

TREATISE OF THE PORTRAIT. by Alejandro HÄSLER

“When painting, I look for the face of which has no face”
Bram Van Velde, who did not paint portraits.

Introduction.

“No form of reality is independent: in some way everything is related”.

Juan Eduardo Cirlot.

It is not difficult to see that this book, begun with the portrait as a starting point, as a stroll with no destination (as when Paul Klee, on drawing, “took the line for a walk”), has become a true Miscellanea. Like those old treatise on painting, somewhat chaotic, which gathered all types of technical considerations and theories about art and painting including information apparently out of context such as cooking recipes, fables, puzzles or proverbs (the mannerist painter Pontormo frequently recorded in his diary what he had eaten that day and in what quantity, showing the worries about the state of his bowels which betrays the hypochondriac or the victim of the terrible Saturn’s disease).

I am a painter. And, like Leonardo in the first pages of his Treatise on Painting, I feel the need to ask forgiveness for having written a book without being an academic or scholar. As surely for them, in the words of the immense Tuscan who knew neither Latin nor Greek and who, in his humbleness, always carried with him a list of more knowledgeable people who he could ask questions of: “not being a scholar, I can neither be a humanist.”

I have taken the liberty to speak about portraits with great freedom, always conscious that, according to the orthodox view, the mere representation of the human face on some type of support is not enough to convert it into a portrait. But this book, like its author, is anything but orthodox.

I hope that, with a greatness of spirit only comparable to their patience, its readers will forgive its contradictions (contradiction is something that tends to be inherent to thought), repetitions and inaccuracies, as well as its lack of method, its accused tendency to digression and association of ideas with no safety net. Above all in the last third of the book, when concerning the greater nearness in time of the works I comment, I have allowed myself to make the abundance of information and reflexion about everything which is of “sub-lunar nature” (and to a lesser degree, also some events of “supra-lunar nature”) more enjoyable using an almost journalistic style, plagued with references about current social and political events. Even including juicy anecdotes, frequently treated with humour, a little in the way of the tattletale Vasari, which, as in works of art, are not necessarily true, if not, verisimilar (as William Blake said, “all credible images are an image of the truth”). Marco Polo, imprisoned for three years by the Genovese, dictated his celebrated tale of marvels and riches of the Far East to Rusticello, his cell mate. The same time your humble servant, prisoner of his own ignorance in everything concerning informatics, has taken to dictate the content of this book to different young people, frequently university students, initiated as nowadays is natural and indispensable in the secrets of informatics (an ability symmetrically balanced with the most absolute ignorance of everything referring to this great unknown which is for them nowadays something as old as the despised grammar). All similarity between both books finishes here, both for good and, I hope, as for bad (the fabulous book by Messer Milione took a long time to become known, bringing him during his lifetime nothing else than all type of raillery and mistrust).

All selection is always, by definition, arbitrary and incomplete. I have opted to show the works I know and remember best, the ones which have provoked an immediate, more urgent and

practically “automatic” answer in me. This book is in the line of work which I have been developing for years, where, under the neutral appearance of images of others’ works, I slowly end by drawing a diary, a map (or a portrait, if you so wish) of, paraphrasing Courbet, “the last fifty years of my moral and artistic life”.

It is my wish that you may enjoy it without prejudice, as when the magician’s tricks charm us without for one instant being conscious that we are being taken in (this “voluntary suspense of incredulity” which Coleridge speaks of taking place). One thing I can say without any fear of being mistaken is that writing this work has been a constant source of satisfaction for me. I may even say, without fear of being accused of lying, that I have written it in a constant state of intellectual and sensual exaltation: “con cuore e cervello” (with heart and brain). In short, an enormous loss of time, definitely a formidable useless effort (almost as useless as the strange idea of Joseph Beuys, one of the great gurus of Contemporary art, of explaining works of art to a dead hare) but at the same time something necessary. Therefore, I would be grateful if you take your pen out of your pocket and, as you read, cross out everything that I have written. Thanks to this small artifice, at the end of reading, there will be as little of this book left as there is of me.

