

From: *Sensing Painting. Opere dalla Collezione d'arte della Fondazione CRC / Works from the Collection of Fondazione CRC*, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 27 October 2023 – 28 January 2024) (Rivoli-Torino: Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 2021), pp. 25-30.

## ***Sensing Painting / Painting in person. An essay***

**Marcella Beccaria**

I'll begin with a confession. *Painting in Person*, the title I proposed for this exhibition, is something of a minor theft. Or, to put it more elegantly, it is a citation, which means that it is also a tribute. Ultimately, the whole history of Western art, and especially that of painting, is criss-crossed by the close relationship between the concepts of copy/citation/tribute (all far removed from despicable plagiarism). Though each has a different meaning, there are instances in which the boundaries between them prove creatively porous, with artists, or even entire cultural movements, making no secret of their kleptomaniac leanings, as in the case of Cattelan and Duchamp, or postmodernism and Mannerism, all the way back to ancient Rome and even earlier. Among the tasks of art historians is the study of the sources of iconography and their iconological analysis, areas of the discipline that, once the subjects, the themes, and the symbols depicted have been identified, examine the ways in which their reiteration, together with any modifications or additional visual forms, reveal changes in culture. A certain approach to perspective, a color, a gesture, even the detail of a finger... Ideas, forms, and models have always been subject to citation, passing from one work to another while inevitably revealing something about those who appropriate, change or, on occasion, reject them, at the same time as throwing light on the new contexts in which they take up residence.

To return to the choice of *Painting in Person* as the title of this exhibition, the citation refers to one of Giulio Paolini's works, *Il modello in persona* (The Model in Person). Obviously, my interest in this particular work is not only focused on its title, but also its meaning with respect to the historical references it evokes. Conceived in 2020 for a solo show at Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, the work consists of two painter's easels, a photograph of Paolini's studio in Turin, a sheet of transparent Plexiglas, and a plaster cast of a statue of Narcissus.<sup>1</sup> With the scene set using these elements, Paolini allows viewers to imagine they are watching the artist at work in his own studio, with the Narcissus in front of him. Depicted as a young man holding a globe in one hand, the cast is a reproduction of a bronze statue made in 1885 by the Neapolitan artist Vincenzo Gemito. Cast several times by Gemito, who devoted more time to this piece than he normally spent on his own original works, the bronze was itself a copy of a Hellenistic piece, which, in turn, had presumably drawn on earlier models. Discovered in Pompeii in 1862, the ancient piece was first noted by Gemito a few years later, during a visit to the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples, where it was on view.<sup>2</sup>

Paolini lets us into his studio so that we can watch him at work; Gemito encounters Narcissus in a museum; the statue serves as a crucible of a visual history (the end product of various models or copies). The recurring theme that interests me in this sequence is the concept of encounter, the idea

of being in a given place and seeing, with one's own eyes, in person, something that is happening at that particular moment. By building an elaborate architecture of the gaze—which provides the viewer with an inside look at the artist's studio and what goes on there, starting with the way in which the back of a painting that sits on an easel to the left forms the wing of the scene—Paolini's work spurs the imagination. Like most of his artworks, it delves into the entire catalog of the history of art, with a particular focus on painting. Leafing through these ideal pages, a key work that is defined by the presence of the back of a painting, placed to the left as a wing introducing an artist's studio, is Velázquez's celebrated work of 1656, *Las meninas*, a portrait of the family of the sovereign Philip IV of Spain. Described in simple terms, Velázquez's painting depicts the moment in which a girl of about five bursts into his studio while he is painting her parents' portrait. Containing a wealth of complex meanings, including the exaltation of the political role soon to be filled by the child, who is the Spanish hereditary princess, the work was admired by Velázquez's contemporaries as a "theology of painting."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the important role that Velázquez gives himself makes the work a key step in the construction of the modern concept of painting as an intellectual and autonomous activity. Whichever interpretation of this work is favored amongst the many proposed to date, there is no question that the iconographic citations and inventions underlying its structure involve viewers to such an extent that they feel they are entering the room where the scene is taking place, and encountering the various figures. As I write, I cannot resist the temptation to view the work again by visiting the website of the Prado, the museum where it is housed. The digital image draws me in, but to fully experience the type of encounter I have described we must bear in mind the fact that the painting is over three meters high. These imposing dimensions contribute to the sensation of being able to enter the Cuarto del Príncipe, the room in Madrid's Real Alcázar where Velázquez had his studio. Only when viewed in person does the work reveal that the immediacy of the scene is also heightened by the use of rapid brushstrokes that juxtapose unmixed colors, anticipating a technique that would be used by the Impressionists in the following centuries.

