

collection will gain new meanings, and history will take a new step forward. As in the case of Plessi's famous image of a boat that invites the viewer into an endless journey, his work with the images of the art of the past is a way of navigating in the present in an attempt to bring emotional and intellectual values of today to the future.

THE FINESSE THAT IT DISPLAYED: AUTOPSIES OF ANTIQUITY

GIUSEPPE BARBIERI

Fabrizio Plessi's dialogue with the Pushkin Museum, which commenced last year with his participation in *Man as Bird: Images of Journeys*, the special project that Pushkin Museum XXI, directed by Olga Shishko, presented at the 57th Venice Biennale of Visual Arts, stems from the conviction that the artist has often put at the centre of his quest and that also lies at the very heart of the museum's purpose: the classics cannot exist without the contemporary world and vice versa; only through contemporary tales it is possible to discover new keys to interpreting the works of the past. The chosen forms in these circumstances, articulated in two important installations by the artist, are summed up in the title *The Soul of Stone*. Both the x-rays of motionless antique busts and the reflections of a primordial sky that seems to come crashing down upon our present and is mirrored in a series of monitors – one of the characteristic features of the Italian master's language¹ – belong in some way to a poetics of discovery (even without using the Duchampian term “readymade”) that profoundly characterizes the modern international art scene, but also refers to an ancient need of human civilization: to see the intimate layer of things with one's own eyes. Plessi's exploration has many important precedents. I have tried to gather together a few.

THE CORTONA SARCOPHAGUS

In his *Life of Filippo Brunelleschi*, Giorgio Vasari recounts an episode that he believed exemplified the attitude of the first generation of Renaissance artists towards ancient art. A “few months” earlier, Brunelleschi had completed his stay in Rome (1402–04), during which he and Donatello had surveyed buildings, measured cornices, designed capitals, and paid particular attention to studying the vaulted ceilings of Roman buildings. Vasari wrote that they excavated and ordered excavations, and the people of Rome “called them the ‘treasure-hunters’, because they believed they were practising geomancy in order to locate buried treasure”. With a few minor exceptions (an earthenware pot full of medals), Filippo and Donato never appropriated coins or other precious objects, but rather forms, proportions, and specific relationships between figures and backgrounds. Donatello returned to Florence first, and Filippo shortly afterwards, when he had entirely spent the few resources set for this sort of “inner journey”, and the two artists met (with “some other artisans” in Piazza di Santa Maria Maggiore in Florence.

Here is Vasari’s account of the episode:

[They were] discussing matters relating to ancient sculpture. Donatello was telling how, as he returned from Rome, he had taken the road through Orvieto to see the famous marble façade of the Duomo which was constructed by several different masters and in those times considered a remarkable work. And he added that while passing through Cortona, he entered a parish church and saw an extremely beautiful ancient tombstone upon which there was a scene carved in marble, a very rare thing in those days, since the abundance of antiquities we enjoy today had had not yet been unearthed. Donatello continued, describing the method the ancient master had employed in creating that work, and the finesse which it displayed along with the perfection and excellence of its workmanship. This aroused in Filippo such a burning desire to see it that dressed just as he was, in his cloak, hood, and wooden clogs,

without telling anyone where he was going, he went off on foot and willingly allowed himself to be carried off to Cortona by his love for the art of sculpture. And when he had seen and enjoyed the tombstone, he sketched it with his pen, and then, taking his drawing, he returned to Florence, without Donatello or anyone else realizing that he had even left, since they thought he must be drawing plans or dreaming up some project.²

The drawing has not survived, however, in this case at least, the work itself is less relevant than the procedure. In fact, it illustrates one of the essential protocols that, during the centuries of the Early Modern Age, allowed a different approach and an effective knowledge of the ancient³, namely that of autopsy, in the sense of direct and personal visual experience. Indeed, at the beginning of the 15th century, the art that would subsequently be referred to as classical ceased being simply an infinite series of spolia that could be easily used, or the image of an irretrievable grandeur (*Roma quanta fuit ipsa ruina docet*⁴), or the emblem of a political triumph (such as the *Horses* of Saint Mark in Venice), or even the product of unverifiable *auctoritates*. It almost goes without saying that all of these uses of the antique would continue to be deployed, with much overlap, particularly in semiotically complex urban schemes. But the practice of autopsy gradually became established, paving the way for the modern scientific experimental reasoning that we have now been using for around 400 years.

