

On Gioli and the nature of photography
by Giacomo Daniele Fragapane

IMAGE = MAGIE

Man Ray, telegram sent to Hans Bellmer

*I want to grasp things with my mind the way
the penis is grasped by the vagina*
Marcel Duchamp

When I add materials to my work I am not making a collage. I am just adding layers of materials. We need to say this about Polaroids. They transfer like a layer of a fresco. I wanted to find something that would be connected with the fine arts, and I found this material, which can be removed from one support and end up on another. But then, between the time it is removed from one and the time it is laid down again on another, I can easily introduce myself like a creative parasite and insert myself inside to steal from, to subtract from, the material. And then I look for a support capable of receiving the Polaroid material, and, as if by coincidence, the ones I find are all supports, which have a connection to proto-photography or the fine arts: drawing paper, silk, wood. I love transferring a material, which is the triumph of immediate consumption, of pornography, and of family memories, onto materials, which are so noble, so ancient.¹

These are the words of Paolo Gioli. In them — at a distance of 20 years — we are still finding the answers to the questions, which, today, his work continues to raise. However, in the interim much has changed and photography is not the same. In an arc of time extending from the first years of the 1970s until today, the photographer has dedicated a rather significant part of his photographic output to experimentation with the Polaroid process. Twisting in every possible direction the enormous potentials of this material, he has completed in the final phase of the analog era, an extraordinary labor of philosophical research on the photographic apparatus, on the history of photography, on the archaeology of visual processes of the modern Western World. His research has been for the most part connected to classical art historical motifs — the body, the face, human anatomy, the still life — and to the interpretation with a consistently strongly analytical and deconstructive orientation, to several of the most significant icons transmitted by the pioneers of the history of photography.

The cessation of activity, in 2008, by the Polaroid Corporation, and thus the gradual and thereafter practically definitive unavailability of the material with which Gioli has experimented in various phases of the arc of his creative development, marks, in the meantime, the close of a crucial period in the history of “technical reproducibility” or even the end — and as well probably, the evolution, the directing towards other territories, and because new clones of that technological history have quickly appeared

¹ Paolo Costantini, *Una conversazione con Paolo Gioli [A Conversation with Paolo Gioli]*, in *Paolo Gioli, Gran Positivo nel crudele spazio stenopeico [Paolo Gioli: The Great Positive in Cruel Pinhole Space]*, Alinari, Venice/Florence 1991. The text is now available on-line at: <http://www.paologiolli.it/foto.php?page=foto>

on the scene — of a great creative cycle of an artist considered by many to be among the major contemporary photographers (and experimental filmmakers). I will make use in this text above all of images reproduced in the second part of this volume, exhibited as part of FotoGrafia — The International Festival of Rome (2011 edition) at Studio Orizzonte², in order to give an overview of several aspects that I hold as central to Gioli's production: from the connection that links, often in a truly indispensable way in the work of the photographer, the theme of eroticism and the reflection on the historical, cultural and ideological foundations of photography.

This exhibition presents a series of photographs entitled *Naturæ*, in 50x60 cm format, taken with a large custom made camera without a shutter. The project might be considered the twin of a similar operation realized during the same period at the Minini Gallery in Brescia and dedicated to another cycle of images by Paolo Gioli, entitled *Vessazioni* [*Abuses*], in many ways mirroring the *Naturæ* cycle. Beyond the fact that they concern the final works realized with the Polaroid process by the photographer, the two efforts present numerous similarities on a technological and procedural level, and show interesting connections of a conceptual and philosophical order, that I will explore in greater depth elsewhere. The first group is more insistent and obsessive; the second group is more articulated and varied; these two groups seem to have an attraction for one another by virtue of their complementarity of tone and attitude. While the *Vessazioni* cycle consists of a series of portraits of masculine and feminine subjects, made with the same camera on Polaroid film, with various modes of framing and various kinds of manual interventions and the transfer onto acrylic of the photographic film, the images shown in the exhibition in Rome are apparently easier to describe: they depict in fact none other than a series of female nudes taken frontally at the height of the sex. Into each vulva a flower is inserted. The sensitive surface of the film is treated in this case with various techniques typical of Gioli's production (the application of pressure, rubbing, cutting, luminescent marking, transfer to other supports) and then after the development of the images, covering the upper half of the images with layers of acrylic paint. Both cycles explore in a systematic fashion the mutual "contamination" (a symptomatic term I have "borrowed" from the artist) of the materials of painting and the materials of photography, of manual gesture in painting and the mechanism of photography, passing through the hybrid medium of printmaking, in this case, using a roller to spread out the pigment-emulsion between the two sides of a sheet of Polaroid film, with positive and negative facing one another. On a metaphoric plane, we could, in fact, think about the two cycles as if the one were the matrix of the other.

As do so many of Gioli's works, these photographs possess an ambiguous fascination that catches off guard whomever observes them, confronting one, first of all, with the choice of whether to enter into that world or to refuse *in toto* any dialog whatsoever with it. Here, immediately, the subject portrayed, and more generally the close, almost tactile exploration of the female sex, come into collision with the complex

² The exhibition project came to be through the initiative of Antonio Barrella, as a follow-up to a workshop on photofinish technology organized by me and given by Gioli at IED in Rome in 2010. The exhibition and the present volume were made possible, thanks to the cooperation of Paolo Gioli and the active contributions of Antonio Barrella and Paolo Vampa.

physical nature and the objecthood of the images of the specifically photographic objects, which are presented to us frontally: the fruit of operations and gestures which have matured and have slowly accumulated over a long period of time on the basis of study and experimentation. The obsessive repetition of the same visual act — that echoes the older procedures typical of more archaic scientific or police photography — resolves itself, at least at first sight, in an effect of difference/repetition that renders extreme and intrinsically paradoxical the seriality of the operations. A seriality, that, moreover, as we will see, Gioli rejects categorically. Each photograph can in fact be understood at the same time as a unique, unreproducible object (each Polaroid is so by definition, even more so when artisanal photographic techniques or even proto-photographic ones are applied to it) and, as an element of a more articulated textual structure, which is virtually endless (the same gesture is, in fact, infinitely repeatable: and so, gives rise to the catalogic accumulation of subjects and their typological organization into classes, types, formal structures, etc.). The same ambiguity and complexity of cross-references manifests itself in the gesture of censorship carried out through the pictorial intervention, which covers the sensitive emulsion, both partially cancelling out the photographic subject and initiating a game of tensions and cross-referencing between the upper part and the lower part of the image; between its material construction and its mimetic function; between what it hides and what it makes visible.

But these are only first impressions, which, after some years of familiarity with the body of work of the photographer, I tend to distrust. And it doesn't particularly help to ask for clarifications from the artist, who is almost always diffident towards any interpretation, and is indifferent to laying out the meaning of his work in words and is disposed, if he is disposed to anything at all, to finally lead things back to the plane of metaphor, or linguistic play or simple tautology, to the pure and simple: "This is how I did it!" Confronted with each of Gioli's new works, however (and *in spite of* the kind of resistance that I perceive in him each time)³, remaining utterly surprised and attracted at first sight by the fine formal technique of the photographs, I experience the sensation, that these images in reality represent only the tip of an iceberg. And in order to better understand the *thing* that in reality I am observing, it is first necessary to undertake a labor of excavation and of anamnesis.

