

The necessity of being elsewhere

An aesthetics between perdition and salvation

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The first part of this essay introduces the concept of the *wind image*, to be understood as that particular artistic representation that resists the violence and noise of the real, and shows the essential left behind by time. Such an image allows one to penetrate an intimate, existential place. The work of art is born out of a dormant potentiality, which palpitates in the life of the artist like preservation and duration, waiting to find a completed form. The second part of the essay shows how this particular existential disposition may find its fullest expression in the indirect self-portrait made by the artist, bringing about de-identification and, thus, an opening towards a universal meaning. Such an image generates an absolute identity between the artist, the work and the spectator, revealing a threefold representation that lives in its promise of redemption, its beauty residing in the self-portrait that life makes of itself.

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1. The wind image

may my heart always be open to little
birds who are the secrets of living
whatever they sing is better than to know
and if men should not hear them men are old

(Cummings, 1998)

Art is that which makes life worthier to be loved and more interesting than art. Without life, it would not exist and it would find no exhibition space. However, in order to be able to live through infinite practices, a profound intuitive faculty is called for, one capable of contemplating those moments in which the unexpected concentration of each feeling and each language is expressed. The artist is the one who makes of this intuition a science, a

knowledge that is life, a unique kind of fullness beyond which spreads out an existence in its incompleteness, in its possibility of being. Great poetry, as Agamben reminds us: «[D]oes not merely say what it says, but also the fact that it is saying it, the potentiality and impotentiality of saying it. Just like poetry is the suspension and exposition of language, painting is the dormancy and exposition of the gaze» (Agamben, 2019: 19). From this point of view, the work of art is technical imagination and quiescent potentiality that resides within the artist like a dormant breath, preservation and duration; like a thin membrane where expectations of writing are given.

On the last page of his *Diálogos de la Pintura* (Carducho, 1633/2018), Vicente Carducho appends an engraving that is as an emblem of painting: a paintbrush entwined by a laurel wreath lightly touches a blank canvas on which a sign appears, an almost imperceptible shadow. Around this image a mysterious Latin inscription can be seen: *potentia ad actum tamquam tabula rasa*, potentiality is to the act like a clean slate. It is desire that spreads out in the potentiality of expectation and its inactivity, exposing itself to life that embraces us. This means that each work has its beginning before the artist's gesture: in hesitation, in probable configurations of accident, in the accumulation of sensations, in incongruities, in vital aches and breaths. The artist is, thus, even before the work, already within the work, since he is inexorably and constantly inscribed in it. The challenge for him is how to emerge from within it, to elude the stereotype and the predetermined frame of his project, to open up the image to the rhythmical event of life. He is immersed in the project in order to disrupt it, shatter it and find a figure of life that no longer resembles the initial figuration, but lives on the boundary that is wonder.

The artist balances on this threshold and recognises in this action a modulated development both active and passive, alert and dormant. It is a continuous oscillation that never comes to rest. An act that produces an image emerging from the ineffability of the instant of its exposure to the world, of

which it is a profound reflection. He lives because he yields to existence, becoming dormant potentiality of the world. The artist lives expecting the world to penetrate him. In *Poetenleben* (1917), Robert Walser imagines he is a painter writing to a poet, reversing the roles between him and his brother:

I go outdoors, I satiate my sight with nature's divine countenance, I bring back with me some deep impression, an image or a weave I have retained, in order to carry out my idea in my quarters, so that my painting almost appears to be painting behind nature's back, rather than facing it. Nature, my brother, is great in such a mysterious and inexhaustible way, that when one comes to enjoy it, one already suffers for it; but a thought occurs to me that in this world perhaps there is no happiness without an admixture of pain. (Walser, 1918: 13)

This particular way of feeling with – and in – the world designates the work of art as an event that makes of an instant an infinite return; it carries with it the indubitability of the temporally extended being in life. The artist's vision is a prolonged being-born. As Enzo Paci remarks, it is a perception of an extended time, an island, albeit a small one, never a single point. The work of art shows that freedom is strictly bound up with what is already past, with an origin. The present of the event of art traverses a temporality fixed and constituted with each renewed present. Paci says: «The more the past emerges from the just-past of retention to become the already-has-been present, the freer I am for the future: in this process, the protention, the simple expectation, passive expectation, can become free activity for the future» (Paci, 1961: 166).