SIGILLA HISTORiarUM

A crucial figure in this long process was Cyriacus of Ancona (1391–1452), traditionally indicated as the father of modern epigraphy, or even archaeology in general⁵. Cyriacus arrived in Rome a couple of decades after Donatello and Brunelleschi and soon realized that, while fragmentary, the direct testimonies of antiquity ensured “maiolem longe quam ipsi libri fidem et notitiam”,⁶ as Francesco Scalamonti, his biographer, attested, and constituted veritable

Sigilla historiarum. This fundamental intuition, led Cyriacus to adopt and try to impose rigorous autoptic criteria to lend credibility to the collections of inscriptions (that were to prove invaluable in recovering the forms of the letters of uncorrupted Latin), which during his time were generally limited to simple unverified citations from other sources. His research, on the other hand, focused on the patient and persistent work of unmediated discovery accompanied by constant comparison between monumental evidence and literary sources. Exemplary in this respect were Cyriacus' verification of the passage by Pliny the Elder on the Temple of Cyzicus in Propontis, and his need to provide a graphical record of the artefact observed whenever possible. The humanist's manuscripts, entitled *Antiquarium rerum commentaria*, were almost completely destroyed in the fire that ravaged Giovanni Sforza's library in Pesaro in 1514. However, one of the rare autograph drawings by Cyriacus to have survived is conserved in Berlin, attesting to the Ancona scholar's scientific method, which Guarino Veronese had advised him to apply "vel in bibliothecis vel in marmoribus".⁷ The drawing depicts the Parthenon in Athens (observed on two different occasions, in 1436 and 1444). Even today it appears surprisingly precise and has the great merit of identifying the building, for the first time in many centuries, as the temple of Athena and not as a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The drawing is also accompanied by a precise description ("the great and marvellous temple of Pallas Athena on the topmost citadel of the city, a divine work by Phidias, which has 58 towering columns, each seven feet in diameter, and is splendidly adorned with the noblest images on all sides") that correctly uses and cites many ancient sources, skilfully combining autopsy and philology. It is worth adding that the humanist had stayed in Florence in 1432, where he had become friends with one of the city's greatest intellectuals, Niccolò Niccoli, with whom he had discussed the temple of Cyzicus and the new approach to the antique. However, he had also had the chance to see how the two leading Florentine sculptors, Ghiberti and Donatello, kept ancient

marbles and bronzes in their workshops alongside their own works in order to observe them on a daily basis.

THE REPRESENTATION OF LIFE IN MOTION

The subject of the Cortona sarcophagus that had so impressed Donatello is the *Battle of the Centaurs*, depicting the clash between the Centaurs led by Dionysus, and the Amazons. It is a scene of frenzied dynamism. In the detailed description of the Parthenon in the Berlin drawing, Cyriacus of Ancona also paid close attention to the decorative scheme of the metopes, emphasizing in particular the *Centauromachy*, the battle between the centaurs and the Lapiths, which occupies the south wall of the temple with scenes of motion, and eloquent gestures. During the last months of his life, Aby Warburg (1866–1929), the great scholar of relations between antique and the various forms of its "rebirth" in history, underscored in the Introduction to his last, unfinished, project – the *Mnemosyne Atlas* – that the essential purpose of art (and consequently of his Atlas) is to accumulate "pre-coined expressive values by means of the representation of life in motion."⁸ The concept is reaffirmed in the sentence that follows it: "On the basis of its images it [the *Mnemosyne*] is intended to be first of all an inventory of pre-coined classical forms that impacted upon the stylistic development of the representation of life in motion in the age of the Renaissance." Art thus has the task of representing motion, crystallizing it in the depiction of a gesture: At the famous conference on *Dürer and Italian Antiquity* [*Dürer und die italienische Antike*] in October 1905, Warburg defined this process as *Pathosformel* (pathos formula), introducing the term (and the associated concept) in his analysis of the great German master's drawing of the *Death of Orpheus*. Warburg's *Pathosformeln* (pathos formulas) are not so far removed from the enthusiasm with which Filippo Brunelleschi hurried to Cortona to draw and then fantasize, or Cyriacus of Ancona explorations in Greece and Asia Minor.

Indeed, this contiguity is not only due to the fact that Warburg dedicated practically his entire research activities to the revivals of interest shown by 15th and 16th-century artists and intellectuals in “extrinsic accessories in motion”, such as garments and hair, as he wrote in his doctoral dissertation on Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus and Spring*:⁹ the German scholar also shared his predecessors’ desire to probe the superficial appearances of classical representations (the body) to discover an implicit profound truth. He thus wished to lead us to the “Soul of Stone”, which is the title that Fabrizio Plessi chose for his first exhibition in Russia, in the extraordinary setting of the Pushkin Museum. This essay is also an attempt at formulating a possible framework for the modern process of autopsy of the antique devised by the Italian artist. Precisely because of this, I will not bother citing – as could have been appropriate and perhaps not irrelevant – the countless historical figures that attempted a direct relationship with the ancient tradition of art.

However, I must make an exception for Andreas Vesalius.

KNOWING THE BODY AND THE SOUL

Andries van Wesel (1514–64) – the original Dutch name, subsequently Latinized, of the father of modern anatomy – also investigated the relationships between the body’s surface and the depths of the soul.

In the preface, dedicated to Charles V, of his *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*, he wrote, “*Yet I surmise that out of the entire Apolline discipline of medicine, and indeed all natural philosophy, nothing could be produced more pleasing or welcome to your Majesty than research in which we recognize the body and the spirit, as well as a certain divinity that issues from a harmony of the two . . .*”¹⁰.

