as crucial a moment as when the writing and narratives that followed were discovered. It marked the start of a long journey in which art, created from different ideas and outlooks, would return time and time again to recreate order in the world, whether through Chinese script or drawings that marked the beginning of the modern age based on a new perspective. In either case, the dream that began with the Bird Man of Lascaux came true: the world and language could meet. "Comme le rêve, le dessin!".

A difficult journey is explored by the diverse forms of modern art. At times it is explored by theatre art, such as the works by **Bernardí Roig** or **Fabián Marcaccio** that express a new interpretation of the limit of the human condition, transforming the form of the human existence or its symbols. At other times, it is explored using allegory of the baroque festival, subjecting the work to a profusion of ornaments, to the interplay of mirrors recreated by dreams, to later recreate in a kind of skilful combinatorial analysis, the

order of the world just at the time it expires, seen in the work of **Joana Vasconcellos**. **Gary Hume** decides to cross the threshold of appearances that subtly becomes an interplay of almost absent presences. The Zen idea suspends the natural appearance, allowing only its shadow or outline, coloured with the light of oriental lakes. Or **Kiki Smith** in a clearly allegorical scene, transformed into a kind of specular game, shows us the anomaly of the evident that is considered hyperbole of gesture, in the sequence of that natural order that is now exposed to the irregularities of unsuccessful actions. And finally, **Helena Almeida** follows the trace of a distance marked by the abandonment or loss that only she can interpret with the gesture. Photography gives the best perspective, more so than any other discourse, when presented with the way we see the boundaries of the world that, as Wittgenstein wrote, coincides with the boundaries of our language.

They are all moments of a journey through contemporary art that Ana Serratosa gives us in this fourth edition, the last part of her project on her vision of contemporary art.