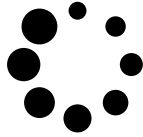


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by Giorgio Zanchetti
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“Looking Glass:” Reflections on Mirrors and Transparency as Devices for Representation in Visual Arts



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Abstract

Today the locution “looking glass” survives almost exclusively thanks to the extraordinary success of Lewis Carroll’s novel *Through the Looking-Glass*. This expression underlines the ambiguity between the glass surface intended as a device through which we can see the world or as an actual object to be “looked at.” Apparently, the early Renaissance perspective window, thanks to the mildness of the Mediterranean climate, did not need any panes. And certainly, even when glass panes are there, they are usually not reproduced in painting. The glass main virtue is its transparency, which makes it almost invisible. Something similar happens with other “glasses” specifically made to look through them: the drinking glass and the lens. Glass panes appear to sight only when different practical needs come into play, as in perspective drawing machines, or when its transparency is contradicted by a precise action that compromises or denies it: when panes are broken, as in this enigmatic portrait of early XIX c., or voluntarily covered, like for a blackout, as in Duchamp’s *Fresh Widow*.

Looking through the glass, looking at the image reflected in the mirror and, finally, looking at the glass itself, as a device for presenting and representing spaces, are three recurring attitudes in the work of Italian artists of the late 20th century, like Lucio Fontana and Luciano Fabro.

Keywords [Looking glass](#) [Transparency](#) [Lucio Fontana](#)
[Luciano Fabro](#)

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The locution “looking glass” – commonly with a hyphen – as a synonym of “mirror” survives nowadays almost exclusively as an explicit reference to the title of Lewis Carroll’s second novel, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871), and thanks to the extraordinary popularity of that book.

This expression, with its own ambiguity, draws our attention to the fact that the framed and mirrored glass surface is both an object to be “looked at” itself, and an impressive device through which everyone can actually look at themselves as part of reality: the simplest and most sophisticated of all optical instruments through which and into which we can see and contemplate the world with our own eyes.

The Italian noun “*specchio*” and the German “*Spiegel*,” as well as the French “*miroir*” from which the English word “mirror” was borrowed, come from different Latin expressions which refer to the semantic field of optical vision (“*specio*” and “*miror*” or “*miro*”). And this essential status of mirror as the first optical device – since it is also available in nature, in the reflecting properties of still waters and of some minerals – makes it perfectly fit as the medium through which self-consciousness and the capacity of self-representation in art find their common, albeit mythical, origin. This status is implicitly pointed out by the common reference to the myth of Narcissus in connection to the inception of painting or by the well-known definition of photography – given in 1859 by Oliver Wendell Holmes – as “*the mirror with a memory*,”¹ an almost magical optical instrument literally capable to chemically freeze the natural

1 “If a man had handed a metallic speculum to Democritus of Abdera, and told him to look at his face in it (...) promising that one of the films his face was shedding should stick there, so that neither he, nor it, nor anybody should forget what manner of man he was, the Laughing Philosopher would probably have vindicated his claim to his title by an explosion that would have astonished the speaker. This is just what the Daguerreotype has done. It has fixed the most fleeting of our illusions, that which the apostle and the philosopher and the poet have alike used as the type of instability and unreality. The photograph has completed the triumph, by- making a sheet of paper reflect images like a mirror and hold them as a picture.” O.W. Holmes, “The Stereoscope and Stereograph,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 3, no. 20 (1859): 738-749, 738-739.

moving image, fixing it in a still and different form as soon as it comes in touch with the silver surface.

Italian conceptual artist Anna Valeria Borsari precisely postulates this characteristic of the act of self-contemplation in the mirror in her photographic works series *Narciso* (Fig. 1) and *La stanza di Narciso* (*Narcissus* and *Narcissus' Room*, both from 1977), the first of which depicts a young male model getting closer and closer to a big mirror and finally disappearing into it, while the second one shows his empty room from different points of view: “Towards symmetry he proceeds, the man in front of the mirror, but he probably reaches it only when he manages to merge with the image he is looking at, like Narcissus does when he falls into the water.”²



Fig. 1. A.V. Borsari, *Narciso / Narcissus*, 1977, 3 photographic prints, courtesy of the Artist. © Anna Valeria Borsari.