The treatise is illustrated with 230 engravings, largely attributable, at least according to Vasari, to Jan Stefan van Calcar, although an enduring tradition has on several occasions conjectured the possible involvement of Titian (at least in some plates) and more recent studies have suggested

that Domenico Campagnola, the foremost painter in Padua when Vesalius taught at the university there, also played a role (in the decorated initials, for example).¹¹ Several engravings were undoubtedly made or at least closely guided by Vesalius himself. The presence of such a vast collection of highly accurate illustrations was probably influenced by the new publishing trend inaugurated in Venice with Sebastiano Serlio’s treatise and constitutes, from a certain point of view, the most evident and remarkable innovation of *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*. In reality, Vesalius’ treatise became popular above all for its new conception of medical teaching and practice. As Claus Nissen the great scholar of scientific, and particularly botanical, illustrations noted, “while figurative art had, for generations, already been entirely based on an original observation of nature, in the sciences research remained a philological science.”¹² Vesalius replaced this “philological science” with “a totally new vision of the human body”.¹³

Like Cyriacus of Ancona, Vesalius basically set an autoptic criterion for anatomical enquiry, and made enduringly public the pedagogical dynamics of the autopsy, which previously had few precedents. Consider, for example, the emphatic, solemn, and crowded scene depicted on the frontispiece of the *Fabrica*. The Flemish scientist also sensed the potential contribution that art could make to science. Indeed, it is no coincidence that an *emblematic* portrait of Vesalius, attributed to Van Calcar and housed in the Hermitage in St Petersburg, has an antique-style relief in the background showing several figures removing a corpse from a sarcophagus, seemingly alluding to the accusation that was often levelled against Vesalius. Our starting point was the Cortona sarcophagus, and here is a further sign of the importance of that which is hidden, a reality that our eyes must be able to observe directly.

The official portrait of the physician instead shows him dissecting a man’s arm, which was considered one of the most complex anatomical practices. During his lifetime, Vesalius was renowned for his skilled hands and the layout of the composition of this painting was subsequently adopted in

portraits of other famous surgeons (Leone Bonzio, portrayed by Leandro Bassano). However, the hands of artists were no less skilled. In a letter to Titian written in February 1548, Pietro Aretino speaks of that of the great Venetian master: “that hand that contributes to portraying [...] that spirit that lives hidden in every single thing”.¹⁴ A few years earlier, in 1542, in Sperone Speroni’s *Dialogue on Love*, the poetess Tullia d’Aragona, a famous Venetian courtesan, had stated:

*Titian is not a painter and his virtue is not art but a miracle; and it is my opinion that his colors are composed from that marvelous herb which, when Glaucus tasted it, transformed him from a man into a god. For truly his portraits have in them a non so che of divinity, such that, as the paradise of souls is in heaven, so it seems to me that in Titian’s colors God placed the paradise of our bodies; which are not painted but sanctified and glorified by his hands.*¹⁵

This is not too far removed from the concept of form imprisoned in matter characteristic of the Michelangelo’ school, the man that obeys intellect, to which his *Sonnet 151* refers:

*The best of artists never has a concept
A single marble block does not contain
Inside its husk, but to it may attain
Only if the hand follows the intellect.*

AUTOPSY OF ILLUSIONARY TIME

In reality, rather than focusing on the contrast between form and material, I have so far attempted to reflect on the apparent contradiction between the need to directly observe the truth with one’s own eyes and the inevitable approximations that derive from its fragmentary and in some way illusionary nature, particularly when it is rooted in the distant past. Indeed, the autoptic protocol raises both the problem of the transmission of an ancient form and

the impossibility of solving it. In his famous letter on the preservation of the ruins of ancient Rome, written with Baldassar Castiglione to Pope Leone X in 1519, Raphael expressed his “extreme pain – at the sight of what you could almost call the corpse of this great city, once queen of the world, so cruelly butchered”.¹⁶ At the beginning of the *Lives*, in the “Preface to the Whole Work”, Vasari spoke in similar terms of the effects of the “ravaging maw of time”:

*[T]he names of very many architects, sculptors, and painters, both old and modern, together with innumerable most beautiful works wrought by them, are going on being forgotten and destroyed little by little, and in such wise, in truth, that nothing can be foretold for them, but a certain and wellnigh immediate death; and wishing to defend them as much as in me lies from this second death, and to preserve them as long as may be possible in the memory of the living. . .*¹⁷

The same problem was tackled two centuries later by Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68), whose 250th anniversary of death happens to fall on 8 June this year:

*Just as a woman in love, standing on the shore of the ocean, seeking out with tear-filled eyes her departing lover whom she has no hope of ever seeing again, thinks she can glimpse in the distant sail the image of her beloved; we, like the woman in love, have remaining to us, so to speak, only the shadowy outlines of our desires: but this makes the desire for the objects we have lost ever more ardent, and we examine the copies of the original masterpieces with greater attention than we would have done were we to be in full possession of them. We are often like people who want to know about ghosts, and think they can see something where nothing exists.*¹⁸

