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Signs of Life. Five Notes on the Relationship between Avant-garde Art and Everyday Life

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I

The artist sees himself in a mirror that, through a play of reflections due to his position, returns, to him and to us, his double profile, twice. *I*, the artist writes, at the top of the photograph, and adds *We* at the side, affixing an arrow: the image of self multiplied, the re-mirroring in multiplicity, is, for *I-We-Boccioni*, the emblem of the new subject, citizen of the rising city. His characters too appear leaning from the balcony of a housing block near the periphery that the artist had painted a few years before, from where they observe the street, and *the street enters the house*.

It is significant that so little attention was paid to the specific themes chosen by Umberto Boccioni in his declination of the new Futurist language. Themes that, on the one hand, configure the most common features of any city, a construction site, a nocturnal street, the crowded interior of a bar, while at the same time referring to the affective world of the artist himself, through the portraits of his mother depicted in her domestic environment. The plastic dynamism describes the new world as an intermediary site between exterior and interior, between the collective time of sociality and the individual time of the quotidian, between the public dimension and private life. A new sensitivity that becomes charged with both dimensions, which lay the foundations of existence, and which likewise transform them.

II

Seated at a table, the artist sees himself smoking a pipe, a meditative act. Seated, not standing, not ready for action. His multiplied reflection refers to the constituent split of the subject, rather than to its optimistic overcoming in a fusion with the surrounding community. With the ready made, Marcel Duchamp introduces us to the world of Odrakek, where inanimate beings become animated, to grieve for the living, as in Kafka's story, *The Householder's Concern*. The Duchampian ready made not only calls into question the artistic context as a significant element, it also bears witness to the alienation that underlies our relationships with common objects, split between use value and exchange value. The word *kommerz* has come to denote the nature of this split and the working horizon that derives from it. Art tends to subvert this horizon, or at least to overcome it, but the overcoming of commodification cannot but take place beginning from its peak, from a certain excess, beyond which new forms and a new beauty can be glimpsed. Yet tied to such an origin, the new necessarily bears its imprint, like a derisive cipher, as in Kurt Schwitters' suffix *merz*.

Alienation and dis-alienation are the two opposing terms within which much of the history of the avant-garde unfolds. And it is always common existence, the quotidian sphere, that is thematized in these extreme cases, understood as the realm of experience that verifies the actual changes taking place. However, such instances, when not censored, will often be relegated to the background, in the name of ideology. And this obviously does not refer only to the artistic avant-garde.

The split between the private and public domain has always been fundamental to learning, and only recently has the subordination of the everyday been put in question. The quotidian doesn't appear in official doctrines, for it demonstrates that aspect of reality which, on account of its ephemeral and relative nature, is considered more or less irrelevant. As tends to happen with the private sphere in general, it is identified with non-value. Suffice it to recall Hannah Arendt's famous invective against the good father, whom she considers the greatest criminal of the 20th century since he neglects his duties as *citoyen* to devote himself solely to the support of himself and his own family: "the transformation of the father from a responsible member of society, interested in all public questions, into a bourgeois who cares solely about his own private existence and ignores all civic virtues, is a modern international phenomenon. The exigencies of our time (...) may transform him at any moment into mass-man and turn him into a tool of any species of folly and horror".¹

But if the sphere of authentic existence lies in the political, that is, in the sphere of active participation in social life, it is precisely in the name of the political that the private, the quotidian, has been rethought in another form altogether, namely in the guise of its historical repression. The repressed, the inverse of official knowledge, is taken up by the political at the point where the latter assumes a deconstructive and liberating function. This is the case with Foucault's history of madness, of women, of the marginalized and of those who are different and who until now have been silenced. And it is also the story of everyday life, a continent that has literally been rediscovered by the most advanced currents in contemporary historiography, beginning with the French *Annales*. For Philippe Ariès, the emergence into the course of modernity of occasions where it is possible to perceive the difference between public spaces and private and promiscuous spaces, where it is possible, for example to remain in solitude, determines "a new way of conceiving, and organizing everyday life (...) like an externalization of self and the intimate values that are cultivated within oneself. All this leads to us placing great attention and care on what happens in everyday life, within the home or in relation to one's own behavior, and introducing demands for refinement into these areas (...); it is taste then that becomes a veritable value".² It is through taste that one cultivates in private that the everyday subject then becomes value.