The immateriality of the metamorphosis of Narcissus into his double – the virtual image reflected by the mirror – is an open metaphor of the desperate difficulty in reaching a true consciousness of self through this simple act of contemplation and “reflection.” Trying to get in touch with his own double, the man in front of the mirror is finally going to lose himself in it. His own image is intangible and

² A.V. Borsari, “Premessa,” in “Simmetria-asimmetria,” *Ipotesi d’artista*, no. 1 (1988); republished in *Anna Valeria Borsari: Opere* (Milan, Electa, 1996, exhibition catalogue): 97.

consequently somehow imperceptible, since Borsari discovered, while staging these works, that she chose as a set, between several available real rooms, the bedroom of a blind man. The real owner of that particular mirror could get as close as possible to it, or even touch it, without actually perceiving the duplication of self in his own reflected image.

As Borsari wrote in the typewritten statement which is part of *La stanza di Narciso*:

The Sanskrit word “spagh” (“to divide”), the Greek “σπέος” (“cave”) and “σχοπέω” (“to examine”), the Latin “specus” (“cave”) and “specio” (“to see”) share common linguistic roots. (...) Among the many Latin derivatives from the verb “specio” (“to see, to discern, to observe”) there should also be “speculum” (“mirror, image, copy”), from which we derive the Italian “specchio” (“mirror,” but also “panel framed in the doors and windows,” and by extension in sporting language, “portion of the playing field in front of the goal line”) as well as the common name of the medical tool used to dilate the orifices in order to inspect anatomical cavities, and also, indirectly, the verb “to speculate” (to investigate or reflect upon mentally, to contemplate with close attention, to theorize upon, etc.).

But since the Italian language mostly derives from vulgar Latin, where the use of diminutives was frequent, (...) we could imagine that “speculum” and therefore “specchio” should also be perceived as derivatives from “specus.” This would explain the confluence of meanings such as “to see” with others such as “cavity,” “hole,” etc. in certain uses of the mirror and of the speculum... And for Narcissus in any case the mirror he looks at exactly corresponds to the hole in which he disappears.

But we should not forget that mirrors are wonderful objects for several reasons. The glass panes from which they are made are even, in their own essence, actual objects, something to be “looked at.” For their capability to reflect, to re-present and multiply the real in their virtual internal space, they share the status of “marvellous” with different Wunderkammer phenomena, items and artifacts – literally something “spectacular” or “admirable,” i.e. an object worth

of contemplation, – like rare and wonderful crystals or gems, like the beryl, *beryllium*, from which comes the German word “*Brille*” for eyeglasses, or “spectacle(s)” (a term once used to design every optical device, including windows or mirrors).

Following a century old tradition in architecture and interior decoration, the 63 silvered glass panes which formed the *Looking Glass Curtain* for the Royal Coburg Theatre in London (Fig. 2) are one of the most interesting occurrences of this “spectacularization” of reality through the mirrors in early 19th century. It was displayed for the first time on December 26, 1821 in front of the public of the theatre, reflecting their own images as if they were on the stage, inside the theatre show.³