In time, perhaps, I succeeded in finding a formula — necessarily somewhat obvious, elementary, tautological, as is sometimes required of me — to describe this sensation; a formula that can be summed up in the idea that, "each one of Gioli's photographs is the imprint of one of Gioli's thoughts." A thought which, in turn, is connected, by association or negation, by similarity or contrast, engendered directly or as a parallel independent outgrowth, to other configurations of thoughts. More than a final outcome, which has reached a conclusion, having been developed along a linear and sequential

³ In this text, I will sometimes make reference to an exchange of letters I had with Gioli between the 21st and the 29th of July 2011, that I could not define as an interview, since my questions — none of which could find an exact formulation in the present text — are of great length, more wide-ranging and fully articulated than his laconic, but always scathing responses. I will henceforth refer to these answers using the phrase "Private Conversation with Paolo Gioli."

trajectory, any given photograph (at least for me) is thus, if anything, something that resembles for the most part more a “residue of work,” what remains of a complex and ramified, circular, elliptical, spiraliform imaginative process. A symptom, thus, in the psychoanalytic sense, of something more substantial and profound, that presses under the mere surface of photographic *mimesis*. In order to read, each time, case by case, any given photograph, it will thus be necessary to travel back as far as possible — knowing full well that it will remain permissible to try other paths — along the chain of mental associations that it gives rise to. These general associations interest me in a certain way more than the specific cases which convey them: just exactly how are they capable of signaling, of *indicating* the same conditions of possibility, of visibility, of the various singular photographic objects that Gioli has disseminated over time; the catalysts and the causes which shaped them.

Another line of reasoning also pushes me in this direction. In Gioli’s work the syntactic principle of the *series* is generally refused in favor of the structural logic of the *cycle*. Some composited Polaroid SX 70 works of the 1980s, or some artist’s books or lithographic prints can be considered as examples of series (even in an anomalous or irregular sense). These are works, that are not “minor” but “collateral,” i.e. outside the main lines of research of the artist. Like the little book of erotic subject *La conchiglia dissoluta* [*The Dissolute Seashell*], a photo-novel that creates the intersection of a short, enigmatic text with a brief succession of micro-pinhole Polaroids (to be exact, they were Polachrome printed onto SX 70 film). “Eight imagos, damp and fiery within the dark shell”⁴ that represent parts of the female anatomy. “Simulacra”⁵ taken with an extremely simple camera consisting of a small seashell *naturally forata* [punctured] (a mental slip in writing suggests to me “fotata”)⁶: visions of mouths framed sideways like vulvas, breasts, buttocks, a small collection of “partial objects”. On the first page, as a kind of prologue, is a silver gelatin black and white photograph that reproduces the “camera-shell” used as in a scientific treatise, which illustrates, by way of introduction, the instruments and the method of the line of research.

The case of the composite SX 70s is even more complex from the point of view of the logic of the cycle/series. That is because it’s a matter of *groups* of images assembled like a polyptych; images, moreover, criss-crossed with streaks of light or graphic marks, which connect them, which mark and underscore their physical continuity and conceptual relationship. Any one of these groups is thus a singular object. And a cycle is a computed series — an autonomous object or concept — within a singular coherent ensemble.⁷ Almost all Gioli’s production is organized in cycles of consistent works in

⁴ Paolo Gioli, *La conchiglia dissoluta* [*The Dissolute Seashell*], 1990, artist’s book.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ [Translator’s note:] Fotata is a non-existent portmanteau word: a contraction of *forata* (punctured, poked) and *fotografata* (photographed). We might render it approximately by “phoked” or “phunctured.”

⁷ The architecture of Paolo Gioli’s website (www.paologioli.it) should of necessity be confronted with this logic and derive from it something that resembles more the website of an archive or of a museum than of a photographer; a strange list that puts together expressive domains (photography, cinema, painting, graphics, etc.) classical or abnormal technology (Polaroid, Cibachrome, pinhole photography, black and white, luminescent imaging, photofinish), themes (*The Torso of St. Sebastian*, *Natura Obscura*) [lit. *Dark Nature*, alludes to *Camera Obscura*], *Dissolute Figures*, anatomical peculiarities or curious

series and singular or composite objects. It is thus utterly reductive to examine it along a linear chronological axis, as a succession of “photographic works” in the normal sense of the term, because the works continuously recall, and enter into dialogue among themselves, they unceasingly refer back to one another, swallowing up more or less famous historical images and completely anonymous image finds — like his silk screens, which, using a rauschenbergian procedure, edit and assemble previous Polaroid works, film frames, photofinish images, contaminating them with found images and other materials.

In light of all of this, it is utterly logical that any one of Gioli’s images can open up a passageway into the system; and this is the reason for continuing now (or beginning again) with a photograph very familiar to me from the series to which this text is dedicated. The intent is obviously to move through it in order to return to the point of departure.

We are concerned here with a micro-pinhole photograph from 1975. The image was published for the first time with the title *Sogno daguerrotipo* [sic] [*Daguerr(e)otype Dream*], in a miniscule book, proportioned to the dimensions of the objects photographed, which it reproduces; it was curated in 1978 by Ando Gilardi for the Milanese gallery “Il Diaframma”. In fact, it is a strange indefinable image, which can make one think as much of a daguerreotype as of a pop art object. In his brief introductory text, this scholar illustrates the technique of this photograph generated from micro-pinhole negatives and realized with [the “male” part of] a small snap with a hole in it, transformed by Gioli into a pinhole camera. Joining company with Leonardo Da Vinci, who called the hole of the pinhole camera the “spiraculo” [small spiral], the

genre subjects (*Thoraxes, Draped Nudes, Naturæ*) and other information. A catalogue of heterogeneous voices worthy of Borges when he writes in an extremely well-known passage, taken by Michel Foucault as an epigraph for *The Order of Things*: “These ambiguities, redundancies and deficiencies remind us of those which doctor Franz Kuhn attributes to a certain Chinese encyclopedia entitled *The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*. In its remote pages it is written that the animals are divided into (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) trained, (d) pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in this classification, (i) trembling like crazy, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) just broke the vase, (n) from a distance look like flies.” Jorge Luis Borges, *Otras Inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires, Sur, 1952) [*Other Inquisitions*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1964, Ruth L. C. Simms (English translator)]. The words of Eco commenting on the passage just cited are worth quoting as well in connection with the complex architecture of Gioli’s work: “Considering both the coherent excesses and the chaotic enumeration here one realizes, with respect to the list of antiquities, that something different has happened. Homer, we have seen, took recourse to the list because words were lacking to him, tongue and mouth, and the *topos* of the unspeakable has dominated the poetics of the list for many centuries. But confronted with the lists of Joyce or Borges it is, however, evident that the author doesn’t at all make lists because he wouldn’t otherwise know how to say it, but rather because he wants to speak through excess, through hubris and greed for the word, through the gay (rarely obsessive) science of the plural and the unlimited. The list becomes a way of remixing the world, almost a way of putting into practice Tesauro’s invitation to accumulate property in order to bring to light new relationships among distant things, in any case to put in doubt those accepted by common sense.” Umberto Eco, *Vertigine della lista* (Milan, Bompiani, 2009), p. 327.