Alejandro Häsler.

June 2010.

On beginning this book, the images were more important than the text, they were its starting point. Notwithstanding, this never was a mere and subsidiary description of them (it would be more a very sui generis iconology than an iconography, by freely using the Panofsky dichotomy). But little by little, the text began to gain in importance, becoming richer and more complex, able to suggest images (ultimately figurative). Almost from the beginning I noticed a friction, a discomfort or inadequacy between both means of expression (more and more I saw the images as a mere citation, almost a pre-text, so that gradually I reduced their size). To the point that I realised that what was really “conflictive” in this case were the images, which literally were not necessary.

Nothing is more radically opposed to the figurative as the abstract, so finally I decided to substitute the images by a square (the same one of the image in the file). An essential, archetypal form, stable and almost hypnotically beautiful, which resembles the print left by images on leaving (a little like these frames the thieves leave, as a sarcastic present, on the walls of the museums after stealing the paintings).

In this way the totality of each file is achieved, uniting two universes: the abstract and the figurative (represented by the text).

I opted for black colour for the picture as, contrary to what many believe, black does not represent something negative and obscure, but quite the contrary: light, interior light (as the light of the glittering star studded nocturnal firmament), matrix of infinite virtualities (pregnancy and fullness, as the emptiness of Tao).

The black square is a point of support (as once was the mandorla in sacred art) for meditation and visionary experience, favoured by the text which follows, with its ability to awaken the “imagination” of the reader (a complete exercise in *écfrasis* or literary description of imaginary works of art). My secret longing, the challenge I have assumed on writing this book, has been nothing less than converting the reader, blinded by the cacophony of banal images which make up almost all the current iconosphere, in a “visionary”. However, for those who lack the required imaginative and “visionary” capacity (as well as in the unlikely event that my

expectations, being excessive, are not fulfilled), the longed for images can be found, in order from first to last: www.alejandrohasler.com.

It pleases me to imagine the reader of this book which, with its emphasis on the material and sensual aspects (paper, typography, binding, touch, smell,...), is a homage to the traditional book, accompanied by his personal computer where, when he wishes, he can contemplate an image with all the luminosity and magic, as if floating incorporeal in the ether, which the virtual technology confers to it. In the silence of his room, like a medieval monk in his cell, he participates in a type of installation. A whole where, by fusing the most antique with the most modern, current possibilities of the book are enclosed. Becoming conciliating (once again a desire), in an unstable balance, Logo and Myth, image and concept.

TREATISE OF THE PORTRAIT.

It could be considered that the history of the portrait coincides almost fully with the history of art, as above all in the West the representation of the human face has had a greatly relevant role in artistic creation.

Even in such a iconoclastically marked era as was XX Century (limiting ourselves to the visual arts, as possibly the great portraits of XX Century are cinema close-ups), magnificent examples of these exist: it is enough to remember the impressive self-portraits of Frida Kahlo, some female portraits by Picasso, the hallucinated self-portraits of Artaud, any of those by Giacometti or the portrait of Paul Bowles by Rudolf Häslar, with an intensity and eloquence difficult to improve on. It is the motive par excellence of art. And also, possibly, the most difficult not only to achieve, but to appreciate: I have always believed that, more serious than the disappearance of painting, would be the lose of those who understand it (the figure of the "artis pictoriae amator", more commonly known as "connoisseur"*).

When Velázquez (who treasured some portraits by El Greco, whom he admired greatly) painted the marvellous portrait of Innocence X, breaking the norm for the first time (until then it had been Italian painters who had been commissioned with fixing the image of the Pontiff for eternity), it seems that the Pontiff exclaimed "troppo vero!". Neo-Platonist prejudice derived from the vision of art characteristic of early Christianity* (according to Saint Clement of Alexandria, art is worth praising only when it does not deceive by trying to pass for reality). Or maybe his reaction was simply one of stupor on seeing the havoc which the years of absolute power had played with his face and which the Spaniard had taken no pains to hide.