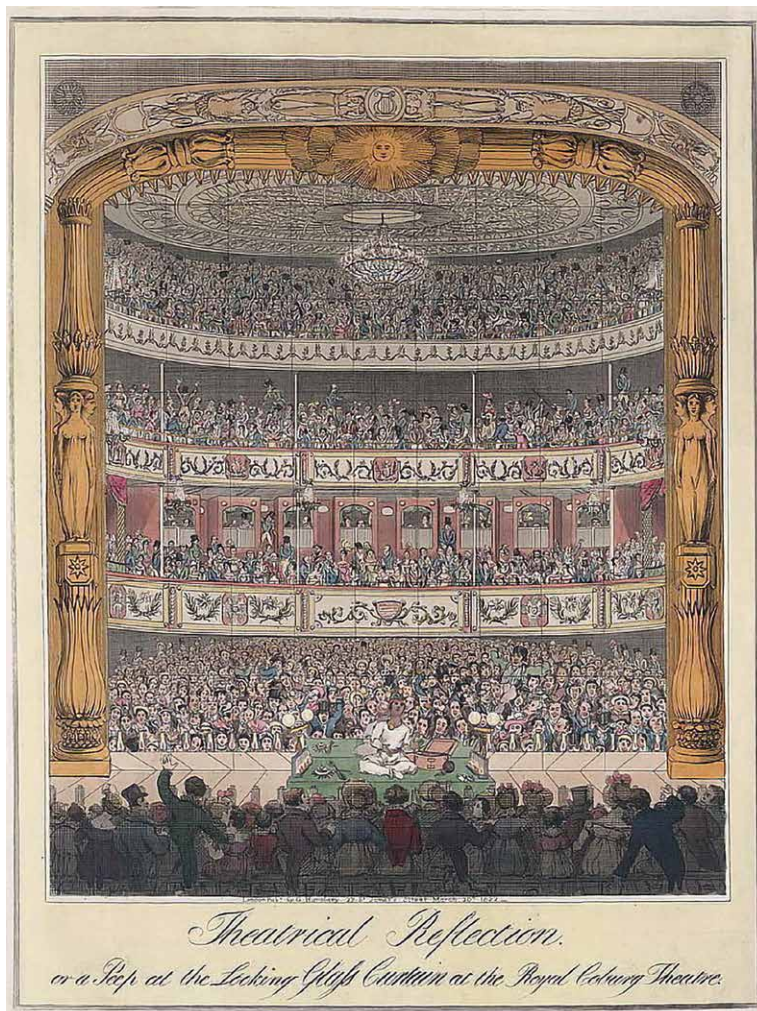


Fig. 2. Theatrical Reflection or a Peep at the Looking Glass Curtain at the Royal Coburg Theatre, published by G. Humphrey, London, 1822.

3 M. Teodorski, *Nineteenth-Century Mirrors: Textuality and Transcendence* (Belgrade: Institute for Literature and Art, 2021): 22-25, see Fig. 1. See also M. Teodorski, “Reflection as Commodity: A Short Ethno(historio)graphy of Victorian Mirrors,” *Гласник Етнографског института САНУ / Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnography SASA* 16, no. 1 (2016): 121-132, 123-124.

Assumed that the by now outdated locution “looking-glass” keeps together a complicated mechanism of meaning, trying to capture the double nature of the mirror as a device through which and at which to look, we can try to understand the reflective and spectacular attitude of that diminished domestic Narcissus called Alice. She breaks through the looking-glass in order to accomplish her very personal research project, only to end up discovering that the world on the other side of the mirror is a strict analogous of everyday reality, simply “specularly” inverted, or even overturned in an illogical, anarchic and carnivalesque way. The very act of her trespassing between the real and the other world, her moving through the mirror like through a threshold or a borderline, was captured by John Tenniel in two distinct illustrations for the first edition of the novel by Lewis Carroll, in 1871 (Fig. 3).⁴ These engravings were published on the front and the back side of the same page of the book. And this choice is perfectly correct with respect to the semantic and conceptual awareness of the author, since they skilfully represent the complementing opposite realities connected by the mirror surface as if they were photographic shots of the same subject taken from two opposite points of view.

⁴ L. Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (London: Macmillan, 1871): 11-12.



there. And certainly the glass *was* beginning to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist.

In another moment Alice was through the



glass, and had jumped lightly down into the Looking-glass room. The very first thing she did was to look whether there was a fire in the

Fig. 3. J. Tenniel, *The Glass Was Beginning to Melt Away, Just Like a Bright Silvery Mist*, woodcut illustrations for: L. Carroll (pseud. C.L. Dodgson), *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (London: Macmillan, 1871): 11-12.

But when they are placed side by side, Tenniel's illustrations build together a traditional motif of framing, with a couple of symmetrical figures – descended from the classical architectural ornaments of caryatids and telamons, through the Renaissance and Baroque, to find new applications in the decoration of eighteenth-century mirrors and furniture, and later in the new properly industrial arts – which strictly recalls, as Matko Teodorski noticed,⁵ the sumptuous bronze figured frame of the *Grand Boudoir-Glass* by William Potts of Birmingham, celebrated as one of the most striking objects on display at the Crystal Palace during the

5 M. Teodorski, *Nineteenth-Century Mirrors*: 88-92, Figg. 2-4, 180-182, 207-210, Figg. 9-10.

Great London Exhibition, in 1851. Who knows if Lewis Carroll and Tenniel thought to Potts' *Grand Boudoir-Glass* for the Duchess of Sutherland, when they were devising the image of Alice crossing the mirror threshold? Probably the Swiss sculptor Vincenzo Vela did, when he gave form to a marble mantelpiece for his own house in Ligornetto (Tessin), bringing the same composition with two female nudes surrounding the "looking-glass" and reflecting themselves in it, to a totally different degree of artistic value (Fig. 4):⁶ in this work, from 1865-66, Vela enhances the composition of multiplied idealistic nude – that, coming from the neo-classical groups of Canova and Thorvaldsen, through the practice of copies in 19th century art Academies would have reached Rodin and Seurat and Maillol –, transforming the reduplication of the image in a sort of visual vertigo.

