

Paolo Gioli, painter: poetics *in nuce*

In the case of Paolo Gioli, and not just at the present time, there is underway a “delay” effect, a kind of feedback loop, which begins with the recognition accorded him in the 80s and 90s, and loops back to his “prehistory” that in the years in Venice first (1960-1967), then in the years in Rome (from 1968 to 1975) saw him carry out in unequalled fashion a long and laborious transition from painting to photography to cinema. A trajectory without nostalgia but as well, if one looks closely, without renunciation of any sort, since much of his photography still retains that layer of memory and of physical presence from painting that distinguishes the poetic practices of the artist from Veneto, especially his mode of producing polaroids; and since much of his cinema seems to have been anticipated, *in vitro*, by the change that he registered in his work in painting from 1965 on.

Thus, while critical appraisals were not lacking even in the course of the 1960s, it was due to an essay by Marisa Dalai Emiliani that the first true recognition came about in that period, which saw anticipations and suggestions fulfilled in the mature work; a rediscovery that was confirmed by the recent exhibition in Venice dedicated to painting in the Veneto region of the 1960s: *Arte al bivio. Venezia negli anni sessanta* [*Art at the Crossroads. Venice in the nineteen sixties*]. In it, an attempt was made to take stock of the situation of young artists of that time, permitting one to evaluate—in a context rich in material and in rediscoveries—Gioli’s position in parallel with that of other artists active at the time.

Early on, Gioli’s language is clearly distinct from that poetic language dominant in Venice as well saturated by L’Informale. Thus it happens that, by contact with two masters such as Santomaso and Vedova, at the beginning of the 60s at the height of their activity, who mentored and helped him, and with Luciano Gaspari and Bruna Gasparini, superb abstract painters, his strong inclination towards drawing

brought him at first to investigate forms of late expressionism, but almost immediately to vigorously embark on a path of innovative exploration of the theme of the nude.

The first torsos or in any case the anamorphoses of figures (from *Gruppi delle creature* [*Groups of Creatures*], 1962-640, are oriented toward tracing “con-torsions,” precisely, of the whole body at first then the mutilated body; they are obviously inspired by the inflections of thirteenth century crucifixions, or gradually by solutions less clearly a function of figuration, at the limit of transfiguration.

These crucifixions appear as if they were subjected to x-rays; they are executed as x-ray graphics, so that even the sources of more or less direct inspiration, such as Masson’s graphics, are absorbed and metabolized. What confers on Gioli’s torsos their peculiar dignity is that sense of the radiographic that makes them appear at once full and empty, frontal and dorsal, positive and negative — as if the torso were only the point of departure for twisting the image, enriching it, and subtracting from it its investigative and communicative potential. Finally, if one looks closely, his childhood drawings, above all the monochrome ones, are vast *projections* onto a screen which becomes a ground (the screen can be sensed).

Gioli enacts a kind of theater of cruelty, [pursuing] a path through the savage textures of physical anatomy, complicated by a precocious interest in the erotic and even in pornography. The border between these zones, frequently impossible to discern, is the fulcrum of his investigations at the beginnings of the 60s, but anyone can see that here we encounter the same themes and modes, which will recur in the film and photo years with pointed insistence, and even today frequent occur if not utterly deliberately.

Already the torso, on its own, is the fruit of elision; it is a form which has been cut off and uprooted. It is concrete abstraction, deadly extraction. This “part,” is then, in its turn dissected and “reassembled,” with an extreme attention to the intersecting of the forms which have been freed from forms, of the colors which have been freed from colors, of the signs which have been freed from signs. What is more: the colors are disjoined from signs and from forms, signs from forms and from colors, colors from forms and from signs. What is at stake, in these strategic paintings, is the autonomy of the signifier, not understood as total freedom (a utopia surpassed during the 50s) but as the power of the negative (and therefore changeable, polemical, absurd, unpredictable).

The confrontation-encounter with the poetics of the “informale” could not be more harsh. The total control of expressive media (design and color, design and design, color and color, according to the most entrenched academic tradition) was reformulated by the young artist as a device for re-reading the history (of art) within the immediacy (of the corporeal). The *organic*, with undulating curves, masses of color, predominates in this phase, creating interesting parallels between the ancient and the modern, and the contemporary: from the [Italian] “Primitives” to Man Ray, from Fra Angelico to Recalcati.

