

## The discrete allurements of distance

by Caterina Bonvicini

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Dear Giulio,

I hope that you have had a chance to see Flavio's exhibit. I've seen it and I left it filled with enthusiasm and rather moved.

What can I do? It's my lot to see materialize (or at least represented) the dialogue between your generation and mine. It's remarkable to discover someone – born in 1975, the year of the creation of your work, *Mimesi* – able to interpret your thoughts so well... and to treasure them, internalize them and, then, betray them. (I'm referring, of course, to "loving ocular betrayals", as Flavio calls them, a particularly poignant expression which draws its poignancy from its very preciseness).

This has always been a penchant of yours and of your masters. After all, you often significantly display *The Lesson of a Master* by Henry James ... I have in mind your works about Ingres, Raffaello, Lotto, Poussin, Watteau, Vermeer, David and De Chirico, etcetera, etcetera... which is also the title of a chapter in the catalogue of your Bergamo exhibit (*E come eccetera, eccetera*) and which focuses precisely on the theme of the Academy. In my opinion, this is an important chapter because you speak to the young who are the artists of the future: You wrote: «The allurements of ancient ruins silhouetted in the backlight against a view at sunset isn't only a vision dear to archeologists or aesthetes because it inspires and gives solidity and character to even the most innovative forms: what I want to say is that we rediscover the same aura of beauty in all those works which, without seeming to, have assimilated – and therefore made their own – the discretion and grace of capturing attention... In brief: works which allow us to admire the wisdom of memory and language".

Well, this is what Flavio *does* and, today, you are the master.

Do you know, I couldn't resist the temptation to ask Flavio to let me read the letters he wrote to you while he was planning this exhibit of your work. Well, there's a part in one of them which I found particularly striking. These lines were written in February 2006 before Flavio could have possibly read the catalogue (which came out in April). This means that what he learned came directly from the work and that the choice of you as his interlocutor wasn't a casual one but was, instead, closely linked to your artistic endeavor – in your case, specifically to *un modo di guardare* (a way of observing).

«I look at *Mimesi* by Giulio Paolini to open up a space of proximity which itself, becomes a work [...] Two small heads in plaster on two white pedestals creating a

point in space I have already passed through. A childhood memory when, high on the island of Egina, through the columns of the Temple of Athena, I saw the horizon as a painted surface. When I create a break on the surface of a monochrome canvas, I see the reflection of that same horizon. Now, from this sort of imperceptible and crystalline aleph, I see – in the distance between two identical molds – the same distance which exists between every painted surface and the veil of Parrasio. Always this distance, forever the same and always different, in front of me and elsewhere, visible and invisible”.

The keyword, here, is *distance* which is your theme in general (“ I try to keep due distance from everything and especially from myself...”). Distance is also the central focus of *Mimesi*, a work which has distance as its very fount. In the catalogue published by the Fondazione Ratti (aptly, for a course held for students in 2002) you wrote: «When I place two identical copies of the same ancient statue, one in front of the other, I don't intend to rediscover or to re-invent that statue nor admire the citation represented. Instead, I want to observe the distance between them, the empty space which separates them, because it is this emptiness which is the true essence of the work”.

And Flavio – he, too, an artist of distance - works on just that invisible essence of the work (“It is in this way that we are able to observe it without actually seeing it”, as you wrote in *Mimesi*). Basically, he works on the emptiness which separates. He doesn't fill that void, but instead, creates another one. He builds a white frame around this distance: appropriately, an empty frame – though it might look like a mirror from a distance. But be very careful because the nature of Flavio's *wall painting* around the window isn't truly specular. The painting inside the frame (an acrylic on canvas, which reproduces on a scale of 1 to 2 the *wall painting*, including the window) is arranged behind one of the two heads of *Mimesi* making the *wall painting* perpendicular to the frame. And because it isn't in front of the painting it reflects, a true mirror reflection would be impossible. In other words, not a reflection but a wonderful and ambiguous suggestion of a reflection.

Don't you agree that this – window, mirror, visual trap – is a very subtle Paolini-type game? Paolini-like also in its love of geometry, its vast dimension of freedom and, especially, in its elegance. You'll see...

That's how Flavio paints. With a rigor worthy of Glenn Gould. With a precise touch and a clean sound: cold blues and grays, without any concessions. White and black always at the right time, like in a painting by Antonello da Messina.

Flavio, basically, has the same way of relating technology to the ancient that we perceive in the *Goldberg Variations*. It isn't a coincidence that we are met by Bach

in the background upon entering his studio. A modern (at this point historical) Bach by Gould. Views of the computer screen, deprived of the noise of words become as essential as the works by Mondrian or Frank Stella or Sol LeWitt. But this has nothing to do with minimalism. Reduction is only the starting point used to reach multiplication as it is intended by Calvino and Borges: multiplication as labyrinth. In fact, what does the choice of Glenn Gould and Giulio Paolini as masters mean? It means escape, perspective, counterpoint, Leon Battista Alberti and Fontana. It means choosing *the distance*. Or rather a precise way – that one and no other of the many ways possible – of conceiving of space and, therefore, of conceiving of beauty. Flavio wrote: "Looking is a simple act of non-belonging. The gaze abides but doesn't belong". The eye deeply penetrates but continuously escapes. It's a dizzying eye which is never content with only one point of view because it aspires to infinity. Doesn't that sound familiar?