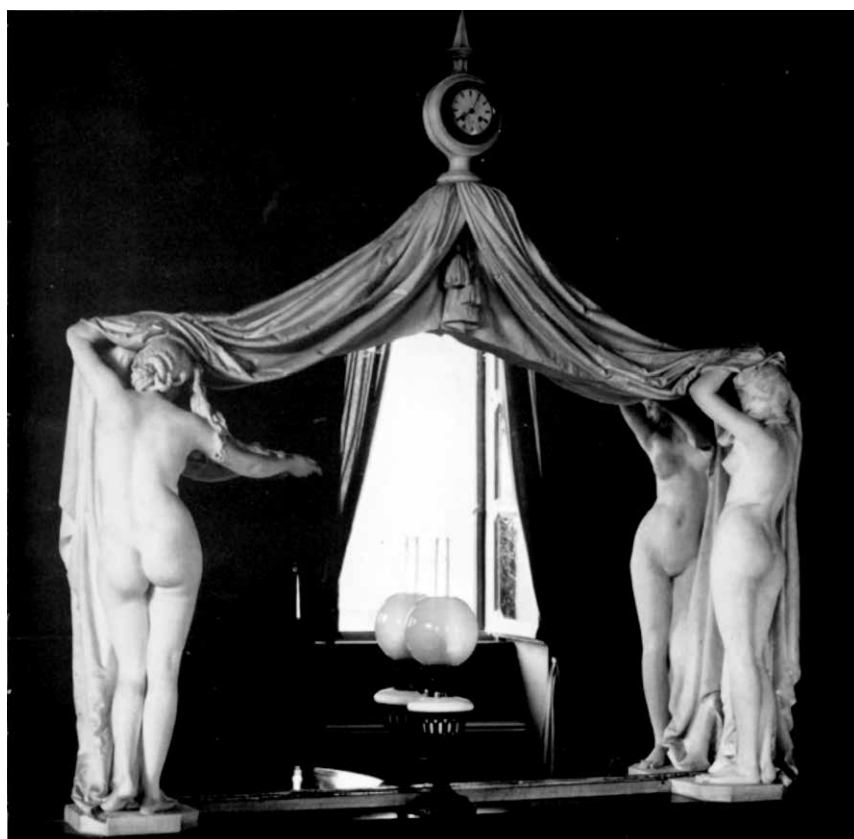


Fig. 4. V. Vela, *Mantelpiece with Mirror and Clock*, 1865-1866, marble and mirror, Ligornetto, Museo Vincenzo Vela.

6 G. Zanchetti, in G.A. Mina ed., *Museo Vela: The Collections. Sculpture, Painting, Drawings and Prints, Photography* (Lugano: Cornèr Bank): 52-53, 86, Fig. I.29, 293.

Falling down into the mirror view, as Alice once did into the rabbit-hole (literally a “*specus*,” a door leading to a subterranean realm), the beholder reduplicates, becoming part of the virtual image inside the frame. The essential paradox of this reduplication of the viewer consists in the simple fact that the images of painting – virtual representations of reality made by human hand – are not capable to show the other side of their subjects, but can only repeat the same figure seen from the same point of view, like in the well-known painting by René Magritte, *La reproduction interdite (Not to be reproduced)*, 1937-39, Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen) where the figure of a man seen from the back – clearly a substitute for both the author and the spectator – is tautologically repeated as it is in the mantelpiece mirror in front of him, without revealing his hidden side and his face as Victorian and naturalistic sculptures from 19th century did. Confronting himself with the same paradox, through photographic language, Ugo Mulas wrote about the mirror-works by Michelangelo Pistoletto:

When he paints a nude on a mirror surface, and this nude is seen from the back, he forces the viewer to enter inside the painting, which means to get completely involved, because the watcher will see himself as a part of the picture, standing at the opposite side of the painted figure he is watching; he will see himself in front of the nude, standing on the other side of the subject that for the painter remains hidden. Thus, the spectator reduplicates, he is inside and outside of the picture, he is here and there at the same time, and here he accepts the rules set by the painter, who presented the nude seen from his back, while there he stands where no one is supposed to be according to the inner coherence of the pictorial representation. In the photo I shoot you can see me photographing from the front a nude that is shown only from its back.⁷

