

The form that our museum has taken today is the result of iconoclasm. During the French Revolution mobs went ferociously against artworks, stormed museums, battered churches, destroyed paintings and sculptures that were the symbols of hated powers : monarchy, clergy, and nobility. When hatred and fury ended, decision was made to preserve as many artworks as possible in a protected place, the museum. Historians say that this was also at the origin of the change in the way artworks were perceived, or used, for their religious or even healing functions. The religious and social value of art was replaced by the category of Beauty: thus the eye won primacy.

Today we fully assume that knowing a painting or a sculpture is possible only through the eye, the sense we assign the privileged task of acquiring and conveying knowledge. Artworks housed in a museum are believed to be apprehended only through sight. There are of course works – *performance* and installations– requiring interactions with the senses. Since historical avant-gardes, art has been moving away from the visual realm to move towards, and call upon, other sensory perceptions. Despite the adoption of practices involving smell or taste, however, every attempt at escaping from the predominance of the visual ends up almost always by further stressing its central role, if not its primacy.

For some years now, a German artist, Thomas Struth, has started an exploration into exhibition spaces where he focuses not on the artworks per se, but rather onto people watching them and along with them the rooms, hallways, spaces where the works are located. Often Struth photographs them in their place of exhibit as if they were people. Many of his shots – art works in their turn – seem to be answering the question: What do works do when we do not look at them? The assumption of this is that works exist and live a life of their own independently from visitors' gazes.

Artworks are therefore seen as the tip of the triangle composed of author, work, visitor. Inadvertently Struth shows the untruthfulness of the imperative statement made by one of the major art historian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ernst H. Gombrich, that the thing called art does not exist, only artists do. Thomas Struth makes art with artworks and with our absence as well; in any case what we are seeing is Struth's view, and not merely the artwork in its solitude or in a crowded room.

Now Giuseppe Varchetta and Roxanne Lowit have done something more than that, while trying – I believe – to do something less. Lowit, who is a famous fashion photographer (photographer of social events, of the fashion world and something more: of the fashion scene), and at the same time «a visual confidant», positioned herself near the artworks during the inauguration of Collezione Maramotti – a social event – to grasp the attitude of their makers – photography as the author's icon in front of his/her icon. Or to unveil, unseen, the familiarity of people making artworks and even using them: the marvelous shot of artist Luigi Ontani using Pistoletto's painting as a mirror and combing his hair in front of the couple embracing inside the work. Bodies are the protagonists of Roxanne Lowit's photographs. For this reason they often hide the works themselves. The bodies of the painter and his model, of other artists that have not worked on the piece, but play with it and its maker. All these bodies line up in front of Roxanne Lowit's lens and offer themselves as an alternative to the work. This is the scene of which Roxanne is a free and elegant narrator. Each shot corresponds in effect to the page of a

book, or a magazine, and it is always a small, short but complex narration. The American photographer reveals then her background as textile designer, as the bodies being photographed are textures for her, equal to the works they are a backdrop to: the bodies break free from the background and move towards us, but they are at the same time moving away.

Giuseppe Varchetta, who is a listener by profession – he calls himself with a term he has invented, a psychosocioanalyst –, applies his special style, even his posture to the space of the work. He places himself in the place where the work is operating in silence and observes it, also in silence. Then he shoots photographs when the visitors' bodies enter in the space already saturated with meanings, loaded with the many notes of silence, and touch the same space. Each of Varchetta's photographs are a note jutted in a second; a listening image which functions by subtracting more than by adding, namely, taking away notes from the sound of space, but at the same time adding something to it.

Visitors's bodies – we are again at the inauguration of Collezione Maramotti – are almost shadows, an absent presence. They are there – they all make gestures, show postures, move or stand still – but they seem to be also distant. The bodies, which Varchetta gives back its presence to, in the presence of the artworks, are always an absence being present. And this is not a play on words. I'll try to explain: Varchetta works on the vision of the pieces in view and on the vision of the bodies, which are also in the presence of the art pieces. In doing so he is not driven by a sociological, nor even strictly artistic, intention but rather by a philosophical reasoning. His is in fact a philosophy of listening. Thus he reverses the reason why the museum was born: to view and to put on view. Looking at his photographs you cannot but think that this way of listening is what Zen thinkers call «the sound of one hand clapping». It seems to me that he has approached his photography in exactly the same way.

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