Art liberates life because it liberates the instant and makes it last. If this liberation can be apprehended, it is because there exists a special time that removes us from loss and oblivion. A potentiality which, in as much as it is a happening, creates a space in which an instant, while remaining such, yet extends its permanence and makes possible the renewal and repetition of what was essential. The artist attains his own truth only provided he finds himself when his likeness is lost in his work, he feels the world unfolding and transforming within him. In a letter to his brother Theo from September 3rd

1882, Van Gogh wrote: «Herewith also a scratch from the dunes. Standing there were small bushes whose leaves are white on one side and dark green on the other, and which constantly move and sparkle. Behind them dark wood» (Van Gogh, 1882).

This appears to be a remark of little interest, a seeming explanation. Nevertheless, even in these few lines, one observes that for Van Gogh art is never mere description; rather, it blooms into a powerful stenography of a sensation capable of altering the reality. The painted horizon transforms and sharpens the senses. A colour, a perfume, a weight, a gesture become determined in a *pathic* moment of emotion, transcending all structures of representation. This becomes possible when a visual sensation acts upon a vital potentiality to become rhythm, a non-cerebral measure. Every powerful representation is radically isolated; by virtue of rhythm, it shatters the potential narration and prevents the image from becoming illustration.

This is a “logic of the senses”, as Cézanne said, which is neither rational nor cerebral. What is ultimate is thus the relation between sensation and rhythm, which places in each sensation the levels and domains through which it passes. This rhythm runs through a painting just as it runs through a piece of music. It is diastole-systole: the world that seizes me by Painting and Sensation closing in around me, the self that opens to the world and opens the world itself. (Deleuze, 1981: 42-43)

Such a sensation is a coagulum that endures, it is an intuition that cannot help but be activated. Seen in this light, the artist does not seek beauty or truth, but begins to embody it and redistribute it through his gesture. He lives for the work, by virtue of the necessity that pushes him towards the event of art as if each single atom in his body were sucked in by a kind of vortex or inexorable gravity. Perhaps it is in this sense that we should take the meaning of a phrase by Alighiero Boetti variously threaded by the *Afghan People* in Peshawar in some of his tapestries from the eighties: “Hungry for wind”. The embroidery is the breath of the artist, it is the current of air that passes through and transfigures the image, wafts it into time. In Latin

literature, in the Book IV of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, the mouth of inquisitive Lucius is described as *fauces diutina fame saucias et araneantes*, «jaws which ached with long famine and seemed to be full of cobwebs» (Apuleius, 1922: 177). If the fabric of a cobweb suggests forced deprivation of knowledge, the hunger is hunger for wind, the infinite aspiration which seeks to capture forms and their vital energy. Boetti put it thus in a 1988 interview with Sandro Lombardi:

I want to talk to you about wind. The force that stirs and transports, that makes all things lighter, even heavy ones. The wind is a moment of grace. Forms created by wind are in any event forms of energy. Moreover, the wind makes everything temporary and gives us the dimension of time, for it produces in those forms the succession of instants one after another... A blast of wind blasts away the past, the traces of the past. The wind transforms shapes continually, you can see it with snow, with dust, with sand. It is a live force, like that of sunrays, but also a light one. Its force can be extremely violent, yet it remains an image of lightness, intellectual as well, light words, aerated... (Sauzeau Boetti, 2001: 197)



Figure 1: Alighiero Boetti, *Avere fame di vento*, 1988, courtesy of

Thus, we could call *the wind image* that particular artistic representation that resists all violence, or noise, of the real and shows us the essential legacy of time. An image that pierces, stings, and is embodied in life through an infinite oscillatory movement. An open form that allows us to penetrate that

which was debarred to the senses, an opening that shows an unavowable, intimate space, rooted in matter, which models and insufflates the form. A gust both light and forceful that goes beyond the artist but which the artist has drawn into his breath.

