

A "Labourer of the Gaze"?

Gianni Berengo Gardin Tells of Marcello Mariani's Visible Poetry

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Even more important than our relationship with reproduced images, born of bygone times and spaces, is the following problem: do we not exist within a new and original relationship with models, a primordial connection, the reality of which has still not been made manifest by any phenomenon?

It is the same as asking whether we are not perhaps the owners of a freedom the use of which must still be learned.

Ernst Junger, *The Worker*

The vision that the visionary practices is what the visionary himself is subject to on behalf of things and, as many artists have said, "I see myself being seen by things".
Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*

However brief the moment is in which one captures an image, it reveals itself to be coming from and directed towards a rhythm. Everything dances.

Giorgio Manganelli, *Un fagiolo grande come un grattacielo*

Digital processes, the electronic image and multimedia are dissolving the historical canons of photography, those which this great mother of all the means and non-manual processes of image production has taken to be her own since she was born, and in which she has trusted in order to affirm her own existence and her own truth. That is to say the codes of analogical photography, characteristic of her linguistic DNA. First of all, there is the certification of reality: the fact that that which you see in an image exists or existed; that to the present of representation necessarily corresponds a past experience. Following that, we have the unity of space and time: the fact that the photographer and his subjects found one another in the same place at the same time. Finally there is experience: to have seen, lived, chosen and photographed; the fact that the photographer had the experience of reality represented, in such a way that the photograph speaks through the gaze of the same photographer, who is at once sign and witness of a reality.

Digital photography, instead, works on a reality that is already image, receding that which is already in code, without having to come to terms with the "harshness" of the real. The reality with which it is confronted is empowered to the second, the third, the nth degree... By now the gesture of grabbing a camera is passe, and increasingly similar to that of brandishing a club from the twentieth century, an outsized, anachronistic object and according to many inappropriate for representing the present, that became ungraspable, polymorphous, discontinued and fragmented into infinite present moments. It is a present moment which according to many can no longer be reduced to the experience of a single individual in a single place, and even less so to that of a single eye-thought-hand process. In a present dominated by a "weak" thought, from which reality escapes to make itself invisible, the photographer now recreates his own reality through particles of a world where everything is under control, where the codification is programmed in the same way as in the laboratory of a scientist. In the absence of

a "strong" thought, capable of identifying the real, contemporary photography is increasingly focused on models of reality. It shows us scenes, situations, events that seem real or possible. Within this paradigm, Gianni Berengo Gardin is decidedly counter-current: he brings a "strong thought" of and on photography. He is a living and attentive witness, who believes in the reality of people and things, who believes in experience and in the fascination and difficulty of living it. He is an author nourished on intellectual honesty, who takes entire responsibility for this experience, to interpret it, recount it, transmit it through his hands and his gaze. Italian post-war photography was the scene of a conflict between the graphic formalism dear to amateurs (who were still clinging to the idea of an ideal art, essential rather than existential), and the Neorealist photojournalists, established by the theories of Cesare Zavattini and illustrated by Elio Vittorini's *Politecnico* and Mario Pannunzio's *Il Mondo*. In 1954 Berengo Gardin began working as a professional photojournalist for the latter, poised to be a part of reality, to descend into existence, even though he already possessed a knowledge of composition that oriented his photographic fragments of reality towards an aesthetically fascinating "form", which discretely reveals the presence of the author. Nevertheless, in his documentaries, this formal presence of the common user turns out to be "veiled", reorganised by the priority of the subject, the event to be documented.

Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004), who can be considered the father of contemporary reporting, insisted precisely on discretion, necessary to project the photographer into a living reality, unconditioned by the evident cumbersomeness of the means of reproduction. Even though Berengo Gardin is equipped with an unmistakable formal elegance, he privileges the documentary approach. His is never a cold analytical documentary. It is an instantaneous and instinctive document, the synthesis of a situation grasped quickly in its evolution. A perception more human than mechanical, it is grasped by the eye in the unrepeatable moment in which the event manifests itself. One of the elements that made Berengo Gardin's work singular and unmistakable in the photography of the last fifty years was his affable, participatory yet never pathetic, gaze, with which he caught gestures and attitudes capable of revealing the lightness and the weight of everyday life.

More than photographs, those of Berengo Gardin are fragments of a time and space lived by the author and memorised by his camera. Their value is therefore more conceptual than formal, if it is true that the reality consumes itself in its existence and cannot therefore be reduced to a "thing". Formal elegance thus reveals itself as the direct consequence of reality seized in its epiphany rather than being derived from a pose, or a manifestation of a manual presence of the author. It is significant essentially thanks to the presence and the involvement of the photographer. According to Cartier-Bresson, in order to signify the world it is necessary to feel involved in that which can be seen in the viewfinder: to photograph is to recognise in a fraction of a second a fact and the rigorous organisation of the shapes, perceived visually, that express and signify that fact.