Besides the idea of painting in person as a subject of itself, a fundamental theme of the exhibition is the desire to address the pervasive nature of the digital mediation and the dematerialization that characterize so many aspects of modern-day experience. This is not to disparage the role of digital technology, or of the information made available by the internet. Indeed, in the field of art alone, there can be no denying that the possibility of viewing an infinite number of images of artworks today provides us with the largest museum created at any point in the history of human civilization. It is a marvelous idea, attributable in part to André Malraux, who was among the first to develop the concept of a museum without walls, an imaginary place that would potentially exist in the mind of each of us. To Malraux, a scholar of the 1950s, photography and its product, the art book, were the tools with which this museum could be built.<sup>4</sup> Innumerable art historians, though tireless travelers, have relied on photographs to pursue in-depth comparative studies that would not have been possible in earlier times. Besides Malraux (who features prominently on the web in snapshots that show him stretched out on his office floor, surrounded by countless photographs of artworks), we may also recall before him Aby Warburg and his *Mnemosyne* project.<sup>5</sup> Other major examples of photo-archives include the ones gathered by Federico Zeri, or before him by Bernard Berenson, who referred to art history as a grand game of chance won by whoever had the most photographs. Long before such scholars (unfortunately, I have only been able to think of men) made recourse to photography, engravings were used to spread knowledge of works of art.<sup>6</sup>

Just as photography and engraving have conveyed specific contents with respect to the works of art, so it happens for their digital reproduction. The engraver's hand interpreted what it was reproducing, and we know full well that photography is anything but the objective instrument that its use on our ID cards would suggest (even in the early 1900s, Matisse would commission several photos to record each of his works, noting that each image captured different aspects). In the case of digital reproduction and the numerous applications offered by AI (such as the thrill of seeing the missing portions of Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*),<sup>7</sup> a crucial topic of current discussion is the opacity of the data content used to train the software, as well as how the resulting models are managed. It should also be added that, as foreseen by Marshall McLuhan, technology modifies the human brain, which is reorganized by this type of exposure.<sup>8</sup>

Looking at a work of art on a digital screen means seeing certain features (those for which somebody has trained the algorithm) and reading them using a culturally restructured brain (that has developed specific circuits). Thus, looking at a work on a computer screen and seeing it live, "in person," will be two different experiences. The most recent studies on neurophenomenology, beginning with those of scientists like Francisco Varela, have developed the idea of embodied cognition, acknowledging the central role played by the body and the environment in which it moves and experiences.<sup>9</sup> Especially in the case of painting—the medium of the majority of the works brought together for this exhibition—a direct encounter makes possible a full perception of the work's spatial volume and its physical body with respect to the one of the viewer, as well as the tactile materiality that defines it, exactly as it happens with the skin that covers the human body. Painting also has its own unforgettable scent, as anybody who paints, or has the good fortune to spend time in an artist's studio, will know. Today's technologies in use are not capable of conveying these characteristics. Why should we deprive ourselves of such a rich sensory experience?

---

<sup>1</sup> See *Giulio Paolini*, exhibition catalog, edited by M. Beccaria, Rivoli-Turin: Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> For an in-depth discussion of Gemitto's work, see Salvatore Di Giacomo, *Vincenzo Gemitto, La Vita – L'opera*, Naples: Achille Minozzi Editore, 1905.

<sup>3</sup> Cited by Andrea Palomino, the statement is attributed to Luca Giordano. See *Velázquez*, exhibition catalog, edited by A. Domínguez Ortiz, A. E. Pérez Sánchez, J. Gállego, Madrid: Museo del Prado, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> See André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence: Man And His Art*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1953 (original ed. *Les voix du silence*, Paris: Gallimard, 1951).

<sup>5</sup> Mnemosyne was the focus of a recent exhibition in 2020 curated by Roberto Ohrt and Axel Heil, organized at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin. See *Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne: The Original*, exhibition catalog, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> In 1998 Federico Zeri donated to the University of Bologna his photograph archive, composed of over 290,000 photographs, to which he had dedicated utmost care. The archive is part of the Federico Zeri Foundation. Including around 300,000 photographs, Berenson's Fototeca is kept at Villa I Tatti near Florence, as part of the donation to the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies.

<sup>7</sup> Since 2019 the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, in which the masterpiece painted in 1642 by Rembrandt is hosted, began a multi-year restoration work, which included the reconstruction of the missing parts of the painting mutilated in 1715. To do so, the researches referenced an ancient copy of the work and trained neural networks to paint in the artist's style. See *Operation Night Watch*: <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions/operation-night-watch>.

<sup>8</sup> See Norman Doidge, *The Brain that changes itself*, New York: Viking Press, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> See Francisco Valera, Evan Thompson, Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1991.