Seeing Thinking Forgetting
Religious Images in the
Work of an Artist

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... Now the dark, the nothing, the emptiness can fall on the page
Of this you can be sure my sire be my friend
You can believe in the dark when the light lies to you

From E. Mounód. The five and the Dark

The clash between cultures is often seen with rare clarity in the invention of images. Different memories, different social traditions then stand face to face in the same image. Thus different profiles can stand out on the figure of a Christ on a Mexican cross, an African god transported to the Caribbean or a Greek god taken to India. The iconography or the traits of ritual use appear similar and yet the clash of cultures traces profoundly different lights and shadows on that Christ, on that voodoo statue, just as on a Greek Atlas conceived in Gandhara. Nowhere do cultures in conflict perpetuate without changing, and yet cultural perspectives that clash always maintain a consistency and thus reflect the light along the lines of incompatible symmetries, like crystals with different structures. Something like a visual illusion is created, an ambiguous figure that can be interpreted in incompatible ways in the comparison between opposing cultures, where contagion and conflict do not exclude each other. The process that generates these images of conflict and makes them so effective is still mostly unexplored by both religious anthropologists and art historians.¹

It has definitely been one of the ambitions of modernity to make this field an area of artistic cricism since primitivism (in Berlin, Vienna and Paris). Nor did this possible exploration of idols through the experimentation of forms cease with the disappearance of historical Avant-gardes. It is found in the contemporary artist’s studio, in Beuys who recalls the presence of the cross in one of his incalculable archives of objects (and also in Fontana who unexpectedly staged an abstract crucifixion in the 1950s), and more recently in Dan Flavin who studies the light rays of the cross using neon, where the presence of the idol doubles and multiplies in a purely experimental manner. This re-apparition occurs, at least if we see it in a first approximation, by pure force of the imagination. In this case the artist explores what Kandinsky called “the enormous unconscious force of a form”.² It is a force that unfolds in an artist’s work (and thus allows its effectiveness to be suspended and calculated) just as much as it escapes
religious meditation. The force of this operation, typical of modernity in art, lies in seeing work on idols as experimentation that appears independent of religion. It is a force linked with the attention to the image and how its visual force is expressed as much as to the oblivion of religious sentiment.

Seeing remembering forgetting. Forgetting seeing remembering. This complex sequence of mental states, derived from a penetrating drawing by Tamaso Bonolo might indicate the way in which politics and religion are organised in this artist's work. It is in the crucial relationship that is established between forgetting and seeing, in the gradual return to seeing after oblivion, in the passage from an element of lost memory to a return to seeing that the space for visual research opens up. It is not by accident that the artist who returns to religious images may, it is true, change the features of idols or pretend to transcribe his private dreams, but he cannot avoid the physical space of the altar which constitutes its silent trace. A clear example of this process is found in the work of the Dominican artist: Charo Ouet. The African, European and American supernatural and religious figures in Ouet's works seem to fall in line with a sort of impudent, happy confusion. Mami Wata, the blue African siren who, after an initial nocturnal appearance returns in works like "Cantos de Sirena" (Performance done in 2003 at the Senda Gallery in Barcelona), can freely alternate with other figures of power, whether they are Yemayá, the Yoruba divinity of the Atlantic, Queen Elisabeth of England or with personal everyday objects (shells, glass beads, fabrics, etc.) or objects that are completely invented, like some of her staircases made to go up to heaven. Charo Ouet can even go as far as to give a "mambo or perhaps even a habanera rhythm" to the meeting of these discordant figures, as Parris Thompson writes. She cannot, however, avoid a space appearing for these figures, always and without exception, in the form of an altar.

What emerges in these images is what the light of consciousness can no longer grasp, it is in the arrangement of the space and given by the order imposed on the things. In cases like this, the work is not, as we too often read, a "cultural memory". It is evidence, sometimes meticulously reconstructed, of an oblivion that orients space. A certain oblivion which is in the very roots of art.

Art, or rather that set of heterogeneous phenomena which we have the habit of calling "art", exists simply because we are able to perceive space and organise this physical recognition in relation to other aspects of our experience. We continuously seek to organise space, to orient ourselves, to establish a point of balance and to interpret its meaning. That is why, in its primary aspect, the phenomenon, “art”, exists in this perspective, which remains one of pure physical experience, art is only one of the aspects of a broad set of experiences of perception and the intellect—constructed by interpreting space—which
Tomaso Bonioli
Rio Negro For Beginners, 1997
Installation / Installazione
legno, rete di plastica / wood, plastic netting
c. 30 x 20 m
Galeria Ariaque, Karlsruhe

constitutes a large part of our actual existence. Naturally this aesthetic field does not coincide with that of art at all, even if, on the contrary, experience of art may constitute a pathway to aesthetic experience.

Furthermore, the idea that art has something to do with playing games has been present in philosophical tradition for centuries and was even clearly expressed in some crucial texts by Plato. A game assumes a contract between the players, so that a certain pretense is established by tacit agreement. And that is how two children can declare to each other at the beginning of a game: "I was the horse and you were the angel in the tower". Something like a parallel world arises from this declaration (which in Italian lies in that unmistakable, imperfect tense which Italian children always use). Art is this too, and it always depends on this particular contract that can be established between a canvas, a statue, a reciprocal action, a rhythm or an organised sequence of words. From this very elementary viewpoint, "Art" is a border line between involuntary recognition of a perceived space and a bond between persons established by using a pretense. Physical proximity, visual contact, spatial recognition, shared pretense: this borderline is particularly fragile, unstable and uncertain. The things we call "art" lie on this borderline.

It is from here, from this fragility and this uncertainty that a context is created in which religious and political references can make themselves felt in art. From uncertainty,
"You cannot obtain it thinking. You cannot obtain it not thinking".

This gives rise, alongside the physical image, to a particular formulation of potential images implied by each figure: an exposed space where no image appears and a space marked by the presence of a trace of ritual action, which for Shiraga points to the invisible presence of God. A double space of images then, on which the search for a horizon takes place.

We find a similar invention of spaces again in a work by Boniolo (Río Negro For Beginners), where two fishing nets, superimposed on top of one another in a large environment, form a double sky obtained using natural light only. It is a work in which what is seen is so radically distant from what is imagined that it becomes a sort of extreme magic. A “looking further and further, but still very much further than you are used to doing”. A “not here” of the image which throws your gaze an enormous distance. Where the irony of a sublimeness, which, though it has disappeared and though it is unreachable, has made itself felt, stretched between the window and the wall. A sky condemned perhaps to non-existence and yet which, because of the image, has again become a trace, a new element to see.

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1. These issues are developed in the comparison between an Apache and a neo-Christian tradition in: Sevest, F. Perceptions & la Víor: Una antropología della intuizione (Turin: Einaudi, 2003), 218-230.