That repressed contents are "spoken" does not merely signify adding other and unexpected themes to our consolidated body of knowledge; it also means a profound change in the laws of knowledge and in criteria of interpretation and valuation.

The artistic avant-garde is a contaminated knowledge which conveys repressed contents, where the high and the low find common ground, outside hierarchies, and thus establish a counter-history. Even the counter-history of mass-man can be found contained within its discourses, which pitilessly describe his psychological and social state, but which are also able to prophesy a different destiny. Though George Grosz' metaphysical mannequins with their perfectly spherical heads, like some burlesque abstraction, inhabit geometrical cities, from the clothes they wear they are nonetheless recognizable as typical *bourgeoises*, on a level with René Magritte's man in a bowler hat. And if the German artist's figures announce the incipient catastrophe of which they are historically the unwitting accomplices, and if they denounce the social servitude that defines and limits them, Magritte speaks to us directly of the unconscious as an enormity that divides us but also as a force that has the power to redeem us.

It is significant that both these instances are simultaneously co-present in the work of one of the central figures of the century, Andy Warhol, and that his central position is derived precisely from

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Ebraismo e modernità*, Feltrinelli, Milan, p. 73.

² Philippe Ariès, *Per una storia della vita privata*, in *La vita privata dal Rinascimento all'Illuminismo*, Laterza, Bari, 1988, p. XL.

his indifference. Andy Warhol was able to introduce "artistic" creativity into what Benjamin Buchloh calls "the most advanced and most sophisticated milieu of professional alienation: advertising design". Thus Warhol brought non-commercial elements to his design for women's shoes, where the critic sees false naïveté, the charm of the uneducated and unskilled, his illiterate mother, preindustrial bricolage.³

On the other hand, in the world of non-alienated (because non-functional) creativity, as the art world is supposed to be, he broadly thematicized the compulsive automatism of mass-man. Through the compulsion to repeat and through mechanical gestures, the artist recalls the processes of the fetishization of merchandise that accompanies its production, while the reification of the subject is alluded to in the silk-screens that place Marilyn on the same level as coke bottles. In addition to which, the incipient total pervasiveness of the mass-media is already present in the recycling of images they produce. Reality disappears behind its simulacrum, truth becomes a variable of the information system, and the *Tunafish Disaster* exists to the extent that it becomes front-page news. And yet, at the height of the process of de-realization, the artist indicates a way out that passes through a new and more acute awareness of the times and spaces of the everyday. In Warhol's films, reality is perceived through the imposition of a time that becomes excessive and abnormal precisely because it is absolutely real, as in *Empire*, or alternatively, because the almost tautological display of his screen tests.

The Sixties also opened with Michelangelo Pistoletto's mirrored surfaces, which set up a very similar dialectic, but one that moves within the space of a single text which assumes a disturbing value that is even more intense. The image that appears on the surface of the mirror describes anonymous human beings, generally caught in the act of observing, a non-action that associates them with stereotypes. But the mirror opens up new possibilities to the world and places fixity and becoming in a relationship immediacy. In the temporal short-circuit that the work always induces, our present is superimposed upon the frozen time of the figures and gives them an ever-changing meaning. The space is also investigated in its significant functions; it not only spreads the word about the work that it reflects and returns the phenomenal "here," but also disturbs our rational perception, positing the instance of the double. As in Magritte, here too we are shown mass-man, suspended between the humble dimension of existence and its possible projection into the oneiric enormities of the unconscious.