photographer rebaptizes the images with the neologism “spiracolografie” [*spiraculographs*]. Here is the description made by Gilardi of the process-gesture invented by Gioli:

Gioli does it like this: with his index finger and ring finger, he presses the snap against his thumb; between the end joint of his thumb and the snap there is one frame of ordinary film. The middle finger of the same hand plugs the “spiraculo” on the top of the snap and opens and closes it so that it acts like a shutter. Gioli works in the dark with just a flashlight, or even a small flash, which emits enough light to fix the image that is formed, which is no larger than 3 mm in diameter. In this way, of course, he obtains a negative, which he then enlarges [...].⁸

This photograph is above all a thing; or better, a “fact”. The imprint of a small piece of 16mm motion picture film from 1975, with its own physical and chemical structure, obtained by means of an archaic technique, preceding historically even the very origin of the medium, reduced, what is more, to its degree zero: the entire optical and mechanical part brought back to the pure concept of the “*camera obscura*,” to the simple idea (a perforated cavity) and to the gesture that projects it according to circumstance as a photochemical imprint, a residue of light in a piece of sensitive material. An eidetic object, which is the trace of a thought from 1975. What is more, every photograph is always (more or less) the trace of the thought of an era, and as such a “fact.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, on the first page of the *Tractatus*, writes precisely that [I.I] “The world is the totality of facts, not of things,” because things do not exist except as objects conceived by someone: [I.I3] “The facts in logical space are the world.”⁹

So it is clear then that I am not yet speaking in any way of what is represented — exhibited, narrated, illustrated, etc. — in the photograph, and how all this is connected to other thoughts and things of 1975. What is more, this object is reproduced with a technique and gesturality, closer to that of a microscope or to a scientific instrument, than to the ensemble of codes and procedures that preside over the realization of a “traditional” photographic image, as commonly conceived, with descriptive or communicative or aesthetic or other intentions. Gioli’s gesture thus realizes, at the same time, a photograph (an image) and a description of the photography as an object “in itself and for itself”: first, its utilitarian function or its aesthetic logic is capable of circumscribing its use value. It is a photograph — it is about this, I am speaking and in addition and above all about Gioli in general — that poses for us and for him above all problems of an ontological and epistemological order, with respect as much to his objects as to confrontations with his visual processes. And, as such, it implies a mode of conceiving the “photographic” that develops — and stimulates in whomever observes it with the requisite attention — myriad logical sequences and mental associations; and beneath all these, likewise, powerful unconscious drives. This function, to sum it up, is in some way like a magnetic field, a short circuit of the photographic that functions as a center among a multiplicity of levels of signification.

⁸ Ando Gilardi, *Sulla Spiracolografia del Gioli* [*On Gioli’s Spiracolography*], in Paolo Gioli, *Spiracolografie* [*Spiraculographs*], (Milan, Il Diaframma/Canon, 1978), pp. 2-3.

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* [New York, Harcourt, Brace & company, Inc., 1921, C. K. Ogden (trans.)].

In the middle of the 1970s, immersed in his first photographic speculations, Gioli said that this thing — like other objects he realized in the same period — *is photography*.

But how is this image to be observed? If I read it as a representation, then the object fluctuates in the void: I can understand it as if it were seen frontally or for that matter from above, or from below, as if through a transparent surface (a “small glass”). Not horizontally, however, or upside down: the photograph has on its reverse side the instruction: “– up –” and therefore it requires of the spectator a determined modality of observation, frontal, or from above, precisely, and does not allow a margin of error in that sense. In both cases, the idea of fluctuation in the void is redoubled because the work is in confrontation with the object as photograph, with the piece of film, which has been imprinted with an image, which in its totality refers to itself (that is, it indicates itself as its own referent), that fluctuates with respect to the external setting; whether in confrontation with the thing imprinted as photograph as object, or rather in confrontation with what this registers, represents, witnesses, places on the stage. And it produces a level of thought. This thing fluctuates *within* photography and *with respect to* photography; and it is *presented* as *represented* as fluctuating with respect to whomever observes it.

This unspeakable thing is a lady’s ass (to use a synonym would be hypocritical) barely outlined, that floats in the dark half-glimpsed in a glimmer of light. The very idea of a “glimmer” is, in fact, something, which has insinuated itself between seeing and not seeing, between the visible and the invisible, signaling to us, in the most immediate and direct way, the direction this image is pushing us. Around this, one can just barely make out a small halo, darker — initially I had written black, because immediately here the greatest darkness becomes a dark background, with respect to which, this fluctuating object stands out, if this object is perceived as the representation of something. This glow is, most likely, in turn, the trace of a gesture: of the gesture of the one who printed it (of Gioli, who prints with his small, home enlarger) through which it makes the image a bit more intense and more visible. But above all, it produces a final escape in advance, in the image and in the fulcrum of what it represents: between the buttocks and the thighs of the female body being photographed. Here, there is another darkness and depth, barely visible, almost imperceptible, which, however, represents the conceptual fulcrum of the image — and this is obviously the reason I am using this photograph as a belated *incipit* with respect to the series, which gives its title to the present volume. Besides, another photograph of the same period, which is reproduced alongside the image of which I am speaking, leaves no doubt in that sense, offering itself to the view as a kind of *Origine du monde* in miniature, reduced to the dimensions of a microcosm or of an elementary particle, as if observed through the tube of a telescope or on the slide of a primitive microscope. What is more, the image appears inverted, in mirror reversal with respect to the quite celebrated painting of Courbet of 1866, as if it were its reproduction in negative: once again the reasons for the photographic subject, in the particular mode of its erotic “punctum,” and those of the photographic process seem to intersect among themselves inextricably.

Gioli calls this place familiarly “nature.” With felicitous ambiguity, in the Italian language, this double, two-sided term — in its many significations, in fact, brings to mind, in cyclical fashion, life and death, decay and rebirth — it is sometimes used in certain euphemistic and dialect forms to refer to the female genitalia. This latter usage is in some way ennobled by its etymology: it derives in fact from the Latin *natus*, the past participle of *nasci*, “to be born.” Therefore: what is born and the one from whom one is born; “the part of the body where concepts and what is born come from”;¹⁰ the origin of the world. In fact, I think that Gioli has never truly made any erotic photographs. Even when he explicitly has placed the sex organ and eroticism at the center of his line of photographic research.

