

CONFLUENCES: GIOVANNA BROGNA SONNINO & FABIO SGROI

Entrapped in being, we shall always to come out of it. And when we are hardly outside of being, we always have to go back into it. Thus, in being, everything is circuitous, roundabout, recurrent, so much talk; a chaplet of sojourning, a refrain with endless verses.¹

GASTON BACHELARD, *The Poetics of Space*

ANTE-SCRIPTUM

In its broadest sense, the term *gallery* denotes a space of variable yet substantial breadth that serves as a passageway between adjacent architectural areas. More specifically, in large Renaissance and Baroque palaces, the gallery was a hall connecting different parts of the building, which later became a place of representation where decorations and works of art were stored and displayed. From here, in its contemporary usage, the term has come to denote a complex of rooms intended to house sculptures, paintings, photographs, and the most diverse kinds of artworks. This brief and schematic phylogeny of the word allows us to grasp a fundamental attribute of what an art gallery is today: namely, its dual function as an ambulatory – a zone of passage – and as a place of gathering and artistic concentration. Indeed, it is a point of confluence, a crossroads in which movements, gazes, and intentions intersect: the visitor's physical and mental itinerary, the historical trajectory of the works, and the curatorial path that situates them within the space. The gallery is therefore a space in which the transience of movement and the stillness of contemplation coexist, echo one another, and mutually define themselves; or, to borrow Merleau-Ponty's effective intuition, a space that is not merely the *milieu* in which things are arranged, but the medium through which the very arrangement of objects becomes possible². Inside it, the visitor moves through the space and pauses before the works on display, observing them and, at the same time, recomposing their signs along an intimate and personal trajectory. It is a space that, although structurally devoted to transit, nonetheless invites the construction of a personal relationship with images. For these reasons, the gallery may also be understood as a mediating device, an environment that connects the artwork and its audience, or the private dimension of aesthetic experience and the public dimension of exhibition. Within it, a most peculiar form of encounter takes place, where the movement of the body through space becomes movement of thought, while passage inevitably transforms itself into experience. This is why the vastness of a gallery is circumscribed and finite with regard to its physical boundaries, yet virtually limitless in terms of its combinatory possibilities, thanks to which – as in the case of this exhibition dedicated to Giovanna Brogna Sonnino and Fabio Sgroi – artists whose works reveal experiences, languages, attitudes, and expressive modes so diverse and singular can nonetheless coexist within it.

INTER.SCRIPTUM I

According to the most common informational channels, Giovanna Brogna Sonnino, born in Catania in 1955, is a “director and photographer.” Yet confining her restless and multifaceted artistic explorations within the malleable contours of these two labels would still do a disservice to her unclassifiable and irreducible versatility. A substantial part of her career, after graduating in Florence and subsequently moving to Rome, indeed begins in the world of film production. It is in the capital that she starts working for RAI and devotes herself to the creation of numerous movies, docu-films, and documentaries, some of which have earned her, over the years, recognition both in Italy and abroad

1 GASTON BACHELARD, *La poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958); English trans. MARIA JOLAS, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), pp. 213–14.

2 See MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945); English trans. COLIN SMITH, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962).

(*Festival Internazionale Scrittura Immagine*, *Nastro d'Argento*, *Torino* and *Brooklyn Film Festival*, to name just a few). Her official photographic debut is marked by a pair of exhibitions held in 1986, *Ritratti* (Portraits), staged – not coincidentally – in Rome and Catania, her two most significant urban poles. Even so, anyone fortunate enough to venture into the dense undergrowth of her expressive categories quickly notices both the precedence of her photographic experience and the cluster of side paths, broad routes, and minor tracks that constantly intersect and together shape her artistic corpus. *Lettere al Dott. B.*, a collection of letters written between 1979 and 1987 to the psychoanalyst Piero Bellanova but never delivered, is illuminating and emblematic in this regard. What seems at first a simple epistolary sequence reveals itself instead as a dense, heterogeneous volume of materials: scans of the typed letters themselves, clippings and fragments from various sources, small drawings and watercolors, personal documents, and – above all – a vast collection of photographs, very often featuring the author herself, along with numerous collages³. These pieces, in particular, mark a crucial and paradigmatic phase in Giovanna Brogna Sonnino's work, for their intrinsically hybrid nature attests to a compositional practice inclined toward assemblage, toward the combination of disparate parts, where photography and textual matter – as demonstrated by the works on display here – always play an essential role. Beyond this, the frequent reuse of photographs originally produced in earlier contexts and situations further expands the semantic reach of these already complex and layered works, transforming each collage into a shifting weave of meaning; a constellation of iconic fragments which, once repositioned and recombined, generate an unprecedented image, new relationships, new meanings, new narrative possibilities. In more recent years, and precisely in the wake of this working method, Giovanna Brogna Sonnino has devoted herself to the creation of the so-called *Altarini* (Little Shrines), a kind of installation that, within her house-museum, takes shape as small fusions or assemblages in which – much like in the collages – photography and text seem to interpenetrate and converse with one another. The difference here, however, is that the surrounding space itself assumes an important and symptomatic function; and this cannot, and should not, come as a surprise, for someone who has managed to pour her restlessness into art and sublimate it – an art disparate and polymorphous, in which films, photographs, drawings, books, and various artifacts all find their place – everything, truly everything, becomes part of a system.