I think so. In my opinion it's an eye which shares the same bloodline as your own eye. An imaginary bloodline with all the freedom inherent in chosen ties. But, here, let's return to the Flavio's "*loving ocular betrayals*"...

I can't see you as being proud of having an imitator. What would you do with one? And, anyway, thirty years have gone by since *Mimesi* (and in the meantime you've changed a great deal like all great artists do: always true to yourself but still betraying yourself, sensitive to the present time while still rooted in your own time...) Thirty years: a lifetime or, at least the length of mine and Flavio's for example. Do you know what I think? That if these thirty years had passed over your work without inspiring a betrayal, you couldn't have become a master for the next generation and Flavio wouldn't have become an artist.

Here, I have in mind the etymology of the word *tradimento* (betrayal): «to give further, to transmit, to bestow an inheritance to someone". Behind this meaning, though, there's another one: "deception". But what a beautiful deception! From the point of view of the artist, deception is basically the most sincere act of love to be bestowed upon a work of art (and in your case – and Flavio's – bestowed upon a concept).

It's pointless to tell you these things because you have built your artistic life – and our modernity – upon betrayal and memory («Memory, Mnemosine, is like the future: it's there but you can't call upon it; it's not an archive to be used as one desires... she is the one to make the appointment with us and who knows when...", you wrote in the catalogue to the exhibit: *Da oggi a ieri* (From today to yesterday) Modernity, however, as I see it...(I use "our" taking upon myself the right to use the plural even though I am not a painter because, in my opinion, your

work concerns everyone and those who were born at a later time, independently of their craft, have a need for it).

Instead, I think it is useful to try to explain to you my point of view, or rather the point of view of my thirty years of age – the same age as Flavio – because, in my opinion, he "betrays" you so well.

Between your generation and ours – Flavio's and mine – something enormous happened! A whole new spatial dimension came into being: computer simulated reality. But this is a world which you have always represented even way before the advent of the computer because you conceptually anticipated this great change of perspective. Our experience, however, is very different. We thirty year olds weren't born in this dimension. We grew up in it...with all the lacerations entailed not only by the impact of this great change but also by being aware of its magnitude. This is where I want to start.

Dear Giulio, I'm so sorry it's taking me so long to get to the point but I lack historical distance and without historical distance one must, per force, plod. As you know, my ideal teacher is Giuliano Briganti, and while I'm writing this I'm suffer in the attempt to reconcile clarity, intuition and the awareness of limits which I learned from him. In any case, please be patient and let me try...

Flavio sends me his writings now and again via e-mail. This pleases me because I don't believe in art without thoughts behind it. He is a painter with a concrete way of acting (the preciseness and elegance I mentioned earlier) but his art wouldn't have meaning – nor would it have the necessary solidity – if thought and reflection didn't stand behind it. This is something which can't be taken for granted in our generation which is often consecrated to the ephemeral and to fragile ideas.

In any case, last year, I believe it was around December, Flavio sent me a file entitled: "Brief considerations on the contemporary sublime". And I perked up my ears (This is how I began to pay attention to him. Right afterwards, I went to see him at his studio and I fell in love with his works).

But what did he write that was so interesting? (At least – obviously – in my opinion): "The computer screen, today, represents the new contemporary landscape [...] Man walks on the flat horizon of the screen and looks through this luminous window at an image of a reality which is ever less defined, always nearer to vanishing and always more precarious. In this sense, the computer screen, a space that we always abide in for a determinate time, represents a sort of *memento mori*. The technological universe seems to continuously stabilize and guarantee security to our daily lives but, actually, it is the quintessence of the precariousness

of every space we abide in. The difference between the computer screen and the screen of the outside world is only a reduction in scale and, with just a 'click', our body is immediately expelled from its place of abode", he wrote. Then, he continued: "The sublime is the tragic expression of the landscape because, in a way, it is the expression of loss through the experience of immensity and this immensity brings us violently back to nature and we are not capable of relating to it".

The crux is: "The romantic sublime, because an expression of the finiteness of the individual, today finds a new definition in the absolute precariousness of the technological projection on the screen. [...] The experience of immensity, inside the screen, is the product of a new depth which is no longer physical but instead projective. The precariousness of this spatial presence, connected to a generator of current, becomes symbolic [...] and our daily 'promenade' is the experience of "real time" outside of space.

The sense of infinity and precariousness is similar to yours but seen through a different window. The ways and tragic nature of distance have changed. Flavio's windows are computer windows and they are empty. The silence of his works is a silence which opposes a different noise: a computer generated noise which isn't even real.

And, too, the perspective changes: Flavio always begins from Leon Battista Alberti to reach Fontana and you. But an external factor has entered the equation which is, per force, conditioning and which he has to take into consideration. The world around Flavio, and around me, has invented a new infinity or a new "landscape", as Flavio calls it, and both an ancient course and a modern one can be chosen – Egina and *Mimesi* – loving Euclid's geometry while moving from the Greeks to your own *Disegno geometrico*. But... he who works today must confront another, unexpected and revolutionary dimension which is of the same importance as the invention of printing or photography!

In this way, Flavio breaks through the two halves of *Mimesi* with a frame which is very different from your frames. He makes it impossible to live in only one of the two rooms or one of the two heads, in the ancient half, or in half of the past or half of you... His painting can't be lived in either. His painting, behind one half of yours – is a computer window without words. A window which is rigorously mute.

An affectionate embrace, my dear sketcher – from our past and to our future.

Caterina