It is now another aspect of a general order on which I would like to reflect, that the little pinhole object caused to emerge in a rather evident fashion. It is evident, in fact, how many of Gioli’s photographs ask to be observed as *finds*. Not only, however, because of the fact that in great part they are realized using archaic techniques and devices: with *camere ottiche*¹¹ and pinhole devices of artisanal manufacture; with movie cameras used as an equivalent to a film laboratory to print negatives, as was the case in the cinema with the first films of the Lumières; or more simply using the “erotic” contact between the sensitive surface and the object, as in the first calotypes of Fox Talbot, or in the photograms of the Dadaists. But also, or rather, above all, by means of the scopic logic that they activate, or because of the modality of vision that they demand and allow for whomever observes them. These photographs are often thought of as finds; in fact, they *are* finds.

But what does it mean to think of a photographic object as a find? (A find is principally a *found* object even if “constructed,” in a material or mental sense). Perhaps one should dwell on it a bit here to consider how this find — or a cycle, which groups together a certain number of finds — is produced: the implicit pragmatics of its manual or mental operations, and how operations are connected to ideas related to consciousness and to memory, to experience and to action. We see then how Gioli describes the phases — in reality considering them as a single node of thoughts and operations — of the realization of the cycle *Naturaæ*. I would like to mention here his answers to two of my questions concerning it, “the articles used in technical or procedural operations are carried out at the level of preparation and setting the scene; the handling of the photographic apparatus; the subsequent operation of the shutter”:

There’s nothing to elaborate. It’s a simple standing nude figure taken with a small amateur manual flash unit. And I haven’t operated a shutter for many years, but simply take the cap off the lense of my 50 x 60cm *camera ottica* that I constructed myself.¹²

¹⁰ Private conversation with Paolo Gioli.

¹¹ Translator’s note: the plural of *camera ottica* [plural: *camere ottiche*] an optical device, widely used in the 18th century as an aid to drawing, which projected an image onto a ground glass or flat plane where it could be traced. It is sometimes referred to as a *camera lucida*, or more recently as a “lucy.”

¹² Private conversation with Paolo Gioli.

To my question about the meaning of the “repetition of the same position — whether visually or in terms of proximity, to the subject being photographed — “in the internal arc of the work,” and whether he had “experimented with different solutions and finally discarded them,” Gioli responded in this way:

No, not even one. That is the only solution. When one conceives a work of art one mentally sets aside all other alternatives. In painting you can erase etc., but in photography you must make your choices very early on and start from a very precise idea. There is no room for improvisation! Even more so, in my case, where the painted element will end up on a pre-existing [photographic] image with a heated coupling afterwards, which can ruin the whole strenuous photographic labor and compromise the work. It’s not like working on a blank canvas and starting from zero (now, you never start from zero since the white is already a component of the painting). Working that way, it’s possible to intervene in something that might already be a complete and successful work. To intervene using painting could be creative suicide¹³.

The idea of “repetition” is refuted as well, to the advantage of the concept of “prolongation,” even in so far as concerns the relations between the two cycles *Naturæ* and *Vessazioni*. In response to my observation, that “in both series there is the repetition of the same visual gesture that isolates the photographic object and defines in advance its visibility; in both, there is a kind of measuring or classification of the subject, as in positivist photographic practice; moreover, both imply a strong participation (or at least a willingness) of the subject observed with respect to the photographic act,” Gioli replies, that between these two groups of works “there is no repetition but continuation. They both are part of the same conception of vision, a displacement, a kind of erotic abuse, but in reverse!”¹⁴

The work is then a find above all because it is not thought of as an artifact, a constructed object, but as the trace of a mental process. Continuous, polymorphic, circular, continued over time. Each of Gioli’s photographs is the imprint of one of Gioli’s thoughts. Paradoxically, it does *not* seem to be made, in order to be “consumed” in the current era, to enter into dialog with it and to be exhausted by it, but in order to remain, to be preserved like a fetish, an alchemical object, pregnant with mysterious enigmas. (By a strange mechanism of fate, besides, Gioli tends to disappear into private collections and into the archives of museums, for the most part, ones abroad, rather than to be shown in exhibition spaces more accessible to the public). This aspect is not only a contingent element, but may find its confirmation in the very concept of the photographic act. What as *mimesis*, of representation, of “staging,” appears as multisided and layered, as a photographic act is understood, by contrast, as a single gesture: a clean cut in the continuous flow of a line of aesthetic research and of the conceptual elaboration of vision. A find is what remains of a process, which is in the work, but which indeed is already consumed and presses on to find new directions; it is already beyond the work. This also explains the meaning of the continual “repetition” In Gioli’s work’s photography, of solutions at once very similar and very different from one another, in the arc of the creative cycles lasting, sometimes, as much as ten years.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

This is the case, for example, with *Nudi telati* [*Clothed Nudes*] (1979), with *Autoanatomie* [*Autoanatomies*] (1987), and with *Maschere* [*Masks*] (1988-1990), works the vital thrust of which will never be exhausted, resonating clearly even in his current works *Naturæ* and *Vessazioni*, in a kind of “eternal return of the same”. And yet, in a curious but significantly coherent and consistent fashion — if one comes to think of it — Gioli has always shown the greatest contempt for any sort of “nostalgic” aesthetic attitude (as well as for similar interpretations of his own work), which the *archaeological* aspect of one part of his production might erroneously lead one to think.

In this regard, the reading proposed by Elio Grazioli is extremely suggestive (if, in part, beside the point) of the cycle *Sconosciuti* [*Persons Unknown*] (1994), that the scholar interprets as images, which “are above all the spectral-return of photography itself,” plates “scratched and specially treated in such a way as to cause the face just mentioned to appear, mysterious and [...] doubly anonymous and unknown.”¹⁵ To be precise, it is the result of a series of operations manipulating the original photographic matrix: a group of glass plates from the mid-20th century belonging to an unknown rural portrait-maker, that Gioli recovered and reworked. In reality, here the photographer puts himself in front of the original photographic object — the iconographic matrix of his own work — exactly like an archaeologist, or an historian, in front of a find to question and interpret it: absolutely not to manipulate it; instead, to respect its complete integrity, limiting himself to figuring out a method of observation, that will allow him to see it in a new way. In fact, contrary to what might “appear” in the images, he does not scratch or subject the plates to wear, but illuminates them from the reverse side, from the side with the emulsion, with an extremely oblique light, which causes the evidence of retouching left in his time by an obscure artisan employed by the country photographer to emerge. And then, he simply rephotographs them. It is thus not a technical procedure — the fact of intervening physically on the plate — in order to produce a shift in meaning, an alteration of the connotations of the image, but that same method of observation, which, starting from those photographs, reveals the (preexistent but invisible) dark side, the subterranean, the “phantasmatic.” Once again, we are dealing with a game, which creates a tension between the visible and the invisible, turning upsidedown the usual relationships through an unusual use of the instruments of viewing. It is the vision of the object, along with a *displacement* or “prolongation” of the techniques of observation (in a sense rather close to the psychoanalytic one, as in the kinds of operations that lead to the realization of a *readymade*) to generate the new image. This is, at the same time, a metaphoric interpretation of its own origin — shown at the point of its own disappearance, as if it were lost in time and oblivion — and a visual object completely unheard of and original.