INTER-SCRIPTUM II

Fabio Sgroi was born in Palermo in 1965, and it is here that his career as a photographer takes shape and develops in the mid-1980s. Like many young people of his generation, raised amid the ferment of the punk scene and within a reality that was, all things considered, provincial, he dreamed of traveling and moving abroad, but for various reasons chose to gain experience in the Sicilian capital. There, thanks to his initial collaboration with the newspaper *L'Ora* – his first and last strictly journalistic venture – he had the opportunity to devote himself to reportage through the visual analysis of university movements, marches, anti-war and anti-nuclear demonstrations, but also through the most tragic and blood-stained folds of the so-called “Mattanza”, the mafia war that led to clan feuds, countless murders, and ultimately the well-known “Maxiprocesso”. In recalling this period – so fierce and disturbing, yet also full of contradictions and existential impulses – he would later say that he had been there “with the impression that one lived between life and death.”⁴ But his engagement with Sicily does not end with the city of Palermo, for in seeking paths that were not solely documentary, Sgroi began to explore his region and the many festivals that often define the folklore and religious customs of its towns. Later, emancipating himself from the initial models of photojournalism, he turned his gaze toward new social realities as well, among them southern Tunisia, the United States, and Europe, especially Central and Eastern Europe as it emerged from the disintegration of totalitarian regimes. Everywhere, with a striking continuity of style and content, he traced signs of precariousness and hope,

3 GIOVANNA BROGNA SONNINO, *Lettere al Dott. B. 1979 – 1987* (Siracusa: Lettera Ventidue Edizioni, 2019). It is worth noting that one of the letters, dated 27 May 1982, was written in Malta – the very occasion on which the author took the photograph included in this exhibition.

4 FABIO SGROI, “Per le strade di PA,” in ENZO SELLERIO, LETIZIA BATTAGLIA, FRANCO ZECCHIN, FABIO SGROI, LIA PASQUALINO, *Palermo mon amour* (Turin: Hopefulmonster, 2023, p. 26).

marginality and change, that strong existential tension he had already perceived in his Palermo and which he articulates through a sensitive gaze attuned to identities in transformation. Sgroi's photographic work – as evidenced by the wide spectrum of pieces displayed in this exhibition – is structured precisely within this unstable threshold, between presence and disappearance, between what is lost and what remains, between “life and death.” His shots, both those taken in his city and those projected outward, do not, however, merely document a torn and troubled social context; they traverse it, so to speak, from within, conveying its emotional density, its rawness, and at the same time its unexpected vitality. His grainy black and white, often cut by a sharp, oblique light – one of his essential stylistic signatures – becomes a code through which Sgroi maps a personal atlas of the places he crosses; of the points of friction where reality cracks and allows a more hermetic substance to surface, a truth more ambiguous and therefore more human. And it is precisely in this liminal zone that the compositional effectiveness of his gaze becomes evident, in the ability to transform personal experience into an intelligible document; after all, as a skilled colleague of his reminds us, “beautiful photographs cannot be planned at the drawing board,” for “it is reality itself that suggests them. It is that place, that moment, that person, that situation.”⁵

POST-SCRIPTUM

If, as we have seen, the gallery is a space of cognitive transit, a place where the observer's physical path is juxtaposed with his inner trajectories, then the co-presence of Giovanna Brogna Sonnino and Fabio Sgroi is not simply an exhibition choice but a true declaration of method. Their works, though so distant in languages, materials, intentions, and genealogies, find in the space of recomposition a shared ground. On one side, an art that proceeds through accumulation, stratification, montage: letters, photographs, clippings, drawings, fragments of life and memory that thicken into a single body, where each element is called to coexist with the others and to generate new constellations of meaning. On the other, a gaze that traverses reality with a troubled clarity, capturing in the margins, in the cracks, in the interstices of history those points of friction where presumed objectivities begin to crumble “and seem on the verge / of betraying their final secret.”⁶ One could also say, with a simple metaphor, that Fabio Sgroi's lens is constantly trained on the external world, on its fractures, on the corners where its most fragile substance reveals itself; while Giovanna Brogna Sonnino's endoscopic lens, autobiographically and conversely, is trained on herself, on the sedimentation of memories, on the inner regions where images and words bind together. Two routes, two habits; yet it is here that their proximity takes shape, for both, though from opposite directions, work on the threshold between what appears and what hides, between what emerges fully and what must be recomposed. One traverses the world to grasp its potential truths, while the other traverses herself to return an image of the world. And it is within such tensions and short circuits that the gallery finds its most genuine meaning, becoming the point at which two divergent trajectories converge – not to resemble one another, but to reveal, each in its own way, the wavering intermittence of their gazes.

5 TANO D'AMICO, *Fotografia e destino. Appunti sull'immagine* (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2020, p. 81).

6 EUGENIO MONTALE, *The Lemons*; English trans. JONATHAN GALASSI.