

Nothingness of Being and the Truth of Beauty

by Giorgio Bonomi

Since mankind started to think, it has questioned the problem of its own identity; it was René Descartes, after centuries of philosophy, who finally gave a solid base to the Individual with his “cogito ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am”) giving it an ontological base, “the Being”. However for the Individual, even in the fullness of his “being”, nothing is said about his identity, about “who he is”: so if we continue reasoning with the Cartesian thought we could say: “If I think I am: but who am I?”. This should be determined, but is it possible?

2000 years earlier the Obscure of Ephesus, the great Heraclitus, claimed that “no man steps in the same river twice” as the river will always have the same name but the substance will always change (the water flows so it constantly changes). That been said, you can easily deduce that not even man (he who will step in the same river twice) is ever the same; that is why for simplicity in our everyday life we name living creatures and inanimate objects, that “seem” to never change, but actually are constantly changing with time, becoming different. That is how Pirandello's famous saying “one, no one and one hundred thousand” came about.

To have a better understanding of the nihilistic thought of Marco Circhirillo it was necessary for us to give a philosophical introduction; he affirmed: “Mankind has been deprived of the truth, it does not know the reason why it is alive and finds lots of diversions not to think about it”¹.

As some interpreters have noticed, Circhirillo works on the “double”, that can be his own double but also the foundation of the existence of everyone and everything, because every creature has its own double and this duality presides human life: life and death, man and woman, body and soul, freedom and slavery, victim and executioner, black and white and so forth.

Many philosophers, psychologists, writers and artists² have worked on the “Double” theme, and that is how so much mythology has been created: this was necessary at the beginning of human thought – Giovanbattista Vico would have said, “in the childhood of humanity”, meaning in the “age of gods” and in the “age of heroes” – but after rational, materialistic and scientific thinking it is now all considered regressive, if not ridiculous.

We do not know our own bodies – or at least few parts of it, like our face and back – but through our “double”, in the mirror: our interpretation of the Narcissus myth is derived from here and it differs from the traditional vulgates. We see the Greek myth not as an example of futile vanity (Narcissus' death is caused by drowning or by consumption depending on which version, because he was in love with himself) but rather as a metaphor for getting to know, that is perceiving the other-than-self (what is in front of the knowing being) and comprehending it (which etymologically means “to take together”, “to catch”): therefore Narcissus dies attempting to “catch” his own image, “reflected” in the water, in an attempt to getting to know himself, hence with “auto-reflection”. Yet, looking closer, not even with “the double” we are able to give to the being a defined “identity”; as he and his double (or reflection) are always changing and are never the same (just as the flowing water in Heraclitus' rivers). Like Frederick Nietzsche, Circhirillo repeats: “God is dead”, as it is impossible to give a meaning to human actions, as Jean-Paul Sartre also said; and his friend Albert Camus sees our history and existence as absurd, both indebted to Martin Heidegger who theorized the “total oblivion of being”.

In front of this mankind's “shipwreck”³, it looks like only photography (itself a sort of “mirror”) is able to “fix” the character, making it “immutable”: but, looking properly, it is just fixing one particular moment of something that immediately afterwards is no longer the one in the picture⁴. As Roland Barthes said, “every photograph is a certificate of presence”⁵, as “the Photograph does not necessarily say what is no longer, but only and for certain what has been”⁶; Susan Sontag more clearly and strongly said: “photography is the inventory of mortality”⁷.

¹ Eddy Lovaglio, *Marco Circhirillo*, interview in “NewParma”, IX, 2010, pp. 58-61.

² See our: Giorgio Bonomi, *Il corpo solitario. L'autoscatto nella fotografia contemporanea*, Rubbettino Editore, Soveria Mannelli (CZ), 2012, pp. 11-12 and bibliography.

³ A term that above-mentioned Existentialists hold dear; see also Karl Jaspers' concept of “foundering”.

⁴ Let us mention Wolfgang Goethe's Faust, who risks his life because he wants to “stop the moment”.

⁵ In our everyday life, holder's photograph is affixed on ID cards, and it has to be changed after some time in order to “certify holder's presence”.