Something of the kind occurs as well in many photographs published in this volume. But the erotic nature of the subject represented produces here a strange short-circuit: the

¹⁵ Elio Grazioli, *Corpo e figura umana nella fotografia* [*Body and Human Figure in Photography*], (Milan, Bruno Mondadori, 1998), p. 334.

impossibility together with the necessity of a difference-displacement of vision with respect to its object. Such that the gaze ends up in some fashion aligning itself to the point, that it virtually coincides with the tension — both scopic and sexual — that designates it with respect to *what is shown* in the image. It is the logic of the mirror: narcissistic, hermaphroditic projection/identification with the object of desire; but as well the logic of contact: the necessity of “touching with one’s hand,” of shaping the object, or at any rate of establishing a relationship with it (is the most explicit theme that one can grasp in *Autoanatomie*). Gioli seems, that is, to photograph the very fact of being attracted to certain sensitive places of the female anatomy, so much that the attraction or fascination retransmits itself from the anatomical location of vision to the material of the image, returns in circular fashion to the very acting of seeing, surpassing the dense and opaque blanket of representation.

Gioli thus photographs conjointly *the desire for the object and the object of desire*. Often — as in the photography of the Surrealists — it is only the modality of vision which creates, *imagines* the sexual object: so that the mouth becomes vulva, the vulva becomes face, the buttocks become breasts, etc. This idea leads us to one aspect — a gesture — that runs through many of his works, and strategically connotes the entire cycle *Naturæ* and other works of similar erotic thematics: the insertion into the interior of the image of a screen-window, of an erasure, or the superimposition of layers of paint (or, in other cases, photosensitive material, such as the silk inserts placed inside the Polaroid emulsion) which operate with respect to the plane of representation as a kind of censorship or displacement: repetition, mirror inversion, double, etc. In some SX 70s of the beginning of the 80s, this censorship is explicitly enunciated as a graphic sign, an “X” or a scribble. Moreover, in *Naturæ* the paint which covers the image, agglomerates in such a way as to mime it, replicating it or following its contours, the sex photographed in the lower part of the image: a paradoxical gesture, ambiguous, contradictory, that displaces and causes to reemerge the censored object in the same where it was removed. In reality, as the photographer himself explains, in the aphorism which introduces this volume, the “curtain-screen” (the device is thus as much scopic as theatrical) does not have the function of covering or erasing the underlying photographic image, but of *revealing* its intimate nature, of pointing to its most profound truth. Gioli seems, in sum, to want to include within the image an element of negation of the image itself insofar as it is a *mere* “representation of things.” Placing it, then, as an iconic object, which is duplicitous, dialectical, or rather, hermaphroditic: a representation in the meantime of (active, masculine) scopic desire and of its displacement onto a (passive, feminine) sensitive object. Moreover, the fact that such displacement happens “in the light of day,” that it arrives quite openly denounced, exhibited, inscribed within the figurative level of the image, with erasures, cuts, screens, coverings, etc., seems to indicate the permanence of a tension that cannot be resolved one way or the other — in the transparent fullness of the figure or in its removal and substitution with pure abstract photographic material — but it can be enunciated only in a state of ambivalence. There is also after all a mocking, desecrating side to Gioli’s photography that feeds on such ambivalences, approaching and causing to everywhere

coexist the high and the low, the intellectual and the instinctual, philosophical reflection and the pun.¹⁶

Some of Gioli's historical photographs in this regard assume a particular symbolic value: this is the case for example with the renowned *Omaggio a Hippolyte Bayard* [*Hommage to Hippolyte Bayard*] (1981) produced in several variations in other images of the same period, or in the case of the other self-portrait, made just before that, entitled *Volto barrato* [*Barred Face*]. In these and other similar cases, the censorship or removal or erasure of one part of the image is exhibited as such and precisely in the center of the image — in the place that historically characterizes the mimetic function — and plays a fundamental role. Again: the entire series, which gives its name to the title of this volume is not an exception, and besides at least one of these images recalls quite strongly the homage to Bayard, in virtue of the effect of an overexposure-which-acts-to-screen-the-image,¹⁷ almost entirely engulfing it, then replicating itself reversed, like an underexposure in the succeeding image and finally surrendering to the materials of painting. In this light, perhaps a modernist or avant-gardist direction in Gioli's work's photography becomes clear (of which I have always been convinced, in spite of those who have interpreted the work in the somewhat fashionable terms of the oft-repeated postmodernist "pastiche" of citation). As has been said already, in fact, even where he quotes or reuses iconographic preexisting materials, the photographer does so in order to elaborate a kind of analytic anatomy or archaeology of vision. His problem, in relation to the "photographic," has always been that of comprehending, stretching, and rendering autonomous its rules of functioning, aligning it with the gesture and with the procedure through which the image acquires its own characteristics as an object. The found-footage object reworked or reconfigured — precisely such as the above-mentioned homage to Bayard or the cycles dedicated to Julia Margaret Cameron, Niépce, Eakins/Marey — arrives at its *real* meaning (which as a rule pushes well beyond what the image offers to our view) by starting from the material of which the work is composed, and thus starting from the physical-chemical structure of its own signifiers. In the reactions that take place between them, in the layerings of semantic levels that the photographic act conveys.

It is clear then what the historical inheritance and visual tradition is, which a similar approach refers to: not so much the postmodern practices of the "remake" and the "cover version," so much as the modernist gesture of the readymade, or the metalinguistic dimension of the self-reflexive visual object. In Gioli's work this tradition continues, in the open discussion of the concept itself of "representation," in the deconstructive attitude towards any figurative iconography, to the benefit of the intellectual, meditative, philosophical dimension of the photographic act. In sum, he

¹⁶ To my request for explanations about "how and when the idea to develop the subject of *Natura* came into being" (a clearly obvious, "light" question), the photograph responded with an intellectual pummeling, a joke, a *low* blow: "I have dedicated myself to the sex for many years." He then proceeds, choosing adjectives with extreme care and clarifying: "it was inevitable that I came to do this series of works and probably I will do more since it is an ongoing, mysterious, rich subject". Private conversation with Paolo Gioli.

¹⁷ "Sovraesposizione-schermo," literally "screen-overexposure," in the original [trans.].

disassembles and recombines the parts of a figurative system as if it were a device, the functions of which, he wants to understand and to “displace”: whether it’s a matter of the pioneers of photography or of works of the Renaissance, the Classical Period, the Etruscans, or even, as in *Naturæ*, of “a few photographs of persons unknown dispersed over time;” or of “certain figurative combinations ferreted out from illustrations, which represented the paintings of Bosch, tremendously enlarging certain very small details.”¹⁸

In sum, photography operates for Gioli as an apparatus for iconographic deconstruction. Or, better, like a “bachelor machine.” In fact, the erotic dimension and the symbolic and technological ones here genuinely intertwine. According to the famous duchampian non-definition, a bachelor machine is an object characterized by two attributes: it has an erotic value and its function is not comprehensible. Taking up the operational assimilation of the guillotine and the bachelor machine investigated by Alberto Boatto, it would seem of consequence that even photography — above all in its 19th century variant, so beloved by Gioli, with its chassis that runs between the two tracks of a large wooden frame — approaches these two devices of modernity, the one ethical, the other aesthetic. “A nihilistic machine”¹⁹, an erotic machine, which is at the same time a death machine. (These two complimentary aspects, which mirror one another, as has been said, are at the center of the two cycles of *Naturæ* and *Vessazioni*). Besides, this is exactly what Barthes wrote about photography: a mechanical device, the function of which, is to convert life into death instantaneously, with a single blow of the blade-shutter. It is a device for making meaning: for changing Eros into Thanatos, definitively freezing its appearance in a final, definitive coupling.