III

The neo-avant-gardes from the postwar period on were marked by the generous utopian view that art could be overcome as a separate dimension, as something elitist and incapable of transforming life. In the exemplary case of On Kawara, the work is based entirely on the registration of existence itself, captured in its mere becoming in time and space, realized through the simple accumulation and cataloguing of data. Such an attitude presupposes a liberated time, measured in discontinuous fashion and independent from any constriction, since it embodies a utopia that is conveyed by art. Here the fusion between art and life becomes complete and literal and does not entail dramatically disruptive acts. The Promethean pathos of the neo-avant-gardes is thus somewhat cooled in the choice of an action that is completely rooted in the time of the everyday, but is not for this reason diminished in value. Nevertheless the "life" that absorbs within itself the "Art" polarity and becomes one and the same with it, as in a movement of dialectical overcoming, remains an

³ Benjamin Buchloh, *Andy Warhol's One-Dimensional Art: 1956-1966*, in *Andy Warhol*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1989, p. 41 He also writes: "By contrast, his successful debut as an artist in the sphere of fine art (...) would depend precisely on his capacity to erase from his paintings' and drawings more completely than any of his peers (...) the traces of the handmade, of artistry and creativity, of expression and invention."

uncriticized category, in this and in much contemporary research. It remains like an idealistic residue that hypothesizes life as a free territory that is thus capable of allowing the full realization of the *de-definition* of art, without opening up contradictions with its social and political aspect. Such an ideological limit applies even to Joseph Beuys, the most significant figure in this regard.

More than in behavioral experiences, a truly anti-idealistic instance (with legitimate exceptions, embodied - and this is no accident - by women artists, from Martha Rosler to Yayoi Kusama to Valie Export), is manifested in an analytical approach. Here artists address the art system, probing its functioning, as an integral part of the more general information system, which in turn is understood as an ideological legitimization of the social-economic structure. If, in 1971, Hans Haacke proposed a work dealing with building speculation in New York⁴, Dan Graham goes back to the standardized language of working class architecture, understood as a system of rules conditioning the experience of the inhabitants of the limitless American urban periphery. In his interventions in art magazines as well as in his photographs, Graham compares these constructed modules with contemporary minimalist poetics. Working within a similar perspective, Jeff Wall sets up incongruous signifying structures, such as the technical means employed by advertising, refined references to the painting of Poussin or Cézanne, and, particularly in his early works, contents related to the conditions of life of the suburban proletariat or of social outcasts. The contradiction thus emerges in the foreground and, one might say, underlies the very construction of the work. The light of the light-box, instead of materializing the aura that envelops the commodity, emphasizes its reverse-side, representing the effects of the social division of work on the level of everyday life in the cities of late capitalism.

IV

Alongside the surviving trees on an embankment that supports the bridge of a highway, unfolds the tale of the *Storyteller*, a narrator whose words restore an identity to his emaciated public of outcasts. It is in terms of life conditions that the subject becomes aware of his own social position, and through this of his own historicity. And it is a life story that deals with the subject in its biographical uniqueness, which cannot be reduced to any generalization or category.⁵ The awareness of the uniqueness of every *I* matures in the face of the everyday and only in this way finds an organic tie to the community of which it is a part. The narration of self joins with the history of the many and with history *tout court*, without the silencing of any "residue". "May anyone be one's own historian": Jean-Luc Godard's prediction at the end of his film *Tout va bien* reflects that of many artists who have worked with the excavation of individual memory in order to reassemble a collective memory. Christian Boltanski has brought together images and objects that reconstruct his childhood, without distinguishing between salient events and those of no importance, thereby intensifying the public's processes of identification. Mixing truth with fiction, memoir with narrative, documents with allusive objects and signs, his work has opened the way to a reflection on a recent collective history that sees in the Holocaust - both in its reality and in its value as negative metaphor - a painful and still unresolved point. Significantly, he has done this by using a neutral language which is generic, anonymous and non-expressive⁶, the better to be able to refer to the

⁴ Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971.

⁵ For more on these themes, see A. Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1997.