⁶ R. Barthes, *La camera chiara (Camera Lucida)*, Einaudi, Torino 1980, pp. 86-87.

⁷ S. Sontag, *Sulla fotografia (On Photography)*, Einaudi, Torino 1978, p. 62.

With what we said so far we have explained the two base elements of Marco Circhirillo's photography: the caducity of life and the pursuit of identity.

Circhirillo practise practical aesthetics (art), not philosophy, even if he asks himself the same questions and the same cognitive researches; his field choice is not just implemented by his nature or his predisposition but because it is only "beauty" (that is aesthetics field) itself that can give an answer to the non-meaning of life and thought.

Philosophy acts with the word (the writing), while art, in his different sections (painting, sculpture, photography and so on) uses its own instruments and materials (colours, stone, paintbrush, chisel, camera and so on): Circhirillo chose photography.

This is always addressed to the human "body", to his own body and to others'; in both cases it is easy to recognize the "nihilistic thought", the "pursuit of beauty" and "identity".

Between 2005 and 2010 the artist realized a series of images – significantly named *Sulla caducità della vita* (*On Caducity of Life*) – with models where the "splitting" is prevailing, with the duplication of the main subject, analog photographs produced using double exposure and, but very rarely, finished with Photoshop: it is clear that technology can help the artist, but this technology is never too visible or invasive, it does not destroy the "poetry"⁸. The portrayed faces do not express certainties, on the contrary they appear full of contradictions, so we ask ourselves: "are they duplicating in an attempt to create a more defined identity or because they are losing themselves?". Particularly moving are the two elderly faces (a man and a woman), that looks like they have been shoot while they were fading away (this fading obviously ends up in nothing). Even the problematic of gender definition is treated by Circhirillo in a poetic, even lyrical way, in the images of couples of women and couples of men.

2008 is the year of *Integrazioni* (*Integrations*), where teenagers between sixteen and eighteen⁹ are pictured. Not only do they have an existential identity problem, but also an "administrative" problem, as they are all foreign immigrants: a way to melt together poetry and "politics", art and humanity, without noise or ideological screams but in a rather touching way and with a sense of solidarity that captures the eye of the observer¹⁰.

The two series of works that have just been mentioned are realized in a "black and white" that allows a fascinating scroll of light, thanks to the shadows, the lights and the scale of grays; here, genius is the detailed focus of light in a part of the picture thus becoming the centre of the piece even though it is not the geometrical one: now it is a breast, now a t-shirt, now a detail on a pair of trousers or another part of the composition.

In 2010 colour "breaks" into the images à la Caravaggio or Rembrandt. The contents, as stated in the title of the *Ares* series, are made of a fighting protagonist, who fights with white weapons or barehanded against his double. Ares, in Greek mythology, is the god of war, in its most cruel and violent aspects, while Athena to the contrary is a goddess of war, but in its noble aspects, that is astuteness, intelligence and strategy – no coincidence that he is generally the defeated one.

Here the roles of the fighters are interchangeable, like those between "victim and executioner" or between "slave and master"¹¹. In this series, though, the most distinctive aspect is the formal one: the bodies are "gilded" by light and stand out against their circular, pitch-black background. The circle is the symbol of perfection but it is also a space without a beginning or an end, with all that is related to the time cycle, to the impossibility of "exit", to the theory of "black holes" and so on.

Brand new are *Ritratti* (*Portraits*), from 2013, where the same protagonist is repeated¹² many times, then these "personae"¹³ are set either in nature, even on tree branches in a sort of tropical jungle where they play the role of "savages" or of men in the legendary "state of nature"; or in rich libraries or evangelic churches.

In these works references to history of art go from the distressing settings of Francesca Woodman (but here, differently from the American artist, the woman dressed in black seems to "challenge", not suffer the degraded space), to romantic Symbolism (young men with thick blond hair who play in an Arcadian green field), to a rereading of *Quarto Stato* by Pellizza da Volpedo (men who go forward after a man who holds his blazer over

⁸ We use this term after Benedetto Croce, that is as "art" in its fullest meaning.

