

Roberta Valtorta "Gioli and the art that happens", 1995

As the artist himself states in the accompanying text to this work, Gioli has brought to light (and through light), like an archaeologist making an unexpected find, identities that had remained hidden and devoid of existence until his intervention.

This leads us once again to the abruptness and confusion of significations induced by the ready-made, which in many ways is the key to contemporary art. It reminds us that photography is in essence an act of discovering reality - of all realities, whatever their degree of visibility.

In the manner of a latter-day cog/to ergo sum, photography - French in origin like the philosophy of Descartes - affirms before our eyes on each occasion that an image, by virtue of the fact that it has been found, exists as a completely autonomous entity that is true in itself: I have seen therefore it is.

Gioli in this work has discovered his images - and therefore his entities - neither in the world of everyday reality nor in other images (as he had already done in earlier well-known researches) but behind other images, on the side that normally remains out of sight and bereft of meaning from a visual point of view: the back, or reverse. More precisely, he has found them in the negatives of ordinary photographs taken to certify identity documents.

In this humble, invisible terrain, Gioli has uncovered tightly-woven patterns of signs, intricate traces, firmly-impressed marks, streaks and interruptions in the material, and deposits and reworkings added both by the passage of time and by the retoucher's hand. Thanks to the range of lighting effects that Gioli has brought to bear, the time-consuming process of masking and printing, and the degree of photographic enlargement that has been used, these small elements are invested with the fullness and energy of creative gestures. They become, through this unexpected quirk of fate, moments in a deliberate labour of construction - and at the same time de-construction - of the face, taking on a deeply graphic and pictorial character.

Gioli has discovered this jungle of signs left by a nameless author other than himself and accepted it in toto by explicitly approving and reviving the other's marks as if they had come from his own hand. Indeed one cannot but be struck by the extraordinary correspondence between the powerful plastic effects of the anonymous retoucher and the growing complexity of Gioli's sign-world, especially in those works that date from the late Eighties to the present day.

We find what we are looking for. Gioli has found precise, deeply significant signs in which to mirror himself - signs that seem to be intimately familiar with the history of art and indeed appear almost to retrace its course.

Gioli happened upon these signs but it is as if they were his own. The retouching treatment to which these negatives have been subjected makes them unusually similar to *clique-verre*, shifting their meaning from the realm of photography to that of graphic art. At the very least, this causes the two territories to overlap and reminds us that they share a common artistic heritage. For although the medium is photographic and it is light, the basis of

photography, that brings these images into being, nonetheless the multiplicity of signs that they contain transport us back into the history of graphic art and painting, from Diirer to Goya and on to Kirchner or Nolde, Ensor, Munch or Van Gogh, and then to Bacon, or Baselitz, or Giacometti, or others. As we have often noted in the work of Gioli, here too he operates profoundly on contrasts and on the force of meanings that arise from their confrontation or co-occurrence. The reverse becomes the obverse.

The negative takes charge and becomes the definitive image. The anonymity of the individuals portrayed, of the photographer that took the pictures and of the retoucher who worked on the back of the negatives has become the starring-point for an expressive outcome that aims at a research into identity. The "ordinariness" of the passport photograph enters into a dialogue with the aesthetic elevation of the signs and the "outer" person of the positive passport photograph generates the "inner" individual portrayed on the base side of the negative. Doctor Jekyll rubs shoulders with Mister Hyde; the biological meets the imaginary. Finally, the silent, deaf world of the old photographic studio negatives is transfigured in the tensions and passions of these faces as they are reborn today into a second mirror-image existence.

Gioli has undertaken a task of unmasking what lies behind. His ruthless and yet tender gesture lays bare the deception to reveal the turmoil and dramatic complexity in the maquillage of a photograph that is intended to beautify and render serene the features portrayed. The elegant fiction of the theatre, the scenery and the fascination of its colours, lights and voices are nothing more than scaffolding, wiring, devices and supports that underpin the wonder of the spectacle, while it lasts. It is like the unforgettable crucifixion in Giotto's Grecco Nativity at Assist, where instead of the front with its noble figure of Christ we see the bare wood of the unfinished back of the work; or as in an anatomical drawing or a wax sculpture that reveal, crudely but also with a certain compassion, the mystery of the veins, and nerves, and tissues, and bowels hidden under the skin; or like the dark world of dreams, that searches out and sets free all the significations that have slipped past us unnoticed while we were awake. A mystery revealed, however, is still a mystery. Gioli, in unmasking all the tension in the work of embellishment, creates in turn his own masks, with their screaming, weeping faces and their mouths and eyes charged with new expression, new astonishment, new disguises and new deceit. Above all, he has introduced a radical element of invention, enabling the emergence, through his exploration of the material and the thick tangle of signs, of a multitude of faces, a dense series of identities that never existed in the real world and yet are indissolubly linked to features that really did exist and really were photographed by our unknown, unwitting, photographer.

The bare, unsophisticated black and white - and the black here really is more important than the white - assumes the task of bringing all of Gioli's intervention back to a feeling of essentiality characteristic of beginning, or of conclusion. On this side of the black and white, and chiaroscuro, there is nothing. Not even the figures from the history of art have an existence, and neither perhaps do the figures of the unconscious.

Paolo Gioli "Sconosciuti"
Catalogo ART&, Arti Grafiche Friulane, Udine 1995.