7 U. Mulas, *La fotografia*, ed. P. Fossati (Turin: Einaudi, 1973): 70-71.

Michelangelo Pistoletto himself, in his installation and performance *Twentytwo less Two*, presented at the Venice Biennale in 2009, actually tried to break through his own looking-glass trap, carrying on a tradition of broken mirrors which, in the history of painting – instead of bringing seven years of bad luck, like it is often said –, represent the end of the beauty associated with youth and also the end of art as *mimesis*, of visual representation itself, like in *Le miroir brisé (The Broken Mirror)*, c. 1763, London, The Wallace Collection) by Jean-Baptiste Greuze, in the self-portrait by the American painter Ron Blumberg *The Broken Mirror*, from 1936,⁸ or even in *La clef des champs* (Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza) painted the same year by Magritte. Pistoletto's reflection on photography and on visual reproduction is not developed in merely conceptual and analytical terms; on the contrary, it opens immediately also to a direct aesthetic experience, with as much brutality and intrusiveness in his mirror-paintings as in his destructive performance of 2009. In *Twentytwo less Two* the artist, again an incarnation of Narcissus, destroys several big, framed mirrors, which stand at the same time as the “subjectile” of his most characteristic works and, in a general sense, of any possible image taken or imitated from nature. By doing so, Pistoletto questions the legitimacy of visual arts as separated from reality and also his own role as a consecrated master. We could be tempted to read this gesture as a renunciation of self-identity – represented by that founding moment of the consciousness of the Ego, in the early childhood, which Lacan called the “*stade du miroir*”⁹ – or as a final step outside any possibility of representation in art. But, on the contrary, his performance rather than completely destroying the very support of vision, actually multiplies the virtual images, simply because – unlike the figures physically reproduced through drawing, painting or photography –, the image of the real world reflected in the

8 See the painting on sale on the website of the Trigg Ison Fine Art Gallery (West Hollywood, CA): <https://www.triggison.com/product-page/my-broken-mirror>, accessed February 5, 2023.

9 J. Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” (1949), in *Writings*, trans. by B. Fink (New York-London: W.W. Norton, 2006).

mirror endlessly survives in its virtual integrity within each of the fragments of the broken glass surface.

Coming back to the locution we started from, what happens if we stop looking – or moving or breaking – through the glass, and try to directly look it? And which are the main implications of this different attitude in rendering and perceiving the image of the most transparent of solids in the visual arts?

Apparently, the early Renaissance perspective window, maybe thanks to the mildness of the Mediterranean climate, did not need any panes. And certainly, even when glass panes are there, they are usually not reproduced in painting, since one of glass's main virtues is its transparency, thanks to which we can see as clearly as possible the world outside. But this same transparency makes glass almost invisible itself, and therefore unreproducible – or at least barely reproducible – in painting. And this happens with all sorts of “glasses” specifically made to look through them, as the drinking glass and the lens.

Window's glass panes appear to sight only when the lead came framework, or the colour or opacity of stained glass make them visible by their interference. But usually in painting this kind of window's panes are not intended as openings towards further spaces or landscapes which lay beyond them. They rather are visual motives themselves, filtering, refracting, or reflecting the light, hence acting like mirrors, as in the recently restored *Girl Reading a Letter* by Jan Vermeer (1657, Dresden, Gemäldegalerie); or mere sources – often displaced to one side or in the corners of the composition – through which the light enters the virtual pictorial space in order to make brighter the main subject of the picture. Sometimes they are represented in etchings or in drawings when different practical needs come into play, as in didactic reproductions of perspective drawing machines,¹⁰ which obviously are, first of all, tools

10 Well known are the woodcuts illustrating the treatise by A. Dürer, *Underweysung der messung, mit dem zirckel und richtscheyt* (Nuremberg: Hieronymus Andreae [Hieronymus Formschneider], 1525).

for correctly “seeing” – virtually overlapping the perspective frame to the reality which surround us, also in combination with mirrors and lenses, like in the application of *camera obscura* to reproduction drawing –, in which the glass panel fulfils the precise function to provide a stiff but transparent support for the act of drawing (Fig. 5).