However, this assessment of Velázquez as little more than an excellent portrait painter with little imagination would be maintained until quite recently. Important treatise writers such as Max Doerner dismissed him in four lines as a mere "follower of Tiziano" who modified the Venetian technique a little to make a freer and quicker painting (in reality, the elegant and sensitive portraits of Sofonisba Anguissola, more sober in their colouring, rich in greys, than those of Tiziano, exercised a greater influence on Velázquez than those of the sensual Venetian). Even the divine Michelangelo, for who "disenio" and "invenzione", together with "perfezione" and "grazia" (the immanent standards which art, once overcome the "secolo infelice" of the Middle Ages, had to respect, according to Vasari, to keep up with the happy "etá antica"), represented the freedom of art in face of the inferior "ars mechanicae", dismissed the art of the Netherlands, realist (or maybe even "empiricist") par excellence, likewise as the art from the North in general (the latter deserving greater contempt if possible, due to its hard Gothicism).

It seems that Durer, taking up the challenge without losing any of his recognised passion for the artistic achievements of the Italians which led him on two occasions to travel to the Meridian country of the perfumed Myrtle woods (where the arts and sciences of the human spirit

flowered vigorously in the warmth of the love of Antiquity), where he visited the most recognised masters in their workshops with the yearning to snatch away their secrets, had painted a spider, with the Germanic precision of an entomologist, in a panel of the fussy Florentine genius; of whom it is said that, corroded by envy, had destroyed two works of the German master.***

Going deeper into a matter as complex as the portrait, I believe it convenient to distinguish between the theoretic-philosophical aspects, on one hand, and the practical and technical on the other.

*the figure of the connoisseur is very interesting: a sophisticated, though extinguished character, the greatest exponent of which was Bernard Berenson. Although Thoré-Bürger, Cavalcaselle or Giovanni Morelli were also well known. The latter, very acclaimed during the Italy of the Risorgimento thanks to his very “artistic” method of attributing art works (influenced by the anatomy studies by Cuvier) according to the very personal way the artists had of painting features such as noses, eyes, ears or feet (personally I find the ears painted by Botticelli very beautiful, although those by Mantegna are not bad either).

**Colour was considered as a trick by Saint Bernard (although for Saint Clement the pneuma, the spirit, resided in colour), and the suspicions of the Clergy towards it continued until the XVI century with Luther, Calvin and the great Reformists with no exception. Much of this prejudice can still be appreciated today in the Nordic countries of protestant origin, which consider the unbiased, happy and featherbrained use of colour of the Meridian countries to be vulgar (even though if one evil day we are unlucky enough to bump into a person wearing a green jacket, a red or orange shirt and yellow trousers, it is certain it will be a German).

***See the pinchbugs which the master of Nuremberg painted in the corners of several of his works, such as the Adoration of the Uffizi and the Virgin of the animals. On the other hand, his admiration for Michelangelo was obvious in the strange allegoric and experimental engraving called the Desperate, where the crushed profile of the Florentine genius appears on the left (maybe representing one of the four forms of “melancholia adusta”).

Philosophical - Theoretical Aspects.

An artist is, more than a great technician or a virtuoso of his work, someone who has an original view of the world which surrounds him. It is important to learn to observe with attention and calmness (if you do not wait, you do not find the unexpected), developing the capacity to establish connections and associations between the most varied and apparently disparate. We have to be clear that seeing is by itself a creative act which requires an effort.

When making a portrait it is recommendable to ask oneself several very important things, such as: what sense can there be nowadays in painting a portrait, when photography has existed for some time, in the era of Internet and submerged fully in a technological revolution*? Or: what type of portrait do I want to paint?

Photography and painting are two different languages. On mixing them a disturbance is produced which can be very stimulating, if you know how to take advantage of it. In respect to time, there is an important difference between both languages: photography stops time, painting contains it.

