

Vasco Bendini's last workshop (1999-2014)

and I retreat, or rather, I assert myself by transposing myself into something different

Vasco Bendini, *Lettera con accordi*,
Monte Università Parma Editore, 2003

1. I met Vasco Bendini for the first time in March 2001 in his large flat-studio full of light at 142 viale Mentana in Parma. Two years before he had left the more and more chaotic Rome and had returned to live in the region where he was from. He was born, in fact, in 1922 in Bologna where he lived until the early 1970's and where he became deeply influenced by the late naturalism of Francesco Arcangeli. In Bologna he also attended the Academy of Art and was a pupil of Virgilio Guidi and of Giorgio Morandi. He often recalled the former's long conversations on painting and, above all, the long periods of silence of the latter as well as his severe manners which conformed to the austere conduct of the great Bolognese maestro. From him, in some way, Bendini also absorbed his severe detachment, his rigorous mental articulation, his assertiveness and the obsessive need to clean up his painting instruments at the end of each painting session. Likewise Morandi, Bendini considered painting as a daily duty to perform through an almost symbiotic contact with his pictorial matter. He was actually in an intense, constant dialogue with colour and with its basic essence, whether diluted or not, a silent dialogue which engaged him in almost absolute isolation within the walls of his studio. Nobody, with the only exception of Marcella, was allowed to attend the epiphanic revelations his creations unfolded in the morning. It all consisted in a sort of empathy with his work, which enabled him to "embrace" the image coming to life on the canvas which he kept in a horizontal position and would incline in various directions so that the image he had in mind could come forth. It was during this very phase that Bendini followed a sort of automatic process of research moving from the dominion of the sensible world towards the freedom of creation, as he wrote in the following friendly note he addressed to me:

At the beginning it is like following one's instinct, like following a risky, at times dark, path, but if you insist, it gradually leads to a connivance between the ability of matter to act and the intentions of the artist, thus accomplishing a real ritual creation advancing from the sensible world towards imaginative freedom.

2. It was late in the afternoon and after he had dedicated some hours to reading (Camus was a favourite author of his) when Vasco received me and, in his usual curt manner, showed me his new paintings asking for my opinion and impressions. I felt like a school boy being questioned by his teacher, a little school boy who first of all had to express his feelings inspired by the image on the canvas. According to Vasco, in fact, the "liberation" of a feeling, in full agreement also with the opinion of Longhi and Arcangeli, was necessarily the first step to take in order to reach a justified judgment on a work under examination. Only after this would it be possible for us to discuss the "theoretical facts" which scholars believe to be at the root of the formation of the image. Exactly like that time when together we considered the concept of images expressed by Elias Canetti: "a process towards reality [...] passes through images [...]. Images are nets, what appears in them is what has been captured. Something slips away and something goes wrong, but one must persevere, we carry the nets with us, we throw them into the water and the more they catch fish, the stronger they become. However, these images need to exist beyond a single person [...]. There must be a

place where one can find them intact, not only in one of us, but in all of us [...]”¹. Therefore, if an artist's occupation is to "capture" images according to the pertinent metaphor of the net, we all have the task to question them after coming across them and discovering in them a possible yearning for life. According to Canetti, for instance, the strong emotional impact with some paintings by Brueghel and by Rembrandt taught him new and precious aspects of reality: “every time it was [for him] a gift, a perennial gift”².

However, it goes without saying that we must not mistake "reality" for a simple mimetic transposition of the world surrounding us, but consider it above all the figurative manifestation in us of objects, ideas, passions and feelings. The sought-after image does not simply give a "photographic" representation, but can (or rather must) at the same time open itself to the cosmic spaces of metaphysical imagination (the ones that produced so much estrangement in Pascal), to the hidden existential lacerations (as in Bacon), to the anxiety which inevitably accompanies the life of every single human being (as in Munch). But it must also immerse itself in matter (as in Fautrier), in the feverish manifestations of the psyche (as in Wols), in the vast extensions of colour which record the soul's temperature (as in Rothko). Since *real*, as Canetti reminds us again, “is only what we recognize because we have already experienced it”³, and it - exactly because it concerns every point of view of life - can take on the shape of infinite and various images. Bendini, who was very interested in the scientific development of physics in the XX century - and above all in the "revolution" which took place in the first three decades of the XX century - thought, because of these fundamental events, that the artist needed to reconsider the genesis itself of the image and the essence of "matter" and he eventually had to point out that it ceased to exist as a tangible fact connected to things. I think this is the main reason why he provocatively affirmed on more than one occasion that “the world as representation was [after all] a deceit”⁴, and this made him adhere without any hesitation whatsoever to Informalism also as an effect of his way of being and of his life. I believe this uncompromising adherence of his, protracted in time, undoubtedly drove him to work beyond the age of ninety, with such enthusiasm and depth of thought and with such great pictorial quality that very few artists, not only of his generation, can claim today.

3. Some other aspects concerning his last years of his activity - until the summer of 2014 - still deserve to be taken into consideration. First of all, the relationship Bendini had with colour and its material texture in the process of image formation. More specifically, it is interesting to understand whether this relationship implies the action of "subtracting" rather than of "adding", of keeping the layer of colour and the structure of the image 'thin' rather than 'thick'. That is to say, giving great value to the density of the pictorial matter, almost seeking a sort of remote and autonomous truth within its very texture. In a precious - yet little known - essay dated 1963, Francesco Orlando traced an unforgettable profile of Tomasi di Lampedusa and the last four years of his life. Not only is it possible to read in it about the complex origin of *The Leopard*, but it also reveals the cultural preferences and infinite number of

¹. Canetti, E., *Il frutto del fuoco. Storia di una vita (1921-1931)* Adelphi Edizioni, Milano, 1982, pp. 121, 122

². Ibidem, p. 124.