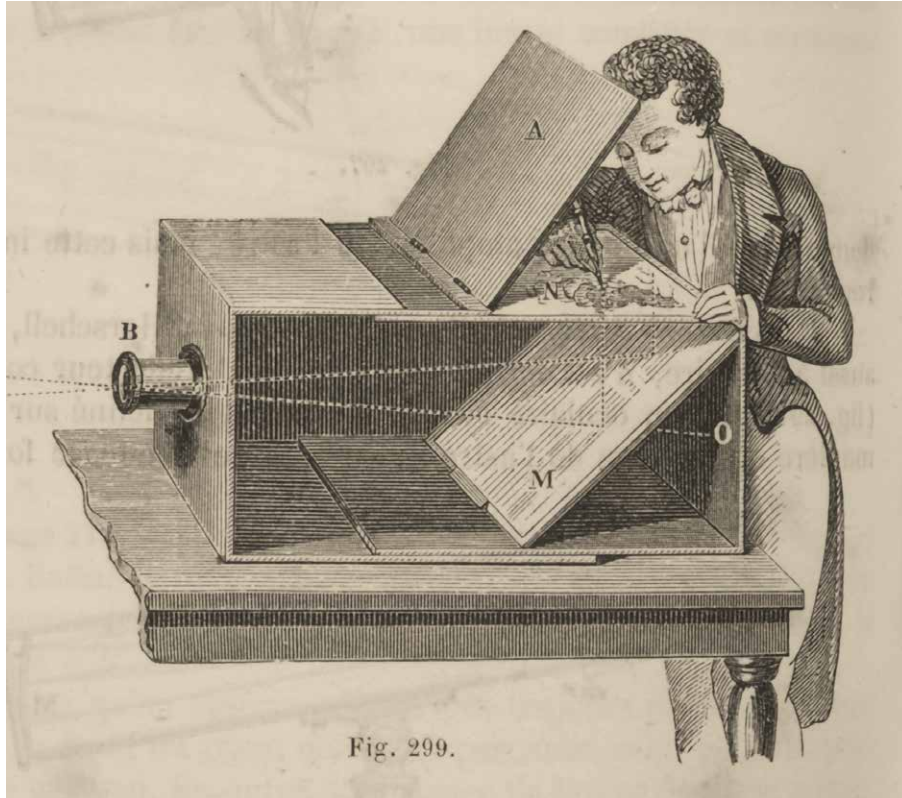


Fig. 5. *Chambre obscure* from A. Ganot, *Traité élémentaire de physique expérimentale et appliquée...* (Paris: Chez l’Auteur, 1855): 434.

Some other times, glass panes can be seen in paintings when their inherent quality as a device through which we may look, the full transparency, is at least partially contradicted – exactly as it happens for lenses or glasses¹¹ – by an irregularity, an aberration, or even an irrecoverable discontinuity of their material unity: i.e., when the glass is broken, as in the enigmatic *Portrait of Marie Joséphine Charlotte du Val d’Ognes*, painted in 1801 by the Parisian artist Marie Denise Villers (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fig. 6), or in the double naked portrait of *The Marriage. After the Arnolfini Portrait by Jan van Eyck* (1985)

¹¹ See the virtuosic *Still life with broken glass* painted as a variation on the genre of the Vanitas by Willem Claesz Heda in 1642 (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum).

by the Polish painter Tadeusz Boruta, which focuses on the definitive rupture of the traditional perspective window as tools for viewing and representing the world, in a key of conceptual realism.



Fig. 6. M.D. Villers, *Portrait of Marie Joséphine Charlotte du Val d'Ognes*, 1801, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Mr. and Mrs. Isaac D. Fletcher Collection, Bequest of Isaac D. Fletcher, 1917 (detail).