And then, beyond the reasons of what takes place in the photographic apparatus “in itself and for itself,” the entire universe is concerned with the *anatomy*, to be taken here in the medical and scientific sense (from the Greek *anatémnein*: to rip open, to open a body, to dissect)²⁰ of its appearances and of its visions. The form and the morphology of its representations and of its omissions. First of all, the anatomical object can be an object of love or of death, and the two things together. Taking up the etymology quoted earlier reported by Georges Didi-Huberman, which relates such medical practices with some aspects constitutive of photographic vision:

The photographic image assumes the value of *evidence*, in the proper sense of a judicial exhibit [...]. It is as if photography unveils to us the secrete origin of evil, as if this latter depended almost on a microbial theory of visibility [...]. If one wants to truly understand the *iconographic impulse* of the work of Charcot, is it necessary to start from the (diagnostic, pedagogical) investigative value and from the (prognostic, scientific) predictions of photography.²¹

¹⁸ Private conversation with Paolo Gioli.

¹⁹ Alberto Boatto, *Della ghigliottina considerata una macchina celibe* [*On the Guillotine considered as a Bachelor Machine*], (Milan, Scheiwiller, 1988, 2008), p. 17.

²⁰ Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'invenzione dell'isteria. Charcot e l'iconografia fotografica della Salpêtrière* (1982, *Invention de l'hystérie. Charcot et l'Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*), Marietti, Genova/Milano 2008, p. 49.

²¹ Ivi, p. 63 (refers to the Italian translation).

But scientific discourse can be turned upside down, reversed in meaning, and in the same way the function of photography in relation to the anatomical object. From our perspective, then, it would be a matter of understanding how in Gioli's work the anatomical, analytical, and dimension of photography as dissection, can become even a capacity for *foreseeing* and, thus, of establishing a precise iconography of the erotic body. ("That is the only solution. When one conceives a work of art one mentally sets aside all other alternatives.")

In an extremely well-known and extraordinary text by the German artist Hans Bellmer — published for the first time in 1957 and defined by the curator of the Italian edition a "phoney treatise on aesthetics or a small moral treatise"²² — the author hypothesizes that there is here "a kind of axis of reversibility between the real and the virtual sources of an excitation, an axis, with regular divisions, suggesting a kind of metric anatomy, and that, given the antithetical affinity of breasts and buttocks, for example, of mouth and sex, one could pass on horizontally to the height of the navel."²³ This "axis of reversibility between the real and the virtual," the fulcrum of an innate *imaginative power* implicit in the anatomy of the human body, in the infinite play of correspondences, repetitions, cross-references, superimpositions of its cavities and postures, of its apertures and of its torsions — in the original androgynous coexistence of male and female — shows interesting similarities to several typical mechanisms, we might say primordial ones, of photography and of the "photographic": in the ensemble of its technical procedures, of its visual logics, of its mental processes. A reversibility is produced, above all, between concealing and revealing; between the act of hiding and that of exhibiting the object of vision.²⁴

This is a good point of departure to confront — still, in cyclical fashion — the theme of the relationship between *monstration* and *ensorship* In Gioli's work. Here the tautological gesture of "exploring" reality is still synergistic, and therefore, reversible,

²² Ottavio Fatica, *La pupilla dei suoi occhi* [*The pupil of his eyes*], in Hans Bellmer, *Anatomia dell'immagine* [*Anatomy of the Image*] (1957) reprinted as *Petite anatomie de l'inconscient physique, ou L'anatomie de l'image* [*Small anatomy of the physical unconscious, or the Anatomy of the Image*], (Milan, Adelphi, 2010), p. 79.

²³ Hans Bellmer, *Anatomia dell'immagine*, op. cit., p. 19.

²⁴ It is well-known that Marcel Duchamp dedicated to the development of this concept his final, post-humous work: *Étant donnés: 1) la chute d'eau, 2) le gaz d'éclairage* [*Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas*] (1945-66), an installation the Rosalind Krauss, referring even to a previous interpretation by Lyotard, defines as an "optical machine through which it is impossible *not to see*," a specular *dispositif* or a "little diorama" where "the viewing and vanishing points whose normal status as antimatter derives from their conditions as geometric limits, these points are similarly incarnated. For the vanishing point, or goal of vision, is manifested by the dark interior of a bodily orifice, the optically impenetrable cavity of the spread-eagled "bride," a physical rather than a geometrical limit to the reach of vision. And the viewing point is likewise a hole: thick, inelegant, material." *L'inconscio ottico* (*The Optical Unconscious*), edited by Elio Grazioli (Milan, Bruno Mondadori, 2008), pp. 112-113. A translation of *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1993), p. 110. [Translator's note: The Italian translation of the text differs considerably from the English original, but does not invalidate the point made here by Fragapane. For reference, I have included the original passage, rather than a retranslation into English of the Italian translation].

with respect to the act of erasure, hiding, covering what the image offers to our view. The term is often used by the photographer as a synonym of “looking,” “studying,” “observing,” but clearly the idea of an “exploration” of physical reality (optical and haptic together, as happens with the pinhole cameras, which have neither viewfinder nor pentaprism and thus impose a completely empirical measurement of the field of the frame) evoke a meaning *more carnal than intellectual*. In Gioli’s work, in spite of all and by way of paradox, the gaze always operates basically as a neutral function: aim at exhibiting things “as they are” with respect to the subject-body which he observes, never marking the cards, or manipulating the authenticity of the photographic experience. Only at the cost of a substantial betrayal of everything in his work, in sum, can we place Gioli among those photographers who dedicate themselves to constructing fantastic narratives and staging an imaginary world: even where he stages fictions and tells stories, he is occupied in fact and above all with exploring some sort of truth intrinsic to the order of the real and within the logic of the means, or rather the medium, which mediates precisely, between the eye and the things. The two levels go hand in hand.

The idea of reversibility (and that of the “double,” its immediate corollary) is moreover this same contained in a great number of photographic processes, perfectly exemplified by the logic — which is part of its origins, genetic with respect to the entire cognitive system of photography — of the negative/positive reversal.