³. Ibidem, p. 126.

⁴. Bendini, V., *Lettera con accordi*, Op. cit., p. 18.

books read by the Sicilian writer. Above all, it is possible to read of his peculiar classification of writers (and their works) into two main categories: the 'thin' and the 'fat'. According to Lampedusa "the «fat» ones give a full account of all the aspects and elements they are describing. They deprive the reader of the responsibility of making deductions and developing ideas from their words, since everything has already been inferred and developed within their works. On the other hand, the readers of the «thin» writers have to take upon themselves this tempting responsibility. The sense of their condensed pages secretly asks for integration and collaboration on part of the reader. The unsaid is more engaging than the said, yet it is not less accurate, for a discerning and allusive art inevitably leads the keen reader thereto"⁵. Tomasi di Lampedusa's classification implies a fundamental aspect in our approach to the work of art, whether it is a written text or a painting: the issue of how these works can express their intrinsic (hidden or silent) truth, their potential to give us the possibility to achieve a wider knowledge of reality. In such research, the Sicilian writer seems to openly prefer the more direct and less winding road, that is, the one characterised by 'thin' language. In fact, he claims that "truth [...] cannot or must not lie *in* words, but rather *beyond* words, in an area of implicit meanings and allusions which voices, gestures and facial expressions disclose far better than words"⁶. These are, according to Lampedusa, the points to follow and pursue: "brevity, sobriety, indirect evocation"⁷.

I believe that especially in the last magnificent years of his activity, Bendini came closer and closer to Tomasi's ideal, to this shared research for a potential truth that a work of art can convey. Brevity, sobriety, indirect evocation are actually the elements we can find in his last paintings: their material texture is 'thin' and so are the cleverly diluted colours which smoothly 'slide' across the canvas in order to better reach all the required 'shades', necessary to give depth to the work. Because we must bear in mind that Vasco lived by, and loved, a famous couplet by Paul Verlaine:

*Car nous voulons la nuance encore
pas la couleur, rien que la nuance*

Not colour, then, but 'nothing but shade'!

The *nuance*, the shade, was the goal to seek through brevity and sobriety, in order to foster a deep truth in the image. An evocation counterbalanced by the thinned texture of its colour, thus producing the 'shade', as if truth could lie not *in* colour, but *beyond* colour. Therefore, this was not to be achieved through 'patches' and 'thick pictorial pastes' as can be found in some masters of informal art, whose works are characterised by sharp and well-outlined strokes. In Bendini the shading thus attained is the element which surprisingly widens the horizons of the image, conferring upon it greater expressive depth and evident spirituality. As a result, Roberto Tassi's judgement - expressed years ago⁸ - is still entirely relevant today. Tassi saw in Bendini's works and in his 'images of subtle

⁵. Orlando, F., *Ricordo di Lampedusa*, Vanni Scheiwiller, Milan, 1963, pp. 50-52.

⁶. Orlando, F., *Ricordo di Lampedusa*, Vanni Scheiwiller, Milan, 1963, pp. 50-52.

⁷. Orlando, F., *Ricordo di Lampedusa*, Vanni Scheiwiller, Milan, 1963, pp. 50-52.

⁸. Tassi, R., *Vasco Bendini, "Palatina"*, n. 18, Parma 1961.

transparencies" a "secret quest for the absolute", characterised by a "spiritual dynamics" which could convey a 'spiritual' dimension to the 'existential'. However, this does not mean that in Bendini's last works colour becomes less important: it remains a central element. Yet, let us repeat it, its particular 'thinness' enhances above all the shades, imposing on us a sort of suspended concentration in the presence of the work. It is 'the silent power of painting' - deeply felt by Delacroix, if I remember correctly - which acts upon us, expressing the truth a work of art can reveal, even though - we must remember - "among the numerous unsolved enigmas in the world, the [artistic] creation remains forever the deepest and most mysterious"⁹. It is difficult to identify what in art is most precious and cannot be explained, it is a mystery - as underlined by Hugh Vereker, the figure invented by Henry James, in *The Figure in the Carpet* - which critics, as well as all of us, must in any case pursue¹⁰.

4. Throughout his long life Bendini always took notes of his impressions inspired by the numerous books he read and by his pictorial experiments. In his minute and sinewy handwriting he collected these 'chords' (as he often defined them) in small notebooks. In one of his last ones, dated 2011, we can find this revelatory thought:

*a beat interrupts the pause
it is time to abandon
the role of prompter is played by
matter.*

In this secret 'haiku', matter is once again considered as a sort of catalyst having the power to start the process of image formation. A simple beat, between abandon and overcoming the pause, can lead us towards the threshold of a revelation of truth. It is also for this reason that in the work of this great artist the image often appears as if 'suspended', dangling between immobility and movement, revealing something that can occur only after we have stepped beyond that threshold. As if, in other words, the image invited us to go beyond the arch overhanging it, directing us towards a metaphysical space unveiled by the artist:

*through the broken arch
of the threshold,
we [have] found again
the missing stone¹¹.*

After all, Bendini's painting, in harmony here with the lines of a poet he was fond of, is nothing but the discovery of this missing stone, the metaphorical exhortation leading us towards the vital and timeless art of this 'great solitary figure of our Twentieth Century'¹².

⁹. Zweig, S., *Il mistero della creazione artistica*, "Sintomi", Pagine d'Arte, 2017, p. 7.

¹⁰. James, H., *La figura nel tappeto*, Sellerio, Palermo, 2002, p. 56.

¹¹. Bonnefoy, Y., *Nell'insidia della soglia*, Einaudi, Turin, 1990, p. 105.

¹². D'Amico, F., *Addio Vasco Bendini grande solitario del nostro Novecento*, "la Repubblica", 1st February 2015, p. 55.