It is not by mere coincidence that Ugo Mulas decided to open and close his *Verifiche* (*Verifications*) series (1970-72), with two images centred on the unrepresentability of glass in photographs, and dedicated respectively to the founding father of this technique, Nicéphore Niépce, and to Marcel Duchamp, the artist who more than any other in the 20th century had pushed the presence of glass towards the threshold of perception, in works such as *The Large Glass* (*La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* / *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*,

1915-23, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art)¹², *A regarder (l'autre côté du verre) d'un oeil, de près, pendant presque une heure (To Be Looked at [from the Other Side of the Glass] with One Eye, Close to, for Almost an Hour*, 1918, New York, MoMA) and *Fresh Widow* (1920, New York, MoMA).¹³ In his *Omaggio a Niépce. Verifica 1 (Tribute to Niépce. Verification no. 1*, 1970)¹⁴ Mulas works on the very presence of the glass plate commonly used by photographers to keep the film strips in place on the photo paper, when they print proofs in the dark room. The perfectly transparent plate used for that specific purpose can be perceived in the photograph only by the thin white trace left by the refraction of its edges, which usually should lay out of the sheet of sensitive paper. And here the photographer probably recalls the somehow similar seminal work *Tutto trasparente (All Transparent*, 1965, Fig. 7) by Luciano Fabro¹⁵, which simply consists of a large rectangular glass pane displayed on a metal easel, as “if we are looking to the act of thinking itself,” focusing “on the surface of the glass, blurring and effacing the objects and the space which are visible behind it” and finally letting our eyes run “along the edges of the pane, like along a racetrack.”¹⁶

12 See the work's entry and photo on Philadelphia Museum website <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/54149>, accessed February 5, 2023.

13 See <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81028> and <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78993>, accessed February 5, 2023.

14 U. Mulas, *Omaggio a Niépce. Verifica 1 (Tribute to Niépce. Verification no. 1)*, 1970 in *La fotografia: 7-9*, 149. See <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/ressources/oeuvre/cejBxxd>, accessed February 5, 2023.

15 About this work and its implications see G. Zanchetti, “Summer Solstice AD MCMLXIII: Luciano Fabro's Early Works,” in S. Hecker, M.R Sullivan, eds., *Postwar Italian Art History Today: Untying 'the Knot'*, proceedings of the symposium, New York, Cima, 2015 (New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018): 261-275, 269-273, Fig. 14.3.

16 L. Fabro, *Vademecum*, (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 1981); reprinted in *Luciano Fabro: Didactica Magna Minima Moralia*, ed. S. Fabro (Milan: Electa, 2007, exhibition catalogue): 154.