An interesting book by Georges Didi-Huberman, published in 2002, used the perspective suggested by Winckelmann to investigate Aby Warburg’s approach to ancient art. Its title is *L’Image survivante. Histoire de l’art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*.¹⁹ *Survivante* (“surviving”) has

been chosen to correspond to the more demanding term in the German scholar's lexicon: *Nachleben*, or living after life. Interestingly, the fine Italian translation by Alessandro Serra (who died a few months after its completion) instead uses the more evocative *insepolta* ("unburied").²⁰ However, what is more important, to our train of thought, is the realization that Warburg's Renaissance seems an image "in which a human being is torn apart, a passionate and violent scene, frozen at a moment of extreme physical intensity", which must be recomposed. This was his goal, conducted through the analysis of the visual signs that had managed to crystallize the deepest expressions of pathos, the gestures that convey our most radical emotions. Indeed, we cannot observe Fabrizio Plessi's multimedia autopsies without bearing in mind that the x-rays of the busts in the Pushkin Museum, explicit copies of Roman originals, take us into a temporal dimension that is both perfectly controllable by our eyes and equally perfectly not reconstructible. It is, in some way, the same question that prompted Didi-Huberman's analysis: *Might there not exist a time of images which is neither "life and death" nor "greatness and decline," nor even that ideal "Renaissance" whose values historians constantly put to their own uses? Might there not be a time for phantoms, a return of the images, a "survival" (Nachleben) that is not subject to the model of transmission presupposed by the "imitation" (Nachahmung) of ancient works by more recent works? Might there not be a time for the memory of images—an obscure game of the repressed and its eternal return – that is not the one proposed by this history of art, by this narrative?*²¹ The French scholar was referring to the long series of attempts made in the 20th century to give a rational homogeneity to the heuristic system formulated in a disorderly but lucid manner by Warburg. However, that "time for the memory of images" could equally effectively refer to Plessi's non-linear visual narration and the apparent serial simplicity of a structure that actually drastically questions our temporal habits.

X-RAYS

The decades in which Warburg was probing the concept of *Nachleben* also saw the rise of radiology. Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen discovered x-rays in 1895 and was awarded the first Nobel prize for physics in history for his breakthrough six years later. The German scientist's first fortuitous experiments are well known, as is the subject of his first x-ray: his wife Anna Berta Ludwig's hand with wedding ring. So here we have another hand, following the one dissected by Vesalius in his official portrait, and those of Titian, able (in the not-so-friendly opinion of his fearsome rival Giovanni Antonio de' Sacchis, known as Il Pordenone) to meld and transfigure "flesh and not colour".²² In Naples, a few months after Röntgen's discovery, the Biblioteca Popolare E. Pietrocola published a booklet by Michele de Ciutiis on the physicist's findings that appeared to open up extraordinary possibilities in the objective knowledge of reality, particularly in the field of medicine.²³ In addition to the scientific rigour of this exercise in popularization, we are also struck by the author's references to man's age-old need for the representation of motion, the permanence of the images, and the devastating effects of the rays (still not understood at the time) on the eyes. He also mentions other rays – cathodic rays, studied by William Crookes (subsequently used in cathodic tubes for televisions) – and underscores the term that Röntgen had used for his pioneering device (*cryptoscope*). Without tracing the subsequent history and uses of radiology, with a brief nod to Marie Skłodowska Curie and her conviction of the beauty of science ("I am among those who think that science has great beauty. A scientist in his laboratory is not only a technician: he is also a child placed before natural phenomena which impress him like a fairy tale", she wrote in her Diary in 1934), it is sufficient here to underscore the narrow boundaries that, in this case too, exist between life and danger, the eye and time, which unravel each time man tries to access what is hidden beneath the surface of what can be seen.

ON THE SURFACE

Of course, it is not possible to trace every single stage in such a long and complex process that presumes to see the things, faces, and times at the bottom of the soul. All I can add, very briefly, is that at a certain point the Renaissance quest for depth slowed and then came to halt, replaced by other approaches to reality. In his fine work on the Baroque period in Rome²⁴, Yves Bonnefoy shrewdly highlights this change, commencing with that “dual nothingness in which Michelangelo struggles: the exteriority of the soul and the imperfection of the divine proportion”. A “dual nothingness” that is almost a way of claiming that the need to look at the soul of things can only lead to a paralyzing impasse.

We can see this in the disconcertment of the cultural society at the unveiling of Michelangelo’s *Last Judgement*; we can see it in the by-now accepted proliferation of pictorial subjects and genres, beyond the restrictions imposed by the Counter-Reformation. At the beginning of the profile on Annibale Carracci in his *Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1672) – the critical manifesto of the Italian Seicento – Giovanni Pietro Bellori states that “the art that from Cimabue to Giotto had advanced gradually over the long course of two hundred and fifty years, was soon seen to decline, and from a queen it became lowly and common. And so, that blessed age having come to an end, in a short time every one of its forms vanished; and artists, abandoning the study of nature, corrupted art with the maniera, by which we mean the fantastic idea, based on artistic practice and not on imitation”.