Bellmer relates the idea of reversibility or superimposition of the real/the virtual with the Freudian concept of the “union of opposites” in dream processes. This is to say that, “dreams likewise take the liberty of representing any element whatever by its desired opposite, so that it is at first impossible to tell, in respect of any element which is capable of having an opposite, whether it is contained in the dream-thoughts in the negative or the positive sense.”²⁵ Gioli makes recourse to a similar idea of coexistence of reversible opposites²⁶ precisely in explaining the theme that runs throughout the *Naturæ* cycle, as “the beginning and end of each thing.” (And what is more, even on an anthropological plane, flowers represent as much an instrument of seduction as an accessory of the funeral liturgy: their value is intrinsically double, split, in a precarious balance between a ritual of love and a gesture of consolation, between a promise of life and a pact with death). It is obvious that this does not exhaust the meaning and the various implications of the work, but I think it represents in exemplary fashion the starting point of the entire discourse. It would be a matter then of a game quite similar to the one that we can observe in the tautologies and palindromes (continually basing

²⁵ Hans Bellmer, *Anatomia dell’immagine* [*Anatomy of the Image*], op. cit., p. 20. The quotation is taken from *Die Traudeutung* (1900). [The version cited here in English is the 1913 translation by Stanley G. Hall (trans.)].

²⁶ This idea is also at the base of the interpretive key enunciated by Roberta Valtorta — with respect to the entire body of work of the photographer — at the beginning of one of her most important writings: “The work of Paolo Gioli is readable in light of a complex succession of superimpositions. Through successive reiterations, he enacts a spherical type of creativity, constructing conjunctions of opposite meanings.” Roberta Valtorta, *La congiunzione degli opposti* [*The conjunction of opposites*], in *Paolo Gioli. Fotografie dipinti grafica film* [*Paolo Gioli. Photography paintings graphics film*], (Udine, Art&, 1996), p. 15.

himself on Freud, Bellmer confronts the question on the pages immediately following the ones just quoted above), some kind of “*linguistic mirrors*” equivalent to an entire series of eminently photographic meanings: duplication, repetition, reversal, inversion, projection, anamorphosis. (And further, the predilection is well known of the Surrealist and Dadaist photographers for negative images and for those strange hybrids of negative and positive constituted by solarization). So that, it is photography itself, by extension, in its most general sense, as a system of thought, which coincides in its own processes with the idea of a possible unveiling — and mirror occultation — of what we know as “the beginning and end of each thing.” Alain Fleischer has in fact formulated a very similar thought in writing that each photograph fundamentally represents in its essence, the ostensive vision of a female sex observed frontally and placed in the center of the picture:

Pornography, a minor genre at the heart of photography, offers to the photograph the center of gravity of its object. The photograph is completely irradiated, from within, by its hard pornographic kernel, completely contaminated in return by this extreme capacity — this murky virtue — at the limits of representation. Even astronomical photographs, even the plates in telescopes trained on the nebulae, the galaxies, or on distant stars, send back to us images, which seem to be emitted from this center of the body, of all bodies, constituted by the woman’s sex²⁷.

Bellmer then concludes the passage to which we previously referred noting how “the charm of optical experience [...] is attributed only to the fact that it concretizes the rather murky consciousness we have of the critical point of our functioning.”²⁸ More precisely, the consciousness of the fact that “opposition is necessary in order for things to be and it forms a third reality.”²⁹ The optical experience, to which he alludes, the exploration with a mirror of the photograph of a nude,³⁰ is a strange experiment in mirror anamorphosis, quite similar to the anatomical explorations of the Surrealist photographers, or to those, a bit later by Kertész in the widely celebrated *Distortions* (1933) taking as its starting point a real body. All the operations that in their turn recall the duchampian concept of the *miroirique* [mirrorical], theorized by the artist in his

²⁷ Alain Fleischer, *La pornographie. Une idée fixe de la photographie* (Paris, La Musardine, 2000, pp. 19-20). English translation by current translator. No authorized English edition is known to exist.

²⁸ Hans Bellmer, *Anatomia dell’immagine*, op. cit., p. 25.

²⁹ Ivi, p. 27.

³⁰ “Place a mirror without a frame perpendicularly on a photograph of a nude, and constantly maintaining an angle of 90 degrees, move it forward and turn it in such a way that the symmetrical halves of the visible whole reduce or enlarge the size of the reflection following a slow and regular evolution. The whole will be reproduced continuously in the form of bubbles of elastic skins that, as they swell, they will move away from the crack more than other theoretical axis of symmetry [...]. Confronted with such an abominably natural fact, that captures all one’s attention, the question of the reality or of the virtuality of the two halves of this unity in movement vanishes from consciousness, is erased at the edges of memory.” Ivi, pp. 25-26.

working notes and in his optical machines:³¹ a “disorientation” and estrangement of the image, a loss of its functionality produced by symmetrical mirror duplication.”³²

This procedure certainly causes one to think of a series of typical operations of Gioli’s film and photographic production, which I would group into approximately three macro-typologies:

(a) Symmetrical doubling along a horizontal or vertical axis positioned in the center of the picture: “orthodox” style experiments suggested by Bellmer that we observe, explored systematically in numerous variations, in almost all the films realized by Gioli during the first years of the 70s. Among these, for example, *Del tuffarsi e dell’annegarsi* [*On Diving in and Drowning*], *Hilarisdoppio* [*Double Hilaris*], *Cineforon* and, above all, *Quando la pellicola è calda* [*When the Film gets Hot*]: a work of excavation, manipulating various short clips of pornographic footage, where the “mirroring” and “ensorious” function interfere with one another, superimposing themselves in a continual and flickering flow of images (as Bruno Di Marino writes, In Gioli’s work pornography and experimental cinema work synergistically, revealing themselves to be “two opposed and perfectly complimentary genres”³³), given that symmetrical doubling intervenes precisely in the *sensitive* locations of the frame, where the filmed bodies couple, become penetrated or exhibit their own anatomical particularities;

(b) the vertical shift or “displacement,” which is at the basis of several of Gioli’s most radically experimental films, like *Filmstenopeico (l’uomo senza la macchina da presa)* [*Pinhole Film (Man without a Movie Camera)*] (1973-1989) or *L’operatore perforato* [*The Perforated Operator*] (1979). Works in which, as David Bordwell writes, “the downward drift produced by Gioli’s stenopeic camera tends to erase the frameline.” Or where, “by spreading a narrow photograph (vertical, of course) across two or more frames on the physical strip, Gioli produces onscreen the cascade familiar from the pinhole footage,” so that “by now, when we can hardly tell the difference between frame and perforations, cinema’s two round-cornered rectangles, the image can be anything — a picture or a zone of blank white.”³⁴ (One should note, that a similar interference between the image and the perforations is produced as well in the micro-

³¹ Cfr. Jean-François Lyotard, *Les transformateurs Duchamp* [*Duchamp’s Transformers*], (Paris, Galilée, 1977).

³² An idea compared by various scholars to the theme of the *entering into the mirror* by Alice, following the trail of several indications present in the duchampian *Boîte verte* (the “green box” where in 1934 the artist gathered together and published his working notes concerning the *Large Glass*) and in other allusions dispersed throughout the work of Duchamp. This relates then again to photography, but by a different path with respect to that traditionally beaten by theorists, centered instead on the nexus of ready made and indexical logic. For evident reasons of space, I will go into no further depth on this occasion.