Between certain animistic cultures (and in the old rural Europe as well) there has always been a superstitious and reverential fear of photography, because it could “steal the soul” of the person photographed. Through its slow elaboration, painting restores the previously stolen Soul (it is interesting to comment that, for Heraclitus, people’s souls, as those of animals in general, were an exhalation of the humidity within them; being immortal, as on leaving the body it goes towards what is its own nature: The Soul of Everything).

When one paints from a photograph, there is a process from the frozen, the “death” implied by the two-dimensional flatness (the painter faces a “translation” from the three-dimensional reality to a new two dimensional one, full of traps which he has to know how to “decode”), towards life which is the painting. If one is not capable of carrying out this “resurrection”, which demands a large dose of creativity and imagination, the resulting work will not be good. There is a process in the studio from the photograph (and here, allow me a poetic licence, verging on exaggeration but very “real”), with an attitude similar to that which Cézanne showed before the Montaigne Sante-Victoire or Van Gogh faced with his sunflowers. The artist Marlene Dumas referred to something similar when she said that she “works with second hand images and first hand experiences”.

The image captured by the camera lens, besides being profoundly unreal (the result of a Cyclopean look, from only one eye, and not in stereoscope, the product of the human two), is translucent and incorporeal. We should remember that the first photographs and even films were frequently seen as materializations of spectra or shades, almost like apparitions. We have had to experience a prolonged discipline to accept photography as something real, a fact which today tends to be forgotten as it seems so obvious (in the same way as it is necessary to be trained to read an X-ray or interpret an ultrasound).

I am interested in an ever denser and opaque pictorial image, as if filtered by the body, or even as if the body emanated the images and these were smeared with their corporeity. I believe that only in this way can virtual images and their clear tendency to dissipate more and more in the ether be counteracted (but trying not to go to the other extreme, towards the manierism or over-valuing of matter, currently represented by the paintings of Miquel Barceló, which always leads to something vaguely sculptural).

The majority of portraits painted in the XX Century, especially in the second half (in the first there was still a continuity with the XIX Century) can be grouped together, grosso modo, in two categories. The first and that which has given the best results is the Expressionist method (two of its most important exponents being Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud). This method implies a deformation, be it in drawing, in colour or in the treatment of matter, in some cases reaching the caricature, which efficiently translates the deep interior life of the person painted (or the tormented interior life of the portrait painter, or a cross between the profound interior life of the person portrayed with the tormented interior life of the painter...).

The other method has no relevance at all, as it is the conventional portrait painting, flattering and untrue, which characterises the eminently commercial painters who have so efficiently contributed to this genre being totally discredited.

However, I defend another possibility of approaching the portrait, which is deep but without being disagreeable (in spite of Hiroshima and the extermination camps, I do not justify horror as a standard in art), without the use of deformation or expressionism. In this type of portrait there is neither idealization nor embellishment, but through the beauty of the painting, of the same pictorial medium (painting can be self-reflective without being necessarily abstract), it exalts and ennobles the human being.

It is a renewed form of beauty, vigorous and sensual at the same time, which maintains a dialogue with the past (with tradition) but without being anachronistic nor nostalgic, but fully compromised with the current reality.

My concept of the portrait can be synthesised in this formula:

Conventional portrait - portrait wished for - expressionist portrait

(Pursue the superficial likeness. Frequently these portraits are made applying Talion's Law – eye for eye-, the only law which, together with that of the minimum effort, is frequently used in the world of art).

(HP: Häslerian or psycho-physical portrait).

(leans more towards the psychic, even psychotic).

(1)

Vilhonneur, France

“Spring flowers, Autumn moon: when will you finish? To what point do we know the past?
Li Yu, Emperor of the Tang Meridional, 990

In November 2005 the Frenchman Gerard Jourdry discovered a cave where a human skeleton and some animal remains were found. This cave had been decorated with the impression of a hand*, haloed in blue cobalt, and the illustration of a human face which, according to Jean-Yves Boratini, is one of the most ancient representations of the human face in the world, going back to Higher Palaeolithic, some 27,000 years ago (much older than those of Lascaux, which date from 13,000 years ago).