Bonnefoy continues:

The right way is undoubtedly elsewhere. And we could say that it was Bernini who found it, for it is now clear that, with his way of twisting every aspect, he suddenly shattered the presumptions of each and every one of us and the bewitching, not to mention satanic, allure of appearances. Aspect was “invented” by the Renaissance, giving us the impression of possessing a

*depth of its own, independent of the existence that produced it; but now it is dissolving again, as it should in the presence of a Being that he himself helped to discover. Appearance, this closed world of Renaissance painting, this merely spectral Being in whose pursuit the bewitched spirit may lose itself, has rebecome appearing, which belongs solely to the moment, but unites body and soul, and is everything despite not laying claim to anything. [. . .]The new beauty is no longer the unstable institution of an inaccessible Essence; rather it is a simple fact of reality in the immediacy of its elements, and it is also the confident adhesion that guides man towards that reality. Because this is the change, the fundamental point: Bernini no longer considers this or that object “in itself” (or, rather, in its appearance), but focuses instead on the relationship that connects us to it, the figuration of an encounter. . . .*²⁵

If beauty is no longer “elsewhere”, in the recesses of time or the soul of stone, autopsy is replaced with deceit and convention. The places themselves lose their identifying uniqueness, the individual aspect becomes standard, and culture – in order to become differently universal – is also standardized. As Carlo Ossola²⁶ perspicaciously observed, *sprezzatura*, that combination of deep attention and at the same time dissimulation that had characterized the great courtesans of the Renaissance, the exuberant intellectual and artistic personalities of the period, at least up until Tasso, instead became “culture of the ordinary”, *bon ton*. “When Montesquieu [in 1721] defined bon ton as “Celui-là a un bon ton, de qui on ne peut pas dire ce qu’il est”, he was targeting a culture so universal as to be accentless, unmarked by place or restricted by habit; bon ton is the surface of a behaviour that has become so polished as to seem *undistinguishable* . . . ”²⁷ In the new social and cultural model that became established at the end of the Baroque period, times and places no longer had a specific soul that required them to be observed directly. Instead – and this would remain true until the late 19th century – they were part of a universal articulation, in a spirit of the time that no longer required autoptic observation, but intellectual participation.

The fascination with depth resurfaced during the last years of the 19th century (albeit with many inevitable tastes of what was to come, for which I cannot account), coinciding with the birth of Tylor's modern anthropology, Darwin's theory of evolution, and the exploration of the deep layers of the individual inaugurated by Freud. It was the period when Warburg was rediscovering the fundamentals of artistic practice, in which the relationship with the details of images once again became enthralling and compulsive, as in the historian's correspondence with André Jolles regarding the *Nymph* that appears in the fresco by Domenico Ghirlandaio in the Tornabuoni Chapel in Santa Maria Novella. Observing it directly, Jolles wrote to Warburg: "I lost my mind". A few years later, in *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad would reveal the danger of an eye that challenges the depth of reality.

CONSCIOUS CREATION

It is also due to the thought of these leading figures of the Modern Age that we have been able to formulate a new consciousness of our shared past, and of its relationship with ancient art and its forms. *Consciousness* is a term whose meaning is hard to pin down, overlapping with "cognizance" and "conscience". A few weeks ago I heard this being discussed by a famous fellow Italian, Federico Faggin who, in the United States, designed and produced the first microchips in the entire history of information technology, and in recent years has been considering the probability of the emergence of a computer with a conscience comparable to that of a human. He believes that this probability is nil, but that the hypotheses must be scrupulously tested. Consequently, he has established a foundation to investigate at least some of the many open questions in the field of consciousness.

I have mentioned Faggin's stance because over the last 30 years the relationships between art and cognitive sciences have become much more intense, sharing an approach that investigates the ways we engage

with images (I am thinking of the studies by Freedberg, Mitchell, Boehm, Belting, Damasio, Didi-Huberman and Bredekamp among others).²⁸ The use of Information and Communication Technologies by artists (among whom Fabrizio Plessi undisputedly plays a central role) has contributed to enriching and articulating this debate, to which Silvia Burini and I have also made a small contribution in recent years. The stakes are rather high: it is the construction of a new approach to the visual sign, in which it is no longer possible to distinguish between the subject regarding and the object regarded as they form a more complex and ramified mode of interlocution and interaction. It is within this debate, in my opinion, that Plessi's path must necessarily be interpreted, particularly the two installations selected for his exhibition at the Pushkin Museum. I have spoken of an *autoptic* approach many times in this essay. I believe that *The Soul of Stone* is a fascinating "autopsy of the antique", which draws on a Renaissance protocol of profound reciprocal sharing. Aby Warburg described it unconsciously but fascinatingly precisely in his Introduction to the last, unfinished project of his life, the *Mnemosyne Atlas*:

*The conscious creation of distance between oneself and the external world can probably be designated as the founding act of human civilization. When this interval becomes the basis of artistic production, the conditions have been fulfilled for this consciousness of distance to achieve an enduring social function which, in its rhythmical change between absorption in its object or detached restraint, signifies the oscillation between a cosmology of images and one of signs; its adequacy or failure as an instrument of mental orientation signifies the fate of human culture.*²⁹

Rhythmic alternation, circular motion, and spatiality merge and penetrate each other, indicating new directions commencing from the past. But the statements that Warburg makes immediately following this passage are also very important, concerning the role of memory in artistic practice, memory that is another essential component of Plessi's work, particularly where he

hints at its fundamental action: “It establishes the lasting legacy of memory, yet not as part of a primarily protective tendency. Rather, the full force of the passionate and fearful religious personality, in the grip of the mystery of faith, intervenes in the formation of artistic style . . .” This is a good start for the rereading of Plessi’s second installation for the Pushkin Museum, *Rolling Stones*, initially displayed in Mantua in 2013.

“I WOULD LIKE TO DO SOME THINGS THAT I HAVE READ”

The subject in this case is provided by Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, one of the most popular and widespread literary texts during the Renaissance, which was an inexhaustible mine of images and visions that speak profoundly of man’s destiny. It refers to the beginning of the poem that, following a vast cosmogonic fresco, describes the battle between the Olympian deities and the Titans: a sort of mythological Big Bang.

*[T]hey say the giants attempted to take the Celestial kingdom,
piling mountains up to the distant stars.
Then the all-powerful father of the gods hurled his bolt of lightning,
fractured Olympus and threw Mount Pelion down from Ossa below.
Her sons’ dreadful bodies, buried by that mass,
drenched Earth with streams of blood,
and they say she warmed it to new life,
so that a trace of her children might remain,
transforming it into the shape of human beings.³⁰*

It is not necessary here to enlarge on the political sense, of the exaltation of the absolute power of the sovereign (or at least the lord), which the theme of the *Gigantomachy* acquired during the first centuries of the Modern Age. Anyone who has visited the Sala dei Giganti in Palazzo del Te will have experienced the power of painting in its ability to convey the “lasting legacy of memory” shaped by the “passionate and fearful religious personality”,

the pathos formulas immortalized by the ancients in both words and images. However, here we must add a further detail, a final element to our reflection on autopsies of the antique. Indeed, in this case we are looking at and showing a text, the page of a Latin poet.

In the *Treatise on Architecture*, written between 1460 and 1464 by Antonio Averlino, known as Filarete, the Duke of Sforzinda, who is the narrator, addresses the deuteragonist, the *architect*, to inform him of the general criteria to be used in the decoration of several of the palace’s state rooms: “On the vaults of the ceiling, I want it to look like Phaeton handling the horses of the Sun . . . And on the side walls I would like to do some things that I have read . . .”³¹, referring to other episodes of the *Metamorphoses*. The wish to see what “I have read” simply and transparently determined the majority of the iconographic choices of the Italian Renaissance, which we only too often (and wrongly) tend to consider highly enigmatic.

Showing one’s vivid, personal and selective impressions of a reading (often referring to Ovid’s poem) is another way of making an experience objective, of transforming a cultural horizon into a personal autopsy. I think that Fabrizio Plessi has captured this process with extraordinary precision. In his case, the text upon which the work is based is not Ovid, but the fresco designed by Giulio Romano (and painted with the aid of his workshop: Rinaldo Mantovano, Fermo Ghisoni and Luca da Faenza), probably based on Niccolò degli Agostini’s 1522 translation of Ovid into the vernacular³². The transition from one code to another – as Silvia Burini clearly explains in this catalogue – necessarily implies some approximations (also of great interest) in the rendition. Indeed, in Niccolò’s vernacular translation Ovid’s poem acquires the characteristics of a chivalric romance together with some new details, such as the presence of the monkeys, for example. Plessi, in turn, has applied his own filters to the wealth of images: a media one, translating the medium of painting into the concrete immateriality of digital imagery; a political one to reflect on the civil decadence of our age of wars, which

explains the compositional structure of the installation; and another, visual and evocative one, which equates the rushing waters with the dynamic and simultaneously corrosive flow of our history, and of each of our autopsies.

¹ Regarding its digital components, see at least the introduction in BREDEKAMP, H. (1995) *The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine: the Kunstammer and the Evolution of Nature, Art and Technology* (trans. from German by A. Brown), Princeton, Markus Wiener Pub.

² VASARI, G. (1991 [1550 and 1568]) *Le Vite dei più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti*, 1550 e 1568, ediz. a cura di Licia e Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, Milano, Rizzoli, II, 1973, pages 22-23. Italics are mine. [Translator's note: *The Lives of the Artists* (trans. from Italian by P. Bondanella and J. Conaway Bondanella), Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 118-19.]