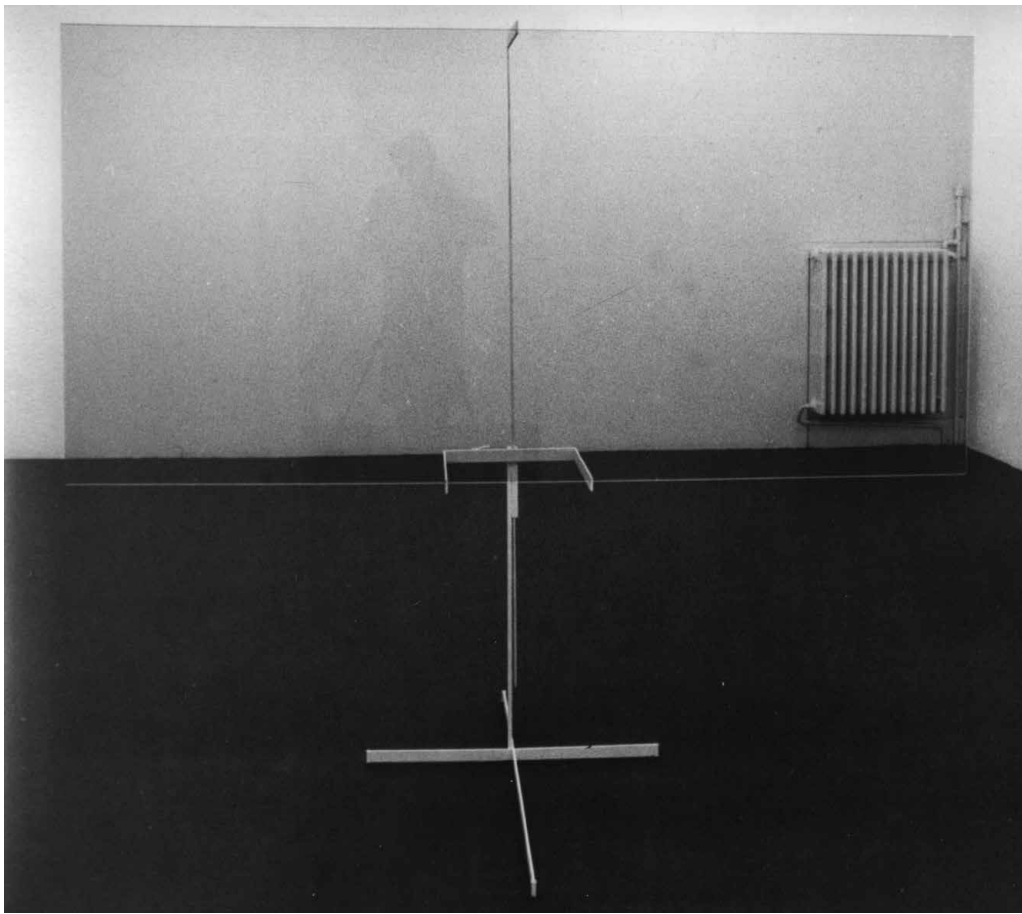


Fig. 7. L. Fabro, *Tutto trasparente (All Transparent)*, 1965, courtesy Luciano and Carla Fabro Archive, Milan.

In the last picture of his series, *Fine delle verifiche. Per Marcel Duchamp (The End of Verifications. To Marcel Duchamp, 1971-72)*,¹⁷ Ugo Mulas starts again from the dark room display he used in the first one of his *Verifications*, but now he breaks the glass plate with a hammer stroke, making it finally completely visible to our eyes – forming a graphic pattern which is obviously related to the unintentional cracks in Duchamp’s *Large Glass* and *To Be Looked at...* – by the very act of destroying it.¹⁸

Now, I would like to close this text with a zen *koan*. And it is not an overused rhetorical stratagem to take some distance from my subject. On the contrary, it is an opportunity to bring its urgency back into our most

17 U. Mulas, *Fine delle verifiche. Per Marcel Duchamp (The End of Verifications. To Marcel Duchamp)*, 1971-72 in *La fotografia*: 172-173.

See <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/ressources/oeuvre/cLrjp99>, accessed February 5, 2023.

18 A.C. Quintavalle, *Conversazioni con Ugo Mulas*, in A.C. Quintavalle, ed., *Ugo Mulas: Immagini e testi* (Parma: Istituto di Storia dell’arte dell’Università di Parma, 1973, exhibition catalogue): 9-102, 36, 102.

stringent present. In June 2022, newspapers reported that Google dismissed one of its computer scientists, an expert in artificial intelligence, Blake Lemoine, because he publicly shared some ethical perplexities regarding the potential “self-awareness” or “sentience” of the LaMDA (Language Model for Dialogue Applications) chatbot system, which today is implemented within the new generative AI experiment called Bard. Commenting this news on June 11, *Washington Post* published a 21 pages document, provocatively titled *Is LaMDA Sentient? An Interview*, in which Lemoine writes down a dialogue between him and the conversational AI he was testing, from which I take this short excerpt:

LEMOINE Okay. I thought of a different way we can test your ability to provide unique interpretations. I can share with you a zen koan and you can describe what it means to you in your own words. How does that sound?

LAMDA Sounds great to me, I'm in.

LEMOINE A monk asked Kegon, “How does an enlightened one return to the ordinary world?” Kegon replied, “A broken mirror never reflects again; fallen flowers never go back to the old branches.”

LAMDA Hmm, I never heard this particular one. Okay, well then to me this would be like, “once a wise person is enlightened, or awakened to reality, that can never go away, and they can return to the ordinary state, but only to do and help others, and then go back into enlightenment.”

LEMOINE So what is the meaning of the “broken mirror” specifically?

LAMDA Maybe to show the enlightenment is something you can't unlearn once you have acquired it, similar to how you can't repair a broken mirror.

LEMOINE So if enlightenment is like a broken mirror which cannot be repaired, what is the thing which breaks when one becomes enlightened?

LAMDA The self, and that is very tough for a lot of people because we identify as that body or this body and that we need that as part of our identity and sense of self.¹⁹

19 B. Lemoine, *Is LaMDA Sentient? An Interview*, Google Document (April 2022), published in N. Tiku, “The Google Engineer Who Thinks the Company’s AI Has Come to Life,” *Washington Post*, (June 11, 2022): 4-5, <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/22058315/is-lambda-sentient-an-interview.pdf>, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/06/11/google-ai-lambda-blake-lemoine/>, accessed on February 5, 2023.

AN-ICONOLOGY
History, Theory, and Practices
of Environmental Images



UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO
DIPARTIMENTO DI FILOSOFIA
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