I have always photographed Italy, because you must narrate what you know - noted Berengo Gardin - I am not a creative type nor even an artist, but someone who registers that which he sees. I am a labourer of the gaze." In reality, if the choice and the interpretation of the subject are an important part of any true art,

Gianni Berengo Gardin is an extraordinary artist, who at a time when too many images bombard us, numbing our capacity to see, offers us the highest lesson of visual art, in his inflexible deontology and with that inimitable empathy with the subject that renders his photographs authentic and unique.

In this case, the subject is a man: an artist, a painter. In this book, some seventy beautiful photographs by Berengo Gardin narrate the horizons, the "air" and the "aura" of this artist, the landscapes and the places in which he walks and liberates his thoughts, his person and his luminous face, his spaces, his daily life, his affections, his objects and instruments, the gestures through which he achieves his art...

The photographer ventures forth into the fields and the rocks where sits the ancient and fascinating heart of stone of a city like L'Aquila. Penetrating into this heart he meets Marcello Mariani, firstly as a shadow in the landscape and on the ancient piazzas (creating certain wonderful "landscapes with figure", a theme in which Berengo Gardin excels), after which he slowly starts outlining the physiognomy of the man and the artist, reflecting on the mystery of the work of art, on its birth and on its relationship to the space around it.

Following Lucio Fontana, Giorgio de Chirico and Emilio Vedova, Berengo Gardin dedicates another fundamental chapter of his meditative observations on the art world to Marcello Mariani.

Gianni Berengo Gardin is the indisputable master of black and white and often reminds one that it is the most perfect register for being, even though perfection never denies the insinuating, hidden fold of precariousness, which is the same vital lymph of the language of photography. In order to at once represent and transfigure an image only two elements are necessary: light and shadow, in which lies all of the dramatic intimacy, the inspiration of that modern "sorcellerie évocatoire" (Baudelaire) that is photography.

This master of black and white finds himself paradoxically following in the footsteps of a master of colour, known precisely for his infinite luxuriant, unpredictable and inexhaustible colour, in the image of Marcello Mariani himself. This story is an emotional path to getting closer to the artist and his work, and to painting tout court. It begins with the vast horizons and the wild and solitary mountains of the Abruzzi landscape that surrounds L'Aquila, until it reaches the physical and metaphysical heart of this adventure: the studio of Marcello Mariani, on the old Via Sassa, near Santa Caterina, a deconsecrated church from the eighteenth century.

Berengo Gardin's photographic gaze turns towards the landscape giving great strength to the perception of the luminous atmospheres, to the light and to the way it travels over things. This constant confers a particular optical density, quasi orthochromatic, to the favoured oppositions between black and white. Natural and urban landscapes are confused until, little by little, they form the setting of a life: the life, indeed, of Marcello Mariani.

Marcello Mariani is without a doubt the illustrious heir of the historical Informale, which he interprets according to a completely original meaning, giving however great prominence to both of the "fulcri" of the Informale: movement and matter. Art, for Mariani, is not therefore so much the painting made, as the act of making it: the artistic value remains first and foremost within the movement itself, a movement that intervenes to modify and combine different materials (canvas,

paper, jute, wood, various textiles), investing them with explosions of light-colours like blue, red, yellow, purple, orange...

It is a well-known fact that art today is dominated by powerful markets, making it hard for artists to live their life choices coherently. From here stem the contradictions, the neuroses, the compromises that are increasingly frequent within the art world. Marcello Mariani never submitted to any of these compromises and simply followed his path, reaching his own, highly personal concept of Informale: very vital and instinctive, but also intellectual and elegant, intriguing and sensual. He is a painter who makes one understand what pure painting is: tension, colour, density, light and the absolute.

By maintaining a privileged role for the subconscious in the creative process, like in abstract expressionism, his images become stratifications, glittering⁵ of light, flashes of the soul, stinging gestures, and highly intense colourings. Mariani's is a spiritual-romantic abstraction, in which the spiritual is unveiled through colour and form. These remain abstract but are always anchored in the flagrant-fragrance of the real through an umbilical cord that creates stupor and emotion. It is as though Mariani felt - to quote Merleau-Ponty from his famous article of 1964, *The Visible and the Invisible* - "looked at by things". This very symbiotic link with the real - although transfigured and retained only as a trace, a material and chromatic essence, a memorial inspiration - is perhaps that which unites Marcello Mariani and Gianni Berengo Gardin, indomitable and arduous heroic knight of the real, but of a real that is continuously questioned, observed with a critical attitude, admiration and doubt.

Even Berengo Gardin looks at the real and is looked at by it. spectator and active witness of the real, with his very gaze he conditions it and activates the dialectic mechanisms that trigger his and our interpretation.

In this way he appears to seize a focal point of the art of Marcello Mariani: the fact that the perception is "without a home", is pure preoccupation, disorder, doubt, perpetual questioning of things.