³ This highly complex theme is effectively treated in the admirable essay written in 1986 by SALVATORE SETTIS, "Continuità, distanza, conoscenza. Tre usi dell'antico" in *Memorie dell'antico nell'arte italiana* (1986), Turin, Einaudi, III: *Dalla tradizione all'archeologia*, pp. 375-486. However, the bibliography in this field is, predictably, extensive.

⁴ This inscription, which appears on the frontispiece of Sebastiano Serlio's *Third Book* (Venice, 1542), is the most famous version of the opening verses of poem 36 by Hildebert of Lavardin (c.1056-1133): "Par tibi, Roma, nihil, cum sis prope tota ruina:/ Quam magna fueris integra, fracta doces"; see also SCHWEIKHART, G., *Roma quanta fuit ipsa ruina docet*, in *Kunstchronik* 40 (1987), n° 2, pp. 41-47.

⁵ On the figure and work of Cyriacus, see the pioneering study by C. R. CHIARLO, "Gli fragmenti dilla sancta antiquitate: studi antiquari e produzione delle immagini da Ciriaco d'Ancona a Francesco Colonna" in Settis, S. (ed) (1984), *Memorie dell'antico nell'arte italiana*, Turin, Einaudi, I: *L'uso dei classici*, pages 269-97 and, subsequently, the extensive conference proceedings of the Convegno Internazionale di Studi (Ancona, 6-9 February 1992): PACI, G. and SCONOCCHIA, S. (eds) (1998), *Ciriaco d'Ancona e la cultura antiquaria dell'Umanesimo*, Diabasis, Reggio Emilia.

⁶ SCALAMONTI, F., "Vita clarissimi et famosissimi viri Kiriaci Anconitani", in COLUCCI, G. (1792), *Delle Antichità Pi-*

cene, XV, Fermo, Dai Torchi dell'Autore, p. LXXII.

⁷ See SABBATINI, R. (1916) *Epistolario di Guarino Veronese*, Venice, A Spese della Società Venezia, p. 353.

⁸ WARBURG, A. (1929), *Introduction to the MNEMOSYNE. L'Atlante delle immagini*, edited by Martin Warnke, Torino, Nino Aragno Editore, 2002, p. 3. [Translator's note: *Introduction to The MNEMOSYNE Atlas* (trans. from German by M. Rampley) in *Art In Translation* 1.2 (July 2009), p. 277.]

⁹ La nascita di Venere e La Primavera di Sandro Botticelli. *Un'indagine sulle rappresentazioni dell'Antico nel primo Rinascimento italiano*, (1892), tr.it. in *Opere*, I: *La Rinascita del paganesimo antico e altri scritti* (1889-1914), edited by M. Ghelardi, Torino, N. Aragno Editore, 2004, p. 79. WARBURG, A. [TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: (1892) *Sandro Botticelli's Birth of Venus and Spring* (trans. from German by D. Britt) in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance* (1999), Los Angeles, The Getty Research Institute, p. 65.]

¹⁰ ANDREAE VESALII *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Libri septem*, Basileae, per Ioannem Oporinum, 1555 (prima ediz. 1543), *Epistola noncupatoria* [Translator's note: VESALIUS, A. (2003 [1555]) *On the Fabric of the Human Body* [Online] (trans. from Latin by D. Garrison and M. Harst), Northwestern University. Available at <http://vesalius.northwestern.edu/books/FA.a.html> (Accessed 1 June 2018).]

¹¹ See MICHELANGELO, M. AND ROSAND, D. (1976) *Tiziano e la xilografia veneziana del Cinquecento* [exhibition catalogue], Vicenza, Neri Pozza, pp. 123-133.

¹² NISSEN, C., "Le raffigurazioni scientifiche" in *Enciclopedia Universale dell'Arte*, XII, p. 318.

¹³ PIERANTONI, R. (1981) *L'occhio e l'idea. Fisiologia e storia della visione*, Turin, Paolo Boringhieri, p. 27.

¹⁴ PERTILE, F. AND CAMESACA, E. (eds) (1957) *Lettere sull'arte di Pietro Aretino*, Milan, Edizioni del Milione, II, p.

198. (Italics are mine)

¹⁵ SPERONI, S. (1542) *I dialogi*, In Vinegia, Aldus, MDXLII, p. 25r. [Translator's note: (trans. from Italian by M. Pardo) in "Artifice and Seduction in Titian" in TURNER, J. (ed) (1993) *Sexuality and Gender in Early Modern Europe: Institutions, Texts, Images* (1993), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 58.]

¹⁶ CASTIGLIONE, B., *Le lettere*, curated by Guido La Rocca, I, Milan, Mondadori, 1978, pp. 531-542. [Translator's note: (translation from Italian by V. Hart and P. Hicks 2006) in *Palladio's Rome: a translation of Andrea Palladio's two guidebooks to Rome*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, p. 179.]