In a 1971 interview with Marguerite Duras, Francis Bacon says of Goya: «He conjoined his forms with air. It seems that his paintings are made with the matter of air» (Duras, 1971: 16-17). That he painted with air does not appear paradoxical when one observes the Spanish painter's *Selfportrait* (1783). In many points on the canvas Goya leaves space for emptiness, he scratches the painting, with rapid brushstrokes he suggests a look, an outline, a gesture, a shaft of light. It is the same technical imagination becoming "sensation" which one finds in Vincent Van Gogh, Michelangelo, Marlene Dumas, Gerhard Richter. While Rembrandt, Titian and Velázquez all used their fingers to paint, in this painting Goya is projecting his entire body. The image becomes a light exoskeleton, the shadow of a delicately blown dark crystal. That which is revealed crumbles and turns into wind, a metaphor for eternity, prey to infinite incarnation. The skin of the painting is an autograph seen in transparency, for in it, dormant, resides life potential.

2. Self-portrait on all fours

Obviously, the visual concerns the optic nerve,
but is not for all that an image.
The condition sine qua non for there to be an image is,
I think, alterity.

Serge Daney, *Ciné-Journal*

The history of the portrait and self-portrait is known, for the most part, as the history of physiognomic likeness. Nevertheless, in art history there are some instances of self-portrait in which the image of the artist corresponds radically to his existence in an indirect, covert, disguised way. These suggest

a way of looking at the image through an opening in the flesh. Apprehending the truth of a portrait, or a self-portrait, does not mean grasping the likeness, but rather the simultaneity of possible faces, the uneasy potentiality which they have in common. The artist gives himself with his body, says Valéry, and it is in giving his body to the world that the artist transmutes the world into a work of art.

When in his mid-sixties Michelangelo worked on the scaffoldings of the Sistine Chapel, he decided to lend his own visage to the flayed, shrivelled skin of Saint Bartholomew Martyr in *The Last Judgement* (1536-41). The flaccid integument should belong to the martyr, but there is a difference between the features of the saint and those represented on his flayed skin. Indeed, ever since Francesco de la Cava's interpretation, it has been widely accepted that it is an anamorphic self-portrait of the artist (La Cava, 1925)¹. Raising the knife, Saint Bartholomew is turning towards Christ as if to intercede in Michelangelo's favour, pleading for mercy as the flayed skin hangs dangerously close to the region of the damned. In the same years the artist's poetry, too, teems with metaphors having as subject a change of skin. Like a sculptor who removes the rough outer skin from a block of marble in order to reveal the hidden figures therein contained, «so my soul's better traits / quiver beneath the excess / of the burdensome cadaver's gloomy weight / like a rough shaggy husk around it grown» («tal alcun opre buone / per l'alma che pur trema, / cela il superchio della propria carne / co' l'inculta sua cruda e dura scorza»). (Buonarroti, 1967: 152, 2000: 96).

¹ On a 1564 print of *The Last Judgment*, Michelangelo's name appears inscribed next to the flayed man's face.

Among Francis Bacon's numerous self-portraits, there is one painting of great evocative power in which he does not appear directly as a subject. The painting in question is the *Paralytic Child Walking on All Fours (after Muybridge)* from 1961, in which the artist shows a naked creature advancing in a desolate, bleak space. Next to him is a portion of an empty canvas stretcher.



Figure 2: Francis Bacon, *Paralytic Child Walking on All Fours (after Muybridge)*, 1961.

The space in which the creature seems to move is traversed by a blurred line dividing the green floor from a dark, apparently infinite, background. Only the stretcher appears illuminated in this deep darkness, while one side of the creature's face, with its disoriented eye, pierces the visual field to look

back at us keenly. The paralytic child's left arm and hand remind us of a human being, the right limb seems to belong to an animal. It is an anti-illustrative image of the painter, who, paralysed vis-à-vis a representation of himself, cannot help but look at it and experience it through the difference in potential between the model and his transfiguration. This interpretation is corroborated by another work of similar composition and colouring, in which the artist actually inserted the portrait of a painter (*Study for Portrait of Lucian Freud*, 1964).