⁶ "Now, in a gallery like Sonnabend, a photo of mediocre quality is "artistic." Because it is rejected by common taste, it becomes acceptable in these privileged sites. My desire to work with good quality photos corresponded to a desire for neutrality. Good quality is nothing, it is simply normality. Poor quality is the evident desire to make art". The artist's statement (1981) appears in *Christian Boltanski*, Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Bologna - Charta, Milan, 1997, p. 142.

collective whole. It is no accident that Jeff Wall's *Storyteller* makes use of words alone in order to communicate, a simple expressive means with which the excess of mass-media messages cannot compete.

At the very heart of the society of the spectacle, artists are adopting the most simple, and if possible, the most immediate means in order to construct narratives. Today's art often attempts to recount, to base itself on narrative structures that refer to existential realities, perhaps in opposition to the sense of de-realization that the reigning culture of virtuality entails, and in contrast to the immateriality of digital technology.

It is this kind of sensibility that pushes artists such as Nan Goldin or Wolfgang Tillmans to use photography to represent their own being-in-the-world, as though in an uninterrupted visual diary. What their images give us is a subjectivity based almost entirely, and constructed day by day, on an ensemble of relationships with others, with the other that, by its mere existence, determines the I. Here too, photography restores the sense of everyday time, in its subversion of scales of value which distinguish between one event and another, or between one personality and another. In fact, other evaluative criteria are necessary, beginning with knowledge based on affectivity. Thus the image becomes a testimonial to an intimate relationship, shared uniquely by the representatives of the community whose lifestyles are portrayed; at the same time it becomes a document of a historically connoted social dynamic

V

If there is a messianic tendency in modern and contemporary art, there also exists a countertendency, from Kazimir Malevich and Yves Klein to Anselm Kiefer. The frame of reference for the former is the cosmos, myth, the transcendent or, in its secularized variations, views of the organic world, grand traditions and ideologies. The latter, in contrast, refers to the earth, understood as the worldly horizon captured in its inevitable banality, to matter, to the body and to sexuality, to everyday life, and, in the value of its designs, to scientific knowledge. From Expressionism to Body Art many artists have attempted to reintroduce into contemporary art the primordial dimension of the sacred and its correlated violence, offering the experience of the ceremonial, which brings about psychophysical shock. In other cases the artist-martyr, embodying the heroic figure of the subversive and the outcast, has chosen, by his own example, to bear witness to the true meaning of life. Many other artists, in contrast, have knowingly rejected both these heroicizing roles and their encompassing ideologies, and have instead constructed a more equal relationship with the public. In the name of such a relationship, artists have questioned the very concept of the avant-garde, understood as a realm aristocratically separate from the world's current languages, resorting to simple and broadly socializable linguistic practices, from the playful use of real space and time to the involvement of the public. Examples can be seen from the Happenings of Kaprow,

Rauschenberg and Oldenburg, to Vito Acconci's actions of recognition of his own and others' bodies. In Europe, Pistoletto used his *Oggetti in meno (Minus Objects)* to establish the basis for a reversal of the individualistic and heroicizing vision of the artist-demiurge. In more recent years this has led him to work that is in part based on collaboration. Franz West creates sculptures that assume a utilitarian function, such as chairs, armchairs, sofas and other furnishings, using crude materials and with the construction ability of a neo-primitive bricoleur. Thus the work radicalizes every "aesthetic of reception," in that the user becomes the active factor that attributes meaning to the work, that establishes it as such, simply by using it, imposing on it nothing other than his or her own being. In this case one might say that artist and observer together redefine the artwork, beginning from the realm of needs and of the most immediate everyday reality.

Many younger artists have been influenced by the work of Pistoletto and West in the sense that their

work moves in directions for which those two artists paved the way. Andrea Zittel, Jorge Pardo and others create devices that induce relationships with the public, who, through the work, are invited to weave their own practices of interpersonal communication, where the motivating factor is emotionality, grasped in its immediacy, still this side of the possibility of its becoming thought.