

## Word and Image

In “The Man Without Qualities” (part three, chapter 55, ‘Galleys and drafts’, “Feeling and behaviour. The precariousness of emotion”) Robert Musil wrote: “The fervour of many portraits – and there are portraits, not just pictures, even of things – consists not least in that in them the individual existence opens up towards itself inwardly and closes itself off from the rest of the world.” Those few lines could speak for many of the works on display, foremost among them the installation by Manfredi Beninati, an abandoned drawing room, shut and inaccessible to the spectator. It’s a literary gaze, turned towards the inner life, the opposite of that of a communicator, turned only towards the outer world, a contemplative gaze, which presupposes gratuitousness, the opposite to that of a consumer, aimed at possession or dispossession. Beninati’s installation raises doubts about the lawfulness of crossing a threshold scot-free, be it that of art or of a house.

“Casa Bianca” (White House) was built by Italian architect Pietro Arrigoni at the beginning of the last century and belonged to Dino Fernandez Diaz (who dedicated the house to his wife Bianca). Jewish of Spanish origin, Fernandez Diaz escaped - thanks to an Italian passport - the German deportation which in February 1943 decimated almost the entire Jewish community of Salonica, Europe’s largest. He and his family were however then killed in the first massacre to take place in Italy at the hands of the German SS at Maina, on Lake Maggiore, on the 22nd and 23rd of September, 1943.

Can the inner gaze turn towards the outer world when it has seen horror? Can it portray it? Andrej Rubliov, in the homonymous 1966 film by Andrei Tarkovski, refused to paint the Last Judgement after witnessing the brutal blinding by the grand duke of artisan monks, and withdrew into silence after the village of Vladimir was sacked and massacred by Tartars. This is dumbfounded silence before the horror of lost sense, of man deprived of humanity, the “Naked Masks” of Luigi Pirandello, like the frail puppets of Christiana Soulou, which yearn to vanish rather than emerge, or like Margherita Manzelli’s flesh-pared floating women’s bodies or the flayed skin of Michelangelo’s Saint Bartholomew who, in the Sistine Chapel, triumphs, knife in hand, finally liberated of his own countenance. However, with Manzelli, as with Soulou, there is no liberation, only a void, nothing to counterpoise the bodies, no space, no resistance nor desire. It’s the triumph of the meaningful over meaning, of a world without metaphor, of the seen over knowledge. It seems that Shakespeare, before writing “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” had read “The Golden Ass” by Apuleius, the first novel in the Latin language written in the second century before Christ, where the protagonist, Lucius, spies on the mistress of the house and sees her transform herself into an owl. Driven by a craving to possess the secret of mutation, he ends, by mistake, by turning himself into an ass. Again, it is this fixed gaze on possession which sanctions the loss of self, as with Oedipus, who goes blind when his guilt is revealed to him; that is, when it becomes reality, ceasing to be oracle, an oracle that had saved him from the abyss with the illusion of metaphoric language. According to Nietzsche, in his essay “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”, illusion is guilty of having fabricated truth and concepts on the basis of deceptive metaphors. When intuitive man triumphs over rational man – writes Nietzsche – a civilization like that of Greece can arise in which art dominates over life and where “this dissimulation, this disavowal of indigence, this glitter of metaphorical intuitions, and, in general, this immediacy of deception accompanies every event of such a life: neither the house, nor the gait, nor the clothes nor the clay jugs give evidence of having been invented because of a pressing need. It seems as if they were all intended to express an exalted happiness, an Olympian cloudlessness, and, as it were, a playing with seriousness.” And yet, contemporary man, who has emptied these metaphors and who, reducing language to the world of the purely tangible, has rendered them incapable of expressing the complexity of being, no longer resembles the Nietzschean stoic whose face is “a mask with features of dignified balance”, and instead resembles Bottom lost in the wood, troubled and grotesque. The loss of logos, the word emptied of its consequentiality, becomes merely a visual formula and leads – from Sophocles to Shakespeare – to the loss of self. Words, in ancient religious frescoes, are always captions; that is,

they function as a key to reading the image, just like captions in silent movies, where the writing is detached during editing in a separate black frame unto itself, announcing the next scene. When, on the other hand, words are mixed in with the image, as in comic strips or slogans or in the shift from silent movie captions to subtitles, the image ceases to refer to anything else and truth – falsehood, according to Nietzsche – is replaced by an eternal present of interchangeable, self-referential and endlessly repeatable figures and words. Thus the enigma of a fragment, the debris of relics washed up by the sea and by history, the basis of the works by Savinio and protagonists in the Embirikos photos on display, today succumb to the uprooted and non-historic word, no longer a metaphor of another world but a vehicle of information. Thus William Kentridge's piece, his video "Zeno Writing", inspired by the Italo Svevo novel of 1923, becomes even more of a major novelty in an artistic panorama where the only possible use of language is still that of the spoken word, addressed, that is, exclusively to an external world. In the Svevo novel which Kentridge draws on, the protagonist breaks off treatment with a psychoanalyst who decides to take revenge on his patient by publishing his notes. An anti-hero, therefore, who flees and refuses – unlike Oedipus – to see his secrets laid bare, preferring to leave us words subject to illusions and falsehood in an endlessly postponed and never represented present. Kentridge draws on words without de-contextualising them, and succeeds by working in an opposite direction to that of pop art: he doesn't transform words into images, but restores to the image its literary quality. That "Domaine intérieur" that Andreas Embirikos knew he could translate into figures as long as he spoke for poetry; that is, to himself and never to a public. Thus we have the last verse of "The Gleam's Inner Land": "And the sphinx (a pun on 'to clasp tightly') crushes us upon her breast in the gleaming silence of the lighthouse." The sphinx punishes those who reduce enigma to reality and awards those who recompose symbols. Naturally, symbols are the children of dreams and illusions, as Nietzsche critiques. However, if myth, which is their direct representation, is not true, it always occurs and can always be reformulated, as in the collages in the series "Greek Mythology", which Nanos Valaoritis created between 1963 and 1975, using, playing with and replacing the content and personalities of Greek mythology with images from the Victorian age. Here Surrealism displays all its vitality in its continuity with contemporary artists such as Pierpaolo Campanini, Pavlos Nikolakoupolos and Imran Qureshi, who have chosen the complexity of the allusive figure, devoted to contemplation, over the simplification of the literal one, devoted to popularization. And only this kind of work can bring the fire of Hestia – Zeus' sister and the guardian goddess of hearth and home – back to the "Casa Bianca", a home whose past belongs to one who lost his life, and those of his dearest, to horror. In fact, only complexity can restore human features to the Nietzschean stoic, impervious to myth and illusion. The same features as those of Ulysses, who the sea restores to Telemachus as an old migrant, naked and humiliated, and not as the king of a conquered home.