Using the relief of the cave wall, eyes, nose and mouth had been painted in charcoal, in this way completely synthesizing the human face (in the deepest passage in the “Altamira” Caves, called Horse tail, there are two pillars decorated with masks which resemble this face flanking the path, as a sort of threatening Scylla and Charybdis).

Prehistoric cave paintings share a history of erroneous, simplistic and reductionist interpretations with all the art of Africa and Oceania for their being considered as artistic representations of a “primitive” mind (whoever thinks in this way, let him try to read a book by Claude Lévi-Strauss about the very complex relationships of kinship found in the few primitive societies which are still left, see if he can get past the first page). And continuing with all types of explanations, from the romantic one of “art for art’s sake”, that of the sympathetic magic to attract prey, the totemic one, the mythological (according to which the caves always followed the same constructive scheme, like a Gothic cathedral, on the walls of which pictures would always be placed following the same predetermined pattern). To Marxist interpretations of the class fight between the horse (the people) and the bull (fascism), and even an early version of the fight between sexes with its Freudian reading of the horse (woman) and the bull (man), which convert them into remote ancestors of the Gernika.

The art of the Upper Palaeolithic, with its combined effect of the subterranean space of the cave, the sounds and ceremonial dances and the parietal images which were revealed as they were illuminated by the palpitating light of tallow lamps and torches emerging “magically” from the reining darkness (which in addition added movement to the images, it “animated” them, as nowadays likewise we attend in a dark cave, silent and overwhelmed, the ritual of cinema), constituted a global synaesthetic experience of great emotional impact. An initiation and transforming rite for the participant (who entered in contact with the spiritual powers of the subterranean world), which is not so far from the sophisticated Egyptian funeral rites, with their intricate network of galleries profusely decorated in the interior of this “artificial cave” which is the pyramid.

The cave’s walls were not an inert surface, but interacted with the artist, proposing an arsenal of reliefs and accidents as well as a play of lights and shadows to his imagination, in an enriching combination of sight and touch (anyone who has been inside a cave, realizes it is not necessary to “alter” the mind in an artificial way, or even follow the famous advice of Leonardo, to spontaneously perceive the most fantastic shapes and figures). This acted rather like a screen on which the artists projected the images they had conceived (the images from the exterior world having previously been projected on the screen of their minds).

Surrounded by formidable and frequently very large animals, it is easy to imagine the burden of “dark infrahuman instinct” (Jung) and the cosmic force which these could embody for the men of the Upper Palaeolithic. Nowadays when we live domesticated in large cities and towns, true human zoos of concrete, glass and metal, almost having made wild life extinct, an infinity of them still gallop on the grassy pastures of our subconscious, showing that we can not (nor should

not) live without animals (which are something rather like the connection of human-kind with the natural world, and even with the cosmic, as Hasidism advocates). You only have to look at the immense variety of pets, shops of exotic animals, television documental programmes which teach us about their habits, films and series of cartoon animals, associations for their defence or extinction (or for both at the same time, as in the case of the bull fight, so much so that you do not know who to identify with, those who defend the beauty of its atrocious death in the bull ring or those who, for the bull's own good, prefer it should be extinguished). As the enormous and mysterious "amour fou" children feel for dinosaurs, or the immense variety of fluffy toys that can be found in the shops (fortunately, the sinister habit of having stuffed squirrels on top of the television or in other equally strategic places in the living room have been lost, which brought about the extinction of a very antique profession such as that of the taxidermist, many of them reconverted into plastic surgeons).

Faced with works of such sophistication and expressive beauty, with such an intensity that they resemble the result of detailed vision or hallucinations, it is clear that from the beginning of the history of art there is no evolution from lesser to greater complexity or perfection of any kind (as the progressive model of artistic evolution in the Western theory of art used to sustain more or less from the Renaissance to the end of the XIX century), if not that art was already born perfect.

*Hands which are poignant greetings from the first humans to the last ones, from the depth of this capsule where an eternal present reigns in which things are no longer prisoners of time; as if meanwhile, only a few metres away, nothing has changed around them.