¹⁷ VASARI, G. *Le Vite dei più eccellenti...* quote, pp. 85-86. [Translator's note: (1912-14 [1568]) *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (trans. from Italian by G. du C. De Vere), London, Macmillan and The Medici Society, p. xxiv.]

¹⁸ WINCKELMANN, J.J. *Storia dell'arte nell'Antichità*, 1764, Trans. into Italian by Maria Ludovica Pampaloni, Milano, Abscondita, 2000, p. 287. [Translator's note: (1764) *History of Ancient Art* (trans. from German by A. Potts) in POTTS, A. (2000) *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History*, New Haven, Yale University Press, p. 49.]

¹⁹ See DIDI-HUBERMAN, G. *L'immagine insepolta. Aby Warburg, la memoria dei fantasmi e la storia dell'arte*, 2002, trans. into Italian by Alessandro Serra, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 2006. [Translator's note: (2016 [2002]) *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art* (trans. from French by H. Mendelsohn), University Park, PA, Pennsylvania State University Press.]

²⁰ See DIDI-HUBERMAN, G. (2006 [2002]) *L'immagine insepolta. Aby Warburg, la memoria dei fantasmi e la storia dell'arte* (trans. into Italian by A. Serra), Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, p. 28.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

²² PINO, P. (2000), *Dialogo di Pittura*, critical edition edited by S. Falabella, Rome, Lithos, p. 66.

²³ See DE CIUTHIS, M. (1896) *Iraggi Röntgen*, Naples, Pietrocola.

²⁴ See BONNEFOY, T. (1970) *Roma 1630. L'orizzonte del primo barocco* (Italian translation), Milan, Istituto Editoriale Italiano.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁶ See OSSOLA, C. (1987) *Dal «Cortegiano» all'«Uomo di mondo». Storia di un libro e di un modello sociale*, Turin, Einaudi.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

²⁸ See FREEDBERG, D. (1989) *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press; MITCHELL, W.J.T. (1992) “The Pictorial Turn”, *Artforum*, n. 30, pp. 89-94; *Picture Theory. Essay on Verbal and Visual Representation* (1994), Chicago, The University of Chicago Press; BOEHM, G. (1994), “Die Wiederkkehr der Bilder”, in *Was ist ein Bild?* Munich, Fink, pp. 11-38, and particularly “Jenseits der Sprache? Ammerkungen zur Logik der Bilder” in MAAR, C. AND BURDA, H. (eds), *Iconic Turn. Die neue Macht der Bilder. Das neue Buch zur Vorlesungreihe* (2004) Cologne, DuMont, pp. 28-43; BELTING, H. (2002) *Bild-Anthropologie. Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*, Paderborn, Fink; DAMASIO, A. (1994) *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, New York, Putnam; DIDI-HUBERMAN, G. (1985) *La Peinture incarnée*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit; *Quand les images prennent position. L'œil de l'histoire* (2009), 1, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit; BREDEKAMP, H. (2010) *Theorie des Bildakts*, Berlin, Suhrkamp Verlag.

²⁹ WARBURG, A., *Introduction*, p. 3.

³⁰ OVID, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A.S. Kline (2000) Book I: 152-60.

³¹ AVERLINO, A., known as FILARETE, *Trattato di architettura* (1972) edited by Anna Maria Finoli and Liliana Grassi, with introduction and notes by Liliana Grassi, Milan, Edizioni il Polifilo, pp. 259-260. (Italics are mine)

³² See *Tutti li libri de Ovidio Metamorphoseos tradutti dal litteral in verso vulgar con le sue Allegorie in prosa* (1522), Venice, Zoppino.

THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN ANCIENT SCULPTURE AND FABRIZIO PLESSI'S VIDEO-SCULPTURE. INTER-SEMIOTIC TRANSLATION AND ICONIC RHETORIC

SILVIA BURINI

For his project in the exhibition space of The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Fabrizio Plessi put the focus on the need for dialogue between works of art and signs that belong to other historical periods, i.e. between antiquity and modernity, which has always existed. After all, history, as pointed out by Yuri Lotman, is first and foremost a form of human narration, a way in which man interprets and tells events because, when no interpretation or storytelling exists, no causal link can be established between what occurred before and what comes after, and no collective and/or individual perspective is available to capture the meaning of human experience¹.

History is the eye of the present enlightened by cultural self-conscience, it is human memory made true by the present, looking at the past and reinterpreting it. To understand what history is means to understand language; the secret of history is in the mystery of its language². Mr. Plessi's language, in this case, is his video art. Needless to say – but it may be worth recalling, since this is his first exhibition in Russia – Fabrizio Plessi is among the pioneers of video art in Italy and the first artist who has used a TV monitor as a true art medium, onto which he pours unstoppable flows of digital water and fire. Sound performances, ephemeral architectures, TV-studio sets and stage sets have