³³ Bruno Di Marino, *Corpo a corpo. L’erotismo nell’immaginario anatomico di Gioli* [*Body to Body. Eroticism in Gioli’s anatomical imaginary*], in S. Toffetti, A. Licciardello (eds.) *Paolo Gioli. Un cinema dell’impronta* [*Paolo Gioli. A cinema of the Imprint*], (Rome, Kiwido/Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, 2009), p. 45.

³⁴ Cfr. David Bordwell, *Paolo Gioli’s Vertical Cinema*, in S. Toffetti, A. Licciardello (eds.), *Paolo Gioli. Un cinema dell’impronta*, op. cit., pp. 27-29 (English original) and 226-227 (Italian translation).

pinhole photography of 1975 from which my entire discussion originates). This vertical shift or displacement is in substance equivalent to a “cut” or a *caesura* that juxtaposes two adjacent images, which are part of a single filmstrip, bringing the upper half of one image to the lower half of the other in such a way that the two halves of the (two) frames are respectively reversed. In another film, *Interlinea* [*Frameline*] (2008), also excavated from clips of pornographic films, this technique is adapted to purpose of “disturbing” the erotic images, separating them or superimposing them in layers that interfere with each other. The procedure recurs frequently in Gioli’s other works, for example, in the photographs, which take their point of departure from the double frames extrapolated from the “found footage” material already previously used for the film *Anonimatografo* [*Anonimatograph*]³⁵ (1973), and as well, in an allusive form, in at least one of the images of the *Naturæ* cycle: the one that closes the series in this volume.

(c) the use of overlays and inserts inside the Polaroid material — as we have seen, a true constant in the photographer’s production. In this case, the anatomical objects reproduced (erotic details, faces, masks, moulds), are put on top of the very (photographic) matrices and are reproduced, generating and negating themselves at the same time, so that the original underlying image is multiplied as an inverted double, out of phase with itself, in mirror fashion or in negative, that covers it or is added to it forming, quite precisely, a “third reality.”

What is proposed here is evidently only a convenient distinction, useful at best to identify some general lines of research for Gioli’s production with respect to this theme, but it is clear that the question is more complex and multi-faceted. The two images printed on pages 24 and 25, for example, the negative and positive of the same trace-mould of the female sex³⁶, were obtained at the same time, by transmission, by reflection, and by contact (with a method that recalls the experiments in interference-based color photography, the basis of modern holograms, that in 1908 merit for Gabriel J. Lippman the awarding of the Nobel prize in Physics): placing a fragment of paper on the pubes — the contact is therefore between both the image and the “thing” that it reproduces, and between the matrix and the photographic copy — and exposing it by means of a brief flash that, coming from the verso side of the paper approaches it being reflected on the skin-mirror and thus intercepting, on return, the photosensitive emulsion on the recto. In this case, in addition, and in many others that it radicalizes and exemplifies, the mirror principle and that of contact (perhaps the idea of the “window”

³⁵ The series was realized by Gioli on the occasion of his film retrospective, which I curated, for the 45th Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema - Festival di Pesaro in 2009. The photographs were not shown, due to problems relating to the space assigned for the exhibition. A small selection was published in the festival catalog, whereas the entire body of work entitled *Anonimografie* [*Anonimographs*] was included on a DVD as part of the volume *Paolo Gioli. Un cinema dell'impronta*, op. cit.

³⁶ This copy of two reciprocal, inseparable twin photographs reveals a curious similarity, with respect to their use, to Duchamp’s work *Étant donnés: 1) la chute d’eau, 2) le gaz d’éclairage* [*Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas*], which we have already encountered in this text. Gioli’s work, as does Duchamp’s, makes of the spectator a *voyeur*, because of the identical conditions of observation, which it imposes (a dynamic, as well, not unfamiliar to the *Naturæ* cycle); Gioli’s two images involve not so much whoever observes them, but whoever possesses them — and, as such, plays a role which necessarily determines the dimension of objecthood in photographic reception — a fetishistic act.

together with the two “great forms,” in the deleuzian sense, more exemplary of the entire aesthetics of photography) tend to coincide in a kind of short circuit of photographic signifier and sensitive material. In such a way that the two images — and the third which is its synthesis where the two processes are superposed in the same photograph instead of splitting into two or more distinct objects — coexist with the sole end of generating themselves and overturning themselves reciprocally. A similar thought process (or perhaps I should describe it as the inverse development or negative mould) occurs in the rolls of sensitive material that were made into a loop and inserted into a movie camera; the loop turns around on itself superimposing images on top of images to the point of its partial or total self-consumption of what along the way was layered onto the film. As far as I know, even now, the only example of a similar procedure is in a film-in-progress entitled *Vita circolare* [*Circular Life*]. Even in this case, the image is animated by a gesture that establishes its beginning and end, causing them to coincide or collide, in a third reality that is neither that of the “thing” represented nor that of the photographic material that represents it, but the synthesis of the two levels in a single mental projection.

Finally, there is (at least) one clear structural and pragmatic analogy between the operation devised by Bellmer, who constructs his artificial, articulated, modular erotic doll for the purpose of “studying the formation of the image and the relations between the anatomy of this image and the images of our anatomy,”³⁷ and the operation realized by Gioli in *Naturæ*. Not so much on the most apparent surface evidence, the “serial”³⁸ repetition of a single visual act in relation to a single posture of the body and the flower, which the latter shelters and exhibits; but in the fact of *constructing*, first mentally, then by means of the instruments of photography and of art (one thing in function of the other) a two-sided polymorphous image of the creative power of the eye and of eros. Besides the artificial flower, the true fulcrum and motive force of the photographs — the androgynous gynaecium, which mimes at once the petal and the pistil, the labia majora and the clitoris — is a conceptual graft that insinuates itself among the visible and the erotic, the gaze and desire, superposing them, as in an anagram or a tautology. It echoes on the surface of the image, that subterranean invisible power, that gives it meaning, form and substance. In spite of all appearances, (once again), there is no act of substitution, but an image of the *circular* relation between the scopic drive and the sexual drive:

The flowers do not represent failed penetration — something that would utterly diminish my work. They are one more combination of fragments of flowers, petals and pistils, that I stuck together with my saliva. A flower, then, that does not exist in nature, but FOR NATURE. I was representing with this an unlikely clitoral prolapse. The vulva is a part of the body like any other, which carries in itself the same erotic power as an earlobe. I find no difference between these two parts of the body and the gaze, the iris of the eye that opens and closes to vision. There are women’s faces, which solely by

³⁷ Ottavio Fatica, *La pupilla dei suoi occhi* [*The pupil of the eyes*], op. cit., p. 86.

³⁸ I repeat that Gioli categorically rejects the seriality of the operation. To a request for a clarification in that regard Gioli responded that his work “is not serial. It is a cycle, a group of works that, like all cycles, have a beginning and a definitive end, with no return.” Private conversation with Gioli.

looking at you, are highly erotic, as much as the vulva. And the same goes for the man. Mine, aims at being a simplification, a search for purity of the gaze on the human body in all its erogenous zones, by which the woman is completely overrun. Any part of the female body you catch sight of is a vulva and is not a vulva. It's the erogenous walking³⁹

³⁹ *Ibid.*