⁹ A quite complex age, like Circhirillo himself suggests, quoting Hafid Aggoune: "Adolescence is the time when you must choose between living and dying", drawing in some sense on another French writer, Paul Nizan, who wrote: "I was twenty. I won't let anyone say those are the best years of your life" (Aden Arabia, 1932).

¹⁰ We can opportunely mention that "integration", etymologically, comes from Latin "integer", formed with "in", meaning "non", and "tangere" ("to touch"). So the title here refers both to racial and national integration and to the will "not to touch" the other, who, even if he appears like different, is actually equal to us.

¹¹ Hegel wrote unexcelled pages about dialectics between slave and master in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807).

¹² Here we can talk of "tribute", through visual language, to well-known Gilles Deleuze's theory of "different repetition".

¹³ We would also like to mention that the original Greek and Etrurian meaning of "persona" is actors' "mask": so are also "personae" portrayed here.

his shoulder).

Particular attention is required to the series of works, self portraits dedicated to the four primordial elements (air, water, earth, fire), named *Omaggio a Rroseselavy* (*Tribute to Rroseselavy*). The artist refers to Marcel Duchamp, who used “Rose Sélavy” as a signature for lots of his creations; just as the French maestro did, when pronounced it sounds like: “Eros is life”¹⁴.

This series of photographs consists in the shooting of the artist's body – a perfectly conformed body, close to a “canonic” standard, as per Polykleitos' theories; it's no accident that Circhirillo practices performance, and above all theatrical mimics – wisely painted, wearing make-up, with his hair done up¹⁵, with symbolic colours representing the four elements: red for fire, brown for earth, blue for water and air, in the latter case also with two light wings.

It is obvious that the reference to the elements is a pretext, as the first evidence is the “statuesque beauty” of the images. If we remember that the Greek statues used to be painted, then the comparison seems less daring, and it would be right for us to consider these images as “living sculptures”: as even if they suggest movement (for example, where the foot rises for a possible flight or where we notice a sense of sliding), actually they are motionless in their plasticity and, we could say, in their “marbleness”.

We do not hesitate to term this “beauty”, legitimately. Friedrich Hölderlin (in his *Hyperion*) already said: “The first child of human, of divine Beauty is art”, and Fëdor Dostoevski (in *The Idiot*) said that: “Beauty will save the world”. These concepts allows us to overcome total nihilism, as art can be the way that allows us to go beyond the non-meaning of life.

As we previously said, Circhirillo believes that mankind has been denied the truth, but then it is through art itself that mankind can capture the truth. On this subject, let us mention the concept, traced back to Plato, that “Beauty is the radiance of the true”, and that the romantic John Keats, in a popular verse of his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, declares: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”; and, Benedetto Croce theorized that “The representation of reality and beauty are, in art, the same thing” (*Poetry and Non-Poetry*). So, with Circhirillo, we have a sort of overturning (a dialectical one, in a Hegelian way) and from a “pessimistic” view – both on the knowledge of reality and truth, and on the identity, while considering the world just on its caducity – it is through art itself that you recover a sense to life, and particularly by working on bodies, on his body “put on the stage”. Once again, in front of the art dilemma – whether it is reality or fiction – fiction assumes connotations of reality even more than the “apparent” reality (in its literal meaning of “what appears”, what you can see). Naturally if, on the one side, our artist finds (again), through the beauty of art, a meaning for himself and for the world, on the other hand he does not indulge at all in an idyllic and serene vision.

Poses, looks, expressions of these self-portraits show suffering and restlessness to the point that there is a touch of death, that death that as soon as we are born is out to get us, sooner or later¹⁶.

The great poet Charles Baudelaire (in *Posthumous Works*) said: “I will not insist that Joy has no part in Beauty, but I do claim Joy as among its most vulgar ornaments; whereas Melancholy is, as it were, its steady companion,

¹⁴Rose Sélavy is also the title of a Duchamp portrait by his friend Man Ray.

¹⁵The “make-up artist”, or better, also given the context, the “beauty specialist” is Daniele Soliani, who takes many hours to prepare the

¹⁶Circhirillo shares this pessimistic philosophy that was typical of Giacomo Leopardi, but at the same time he also takes from the poet the will to virile acceptance of human condition.

¹⁷“This story is about you” (Horace, *Satires*).