

## Roberta Valtorta "Figures as marks", 2004

The photographic work of Paolo Gioli originates a very particular event, which we can say extraordinary, not only in the Italian overview but in the international one, particularly for a reason: there is no other artist who has, for so long and so hard worked to direct manual art codes into the codes of a technological art which is photography (and in parallel he had likewise chosen cinema by many years now as an instrument of work).

We must straighten out right away, that Gioli doesn't hold a position definable as photographic neo-pittorialism: in fact there is no submission of photography to painting or to graphics, neither there is any effort of pictorial "revision" of photography done to bridge deficiency of formal character. There is instead a necessary and "natural" permeation between disciplines, as if painting and graphics constituted an ingrained and unforgettable memory, a primigenial and visceral substratum of photography, a sort of genetic element that comes back and gives it body. And we would like to underline the word *body*.

Even in the mainstay of the shrewd and more important theoretics about photography of the last years (from Rosalind Krauss, especially with her studies about Duchamp and surrealist artists, to Philippe Dubois, with his important considerations about the nature of index of Man Ray or Moholy Nagy's photograms), this "coincidence" between disciplines that we find in Gioli's work is readable in the light of the concept of *imprint*.

In his work the photographic track, so the trace left by the light on the sensitive underlay, needs so much to be distinguished in its physicality, in its corporeity that it turns to its previous die and, which is, in a manner of speaking, coessential, that is the one with the chalcographic sign, and more far, of the first sign left by the hand itself.

So becomes an intense fusion of signs, but we think, all turned to strengthen the meaning of imprint (which in some cases resembles videographics).

About this it is very interesting to remember that at the end of the eighties Gioli realizes a series of photos using his own hand as camera obscura embracing the sensitive film, showing how it is possible to confide in the body of the artist himself the function of camera, as a place that receives the light, which will give life to the image: so there is, in this action, the meaning of a release from any mechanical instrument carried out to direct signs on the sensitive underlay, and the intention of sending back the making of the photographic sign with the man's hand.

And still about the origin of the archaic figures Victor Stoichita, in his *Breve storia dell'ombra* reminds us that Pliny the Elder writes that painting began when, for the first time, it was possible to define with a line the shadow of a human being: photography didn't do otherwise that induce to extreme consequences the possibility of obtaining figures from shadows created by the light.

During a very complex path very thick with stratifications with the passing of the years, Gioli has come up with techniques which have bared the substance of photography and the developing of photographic image, joining the modern

photographic custom to the graphic practice, but, previously, to those very antique of the mould and of the sign drawn by hand: first of all the transfer (the drawing up) of the Polaroid material, both the coloured one and the black and white one, on drawing paper or on other materials as silk, which he practises from the seventies and which have risen him to international fame.

His relentless study on faces and bodies, both feminine and male's (often counterpointed by researches about still life, which, we must underline, return anyway to bodies, and sometimes, to landscape, meant as story of the world outside the body), has found a very breeding ground in this particular technique, which has permitted him to reach a great deepening, both *conceptual* and *procedural* as to speak. In fact Gioli reaches the image penetrating the photograph material itself and reaching to modelling it, disclosing its many stratifications (nearly a geology of photography) and a sort of interiority, accessible only on foundation of long formulas and repeated crossings.

So he recovers the value of the gesture, of the action, of the work of the hand that joins the work of the light, acting inside the camera on the film, in the effort of providing photography of a new and deep temporary standing. He makes use of reiterations, doublings, splits, he arranges trajectories, thicknesses, expansions, all moments of codifying through which he continuously considers the correlation between reality and illusion, corporeity and image (either of real life or photography itself), "realistic" definiteness of figures (because of the strong link between photography and referring) and their irremediable dramatic instability.

All Gioli's photography, as for his cinema, can be defined indeed with the expression *dramatization of matter*, and it isn't a case that he details this dramatization to what is nearer to life and to the time that passes and operates: the body and sex. The image is therefore totally staged, no interest to visible reality in its direct existence; the laying, which is already a way to delve into the subject, even if in the project is cut to minimum, in Gioli's photography has a great importance: it lies in a model eyes, in the orientation of the face, in the way of laying of an hand, in the composition of the objects. Nothing is never "as it is", but "as it is placed" in front of the camera and in front of the sight. And this is a first moment of dramatization. The processes to which Gioli expose the matter itself of photography, increase and get to "show" the dramatization. The sensitive matter of Polaroid isn't inside its traditional underlay, but it is brought "outside" and set on a different support, the drawing paper; the integrity of the subject, its wholeness, are "disturbed" by graphic interferences and by alterations of the colour (obtained in the photographic way, and therefore by the light) which shatter its continuity and transfer it in an extraneous dimension.

If you overcome a first impact with Gioli's figures, which give you right away a great sense of complexity (sometimes mazes of signs) it is not so difficult to see that after all, he bases his work on very few and repeated elements, you could say with a domestic simplicity: only a face and only that one (not even the neck, and nearly either the hair), a simple leaf or a flower (but careful chosen and taken away from any real contest), an hand (remote like a finding). But the

simpleness of the starting and the radical primary choice, which are abstraction and alienation actions governed by typical mechanisms of the *ready made*, are subsequently trailed into a dynamic path, which takes indeed to a stratification and to the disclosure of more identities and of a pluri-level of reading, physical, psychological, existentialist of the image. It is, as we were saying, “dramatized”, put therefore in movement, taken away from its position of clarity, and pushed, even in a semantic point of view, into a dimension which makes it polymorphic, mysterious and inquiring. In this deepness Gioli’s photo isn’t, like in orthodox photography, representation, but real and proper *presentation*: that’s why it is necessary for the artist to involve the memory of photography, that means painting and graphics and even theatre itself (as Roland Barthes reminds us), in other words the representation arts that have preceded and have prepared for the beginning of photography, art in itself of pure presentation. So we qualify Gioli’s photography, with its vibrant colours, the strong enact, the instability of shapes, the continuous strive for a possible sense of matter – as a survey on origins, on coming into world and on physics, changeable identity of all what lives and passes by, starting from himself.