Around 1965 things change, when the context of images, still and moving, of the society (of consumption) of the spectacle obliges the artist to rise to the challenge. Venice, with the 1964 Biennale, is experienced by Gioli as well as undergoing a crisis, which means a renewed understanding of the metamorphic possibilities of the visual. The *mechanical* now supplants the organic, but not completely (never completely). In the paintings, which are rather important from the point of view of scale, the organic is now trapped, the outlines of bodies appear to be protected by loudly colored metallic surfaces: for example in *Figura figura figura figura* [Figure figure figure figure] (1965, Museo di Ca' Pesaro, Venice), in *Omaggio a Fellini* [*Homage to Fellini*] (1965, private collection) and *L'ombrello e l'Angelico* [*The Umbrella and Fra Angelico*] (1965, private collection).

Gioli is already operating, if one may say so, as if he were taking photographs; he dissects and superimposes, cuts apart and glues together the most diverse elements, simulating cinematographic language in the paintings. His preceding vortex-like compositions are now succeeded by composition based on sequences, in an obvious allusion to the language of subdivision of the photographic and motion picture film strip. Diverse questions confront the artist: how many images (or parts of images) can a pictorial surface contain? How many time frames can be compressed into a single visual space? How many time frames coexist in a subdivision of time? How many paintings can coexist in the same painting? Radiographic examination is succeeded by the impulse

towards montage; seeing-through is succeeded by a gaze which has been multiplied, at once active and passive, innocent and complicit.

The rhythmic pulsation of his films confers the effect of the real, which was already in his paintings (but unavoidably “only” simulated and pretended); in *Commutazioni con mutazioni* [*Commutations with mutations*] of 1969, as the title makes clear, (infinitely?) increasing the dispersion, which has been restrained but which cannot be fixed (except by stopping the image), results in making appear-and-disappear an indeterminate number of “single frames” which cannot be assimilated one at a time in the course of projection, but only at a photographic rhythm, not a filmic one. The give and take between painting and photography is confirmed again in the venetian period by other works; in *Scomponibile* [*Disassemblable*] (1966), and in the cycle of *Ogetti probabili* [*Probable objects*] (1967), there is a kind of tape (or strip of film?) used as a template, or rather used to create a form, an entanglement which confers plastic value on itself, a form which forms itself and which forms itself according to a sinuous or geometricizing progress, a winding and unwinding, a performance, a solo.

The large paintings executed in Rome, after his return from his important sojourn in New York, on the contrary introject the optical and gnoseological pressure of the “cinema” factor, understood, whether as a new dimension of the image, or even as the dangerous drift of a flow which liquidates the autonomy of the individual frame. Gioli is beginning to feel the urgency of depicting the glowing beam of the film projector (in *Cono di luce* [*Light Cone*] 1972), that beam which contains all the images of film, but captured and arrested as well before becoming a narrative, before reaching the screen. The tension of seeking origins, of “impoverishing” to the minimum technological mediation (telling even in the important pinhole experiment) is wedded to the inclination to recover the characteristic complexity of any origin, without dispersing its richness, or forgetting its capabilities.

The fact is that Gioli from his youth onward has put forward the problem (not the theme, but the *problem*), with a precociousness equal to the depth of the intention, of how images come to be, whether in their formation (and hence, it might be said, of the right of the image to exist), or in their disappearance (and hence of their duty to disappear, to give up their place to another image or even to no other image at all, to nothing).

There is a strong correspondence between the fate of the image and that of a creature, to the point that in Gioli’s intuition, it seems possible to identify a creature as the very incarnation of the concept of image, if it is true that, like a creation, the created image too possesses two *Outside Itself*’s: beginning and end, birth and death. The elaboration of an image has become, thus, a metaphor of life which has been created, of the unceasing vital pulse (in the eros-thanatos dialectic) in the coming into being of forms (to come into being, that means to disappear, to be born, that means to die).

In this way it may be understood why the trajectory figuration-disfiguration is a constant in his work, and thus how essential is his connection to the heritage of the historical avant-garde, in particular to German Dadaism. It seems to me that Gioli’s work must also be read as a suggestion (or even more than a suggestion) to value the importance of the avant-garde in opposition to the post-modern reading which today predominates,

according to which, the avant-garde would be synonymous with a (nearly) blind linear process. On the contrary, it is possible and even necessary to seize upon the dramatic aspect even of futurism (by that I mean early futurism, in particular that of Marinetti and Boccioni), not to mention the dialectical power (dialectical to the point of being entropic) of so many european crises.