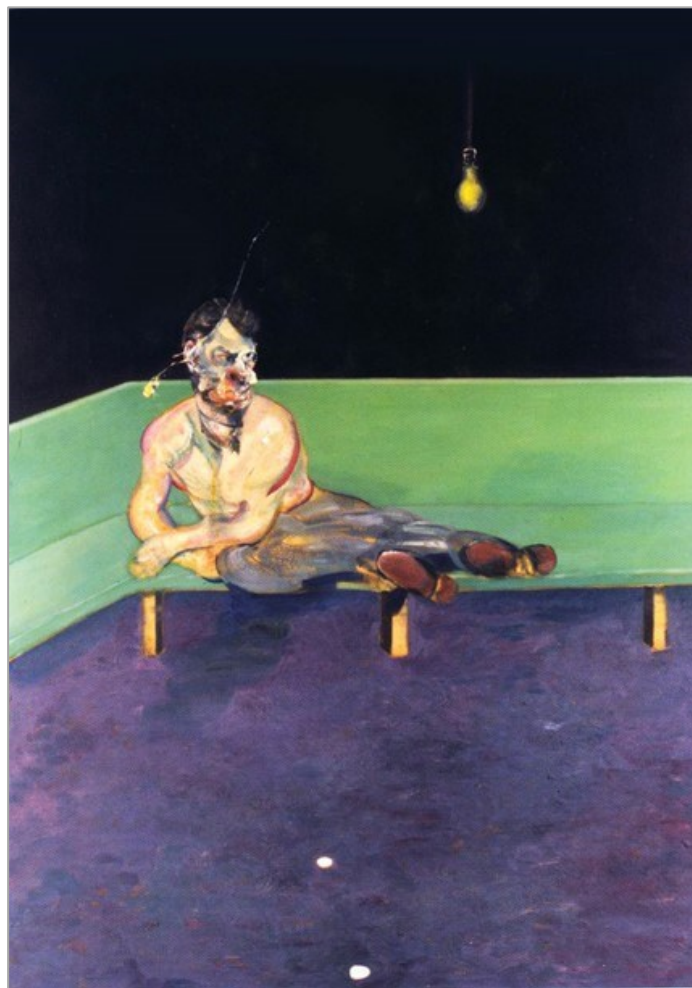


Figure 3: Francis Bacon, *Study for Portrait of Lucian Freud*, 1964

A figure with a distorted face reclines on a green sofa in the corner of a dark, bare room, where a lighted bulb hangs from the ceiling. In this instance,

too, there is no description or narration. Bacon's physiodynamic portraits appear to be blown into shape by a wind that liberates an instinctive, dramatic gestuality. It is a reality unknown to the eye, and yet accessible to pure sensibility. The pulsion reappears in all its concentration. These images restore us, thus, to life as if, in order to be able to live, we had an irremediable need to become metaphor, form. My face or my portrait is my outside: «a point of indifference with respect to all of my properties, with respect to what is properly one's own and to what is common, to what is internal and what is external. [...] Be only your face. Go to the threshold. Do not remain subjects of your properties or faculties, do not stay beneath them: rather, go with them, in them, beyond them» (Agamben, 1996: 98-99).

Art is this threshold of de-identification of all the conventionally circumscribed or socially identifiable modes and qualities. Only where there is an outside, an image that shows our being other, truth can flourish. To carry to appearance the energy of appearance is one of the political tasks of art. To quote again Francis Bacon in an interview with David Sylvester, talking about his Crucifixes: "You could say that one is very close to a self-portrait. [...] Well, of course, we are meat, we are potential carcasses. If I go into a butcher's shop I always think it's surprising that I wasn't there instead of the animal" (Sylvester, 1987: 48-49). One is reminded of another indirect self-portrait by the author Antonio Moresco, who tells of an old man with masturbatory paresis:

People flee when they see me arrive ever since I came down with this paresis. Some get scared, some laugh when I show myself in the street in my tattered jacket, the manuscript crammed into the gaping pocket. The legs slightly bowed, the spine and the head bent downwards. You could hardly call it a walk, it's almost a race, the way I advance, rhythmically moving my right hand, ringwise, in front of the yellowed buttons of my breeches. (Moresco, 2009: 331)

The rhythm of the cyclic gesture is embodied in a language broken down and ripped apart by the writer. If life requires a life form, art induces life to insist more vigorously on the metaphor of itself. Just like the candle on the

chair painted by Van Gogh prefigures the fire and explosion suggested by Artaud, so every human being is bewitched and finally suicided by society. Bacon, Michelangelo and Moresco through painting, sculpture and writing, renounced to tell stories in order to show us «the pure enigma of a tortured flower» (Artaud, 1965: 156). If the essence of art is a fleeting presence, it is pure existence, because it contains an aesthetics which is a metamorphosis of perdition and salvation. The place of art is on the boundary of every life writing. Through the *graphía* of every form the animal existence potential shows itself in its radical immanence. «We are the truth; and precisely because of this it is impossible for us to know it. We come to know it when it becomes something else, something other than ourselves. Knowledge, expression, memory itself, create the anteriority of the truth and of its actuality. If truth is an Eden, we can only know it when we are expelled and exiled from it» (Emo, 1998: 116).

In this banishment we cannot know the truth, we can only safeguard it. To rationalise and know the truth means, to a certain extent, to destroy it, whereas the artwork embodies it in its event, preserves it and tends to it. The artist is a paralytic gardener who never ceases actualising himself through this event in order to make it bud forth. His every trace falls back into a gesture like an act of love towards the world. It is the delicacy of poetic phenomenology manifest in Francis Ponge's verse, in which *De varietate rerum* is rewritten anew. A cigarette, an orange, a piece of bread or a mollusc become transfigured in their life potential, while man hurtles to the edge of big things through small ones, to restore to the faltering reason the force of intuition.

The artist is not merely a spectator, however if he wishes truly to see, he will strive to comprehend the mute order of reality. With each instant of invention he presumes to measure himself against enormous historical tradition to which he belongs. He is, thus, bound to history whilst being simultaneously exiled from it. The moment an artwork emerges, even though

it belongs to its time, it is already expelled from it, because it is anachronistic. The work of art has a penchant for anachronism, as Derrida reminds us, it must press forward in the direction of *contretemps*.

There is a discrepancy where such an anachronism finds its own space, the instant in which the veil on the disclosure of the event, its essentiality, is lifted. It is the instant of the desire that leaves one breathless, that reveals the difference between an everyday vision and an image transformed through art. The artist has invented something when, through his work, he reveals his own law and prompts the spectator to come up with a new discourse in order to be able to explain it; through new parameters, new rules intuited by that work. In *The Book of Tea*, Okakura Kakuzō says: «Our mind is the canvas on which the artists lay their colour; their pigments are our emotions; their chiaroscuro the light of joy, the shadow of sadness. The masterpiece is of ourselves, as we are of the masterpiece» (Okakura, 1955).

In this absolute identity between the artist, the masterpiece and the observer, a triple self-portrait is revealed, one which lives in darkness and in its promise of redemption. Destroying art and the beauty of art means losing not only the art, but the life which breathes inside it, the self-portrait made by life itself. Consequently, there appears an attempt to grasp the memory in order to liberate it, seeking a fresh look at reality in order to be able to transcend it. «The utopia in great art is never the simple negation of the reality principle but its transcending preservation (*Aufhebung*) in which past and present cast their shadow on fulfillment. The authentic utopia is grounded in recollection» (Marcuse, 1978: 73). A recollection that, as in Plato, spurs on the human being to conquer the suffering in the permanence of joy. If memory becomes the driving force in the struggle for the transformation of the world, it is possible to start a new revolution through the images that make visible and perceptible that which is no more, or that which up to now has not been said or heard.

The artistic image thus becomes that precipitated and unresolved vision of the masterpiece, which is always to some extent an image of the human. Clutching at life, it plunges into the open space of our gaze. The eye opens and shows its double bottom, the form and the formlessness of a gesture that has shattered all figures.

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