For this one could refer to Mariani, perhaps not too arbitrarily, in the way Paul Valéry noted in 1913 in his *Cahiers*: "I never conceive of works. The work of art does not interest me deeply. It is the power to create a work that disturbs me, excites me, torments me". Valéry spoke of that, in some ways fortuitous, possibility that thickens in the equilibrium of the work, exposing the priority of the creative moment - of the formation, the becoming of the image - versus the work of art understood as finished product of an artistic labour.

Earlier I alluded to the fact that the logics of development of the documentary tend to reorganise the author's "hand", amplifying the presence of the event, in the spatial-temporal course that the photographer himself points out. A similar process takes place in the practice of Informale art. The Informale artist is an explorer who immerses himself totally within his element - matter, movement and time, in which movement becomes sign. That which counts for him is Be-ing in his corporality as well as the profoundly osmotic relationship with existence. This man-world relationship is ultimately very similar to that which can be made concrete with photojournalism, understood as a "trace of being". One of the main new characters of the American abstract expressionist or the European Informale sign can be summed up as the notion of "trace". This means it refers to what and to who left the trace, to its "action". This is precisely the trace of existing, the imprint

of be-ing: "witness" to a reality that happens, takes place while man is living it. Which are the mechanisms of formation of the work within an artistic practice that increasingly assumes the traits of a "drama of transformation"? It is a fundamental question, especially in relation to a body of work like that of Marcello Mariani. Berengo Gardin appears to ask it, with his usual calm, but also with an intensity highly charged with mystery. And he comes from far away - from the fascination of a landscape without any human presence - to discover the genealogy of this creative process.

The sine qua non in order for the work to have an origin appears to lie within the possibility that the ego becomes another - becomes the air that it breathes, the earth on which it walks, the light that hits its gaze, the people it meets, the architectures it admires, the spaces in which it moves - and in its capacity to create an "atom of silence", in which the perception of the reality can structure itself like a sort of organism capable of modifying the author himself. To perceive poetically : comes to mean select and combine the information of the experience in autonomous forms compared to the habits dictated by the senses. The origin of poiesis, in other words, is always linked to an interruption of the automatisms of the sensorial. Gianni Berengo Gardin seems to wish to tell us along his trip towards and through Marcello Mariani's life and his work. The visual story of the photographer makes us realise how this painting came to be the unstable place of a knot in which the visible and the invisible appear to enter in contact with each other. The "privilege" of painting, in its carnality, consists in the fact that it is capable of showing - more than any other art - how the idea is already inscribed within its own obstacle, within sensibility: the idea is the flip-side and the depth of sensibility. In painting, Merleau-Ponty highlights again, "there is no vision without a screen: we would not better recognise the ideas of which we speak if we were without body and sensibility, in this case they would actually be inaccessible to us".

Painting is at any rate an anti-representative process, intimately "abstract", for which the same ambivalence is true, its constitutional fragility and instability that guarantees its value. Or, as Hans Sedlmayr wrote in *Loss of the Centre*, thanks to painting "one must find in the present the meat of the world... eternally new and the same. A sort of time of sleep".

For this reason, perhaps, Berengo Gardin merely brushes over Mariani's works as objects, renouncing their full and direct re-production, through the distance or the excess of closeness, the detail, the nonfrontal, the transversal or the interposition of other elements in space, it takes away the full and defined perception. His is more of a continuous allusion to painting as a creative process, for example through the expressions of the face of the artist, capturing his thoughts in a flash of a gaze, in the twist of a smile.

The dynamism is one of the dominant characteristics of the portraits of Marcello Mariani made by Berengo Gardin: instead of seizing a static moment in a dynamic world, as usually happens in photography, these portraits suggest the (Da Vincian?) idea of a continuous past-present-future flux: their time is dynamic-dramatic.

The personality of the artist is then explored through his way of moving in familiar or foreign spaces (using among other things even slightly out-of-focus or moving pictures, that can evoke with greater efficiency the existence of which they are the projection); through his movements: from looking for or through a book to

rearranging the canvases in the infinite and infinitely inviting disorder of his studio, to the stirring of the colours; through the bric-a-brac of surprisingly varied and strange objects and instruments for painting, precisely in that magic and alchemical space that is Mariani's studio, objects from which Berengo Gardin recovers extraordinary and unforgettable "still lifes", that don't have anything to envy the most beautiful ones produced during the course of the history of western art.

Nietzsche saw in the flash of appearance the aesthetic donation of truth, that which Longino had called the ekphrastic, the clarity of being. Longino affirms that even the soul of things is manifest in a particular light: perhaps it was that very ray of appearing that hit us in this photograph by Berengo Gardin, that gives back the soul of Marcello Mariani and his art. The "insurmountable aspect" of this appearing, that recalls no ulterior reality, is the scintillating of that which shows itself: no recalling of another, a transcendent, or simply a "signified" reality but only a presentation, the actual coming to presence.

We then realise how much imagination was needed to make these images - imagination: the faculty of the suspended and elusive time of appearing. Thus it does not reproduce reality, but waits to be able to create the appearing, seizing the substance of the transformation, pushing the gaze towards where images form and dissolve.