

The Joyous Dance of Skeletons – The Status of Drawing in the Painting of Bernard Piffaretti

No doubt because for centuries it has substituted the always partisan ideologies of its images for the indecipherable reality of the world, but perhaps also because it has physically covered the grain of the cave wall, then that of the wall and later of the canvas with its smooth opacity, painting invites us to conceive the intuition of a truth that its paradoxical nature would have it hide at the very moment it offers to reveal it to us, a truth that, having caressed it with the wet colour from its bristles, the brush has somehow irrevocably encoded, abandoning us to centuries filled with the thousand and one tricks of the purported mysteries of art. As with the Divine Plan behind the infinite diversity of natural phenomena, or the anonymous skeleton beneath the apparent singularity of bodies and faces, we have learnt to expect drawing to offer us a more ultimate meaning of the picture than the one proposed by the different effects of the pigments organised on its surface.

What a great disappointment, though, are these X-rays of famous paintings which, instead of the secrets and weighty consequences we are expecting, reveal to us only boudoir intimacies, little technical tricks and dispiriting court intrigues. Often, exhumed from the muck that protected their pretensions, taken past the chatter of anecdote, the entity hidden between the surface of the ground and the ground of the surface soon returns to its nature as project, as rough, as an intermediate genre whose interest is quickly confined to the documentary. We are talking, of course, about the kind of drawing whose status is subordinate to that of the painting of which it is only a quicker and not always necessary stage, and not the kind of drawing that is in itself the highest manifestation of the artist. This is the drawing between the lines of which we glimpse the weave of the canvas or the paper or the wall, and which has never been hidden from the gaze, revealing nothing of that which painting, by hiding it, led us dangerously to suppose was the Canvas of the Gods: nothing other than the absurd and rather flat materiality of the support.

This was what Lucio Fontana understood when he made his radical gesture of opening both canvas and painting onto the emptiness at their back, thereby opening onto a greater lucidity, even if this may, wrongly, seem more desperate, less liable at any rate to the always disillusioned illusions that it finally allows us to dispense with once and for all. And any possible despair here gives way to the new exaltation that takes hold of the painter as he grapples with the very question of painting and its culture as the object of the canvas, which question constitutes one of the great foundations of the contemporary project. It is essentially in this light that we need to apprehend the drawings of Bernard Piffaretti, in this light that we can glimpse the new relation that they institute with the picture support, the tableau, and the meanings they discover in it.

And, to begin with the beginning, the fact that these drawings never mark the beginning of the œuvre, that they never take the form of a sketch or a plan, nor that of a rough or an experiment, nor even that of a note to be executed in a future work: Bernard Piffaretti draws when drawing is no longer necessary, when the dice have already been cast, when the curtain is down, when the gesture has no justifying utility, not really even their documentary quality which he readily invokes when faced with the excess of the question, but which in reality lacks credibility given the abundance of photographic traces that, like every artist today, he keeps of his own work. He draws his paintings when they are finished, he draws several, at the same moment, when he has completed several and feels the need to file them away, so to

speak. We know that in the repetition of the motif which constitutes this painter's method, the origin of the painting is practically lost, dominated by the line which, by defining the partitioning of the canvas into two halves of which one will have the vocation of hastily reproducing the other, merely reiterates, from one painting to the next, his decision to subordinate the practice of his art to adhesion to his method. We know of the extraordinary freedom that Bernard Piffaretti has conquered with regard to the motif, the care that he takes not to limit it by any discourse. In the constancy of his production of these drawings since he began his œuvre, in the absolute uniformity of their supports – as it happens, ordinary A4 paper (21 x 29.7 cm) – we find a confirmation of the coherence of his undertaking: one that is more violent than it first appears. Behind the lines of the drawing there is no other mystery than the flatness of a format whose conventionality is enough to index the age without excess gravitas; behind the perfect uselessness of this maniacal reportage of the pencil lead the meticulous and patiently subversive confirmation of the painter's project, a radical gesture regarding the basis, the origin, the cause – in a word, the artist's motif (motive), that which acts in the form that he has decided to give to his actions.

By reproducing the painting with no other reason than the a posteriori affirmation of having done it, the drawing makes its work of being out of work, makes this redundancy an occasion of the work's meaning, the opportunity to question the nature of the painter's activity when he paints the second half, when, in a sense, he repaints, but also an opportunity to question his activity when he paints the first half, to question, more precisely, the very feeble reasons he may have for increasing day by day the collection of motifs he has undertaken, which seems to correspond to no special form of heroism, the opportunity to question the very activity of painting that does not really do justice to its sources or its ends, no more than to its pretexts or excuses.

In the work of Bernard Piffaretti, drawing lies behind his painting, that word here having a very different meaning from under. Rather than having a preliminary function, it has the status of a confirmation: by reproducing the painting, it draws what the painting has done, how one half of the painting has reproduced the other, and in no event does it reiterate the method, since each drawing is made outright, as a whole, with the concern to embrace the particular modality of the mime on the occasion of that particular motif, taking up a posture that would consist in trying to renew the experience, and which would obviously be false under the circumstances, leading not to the representation of that particular painting, but to the presentation of the sketch of another.

Just as skeletons can only really be brought to light after the event, after the body, although they constitute its undeniable underlying assumption, the drawings of Bernard can only appear after the paintings. Like skeletons, whose dance is more grating in life than it is informative in death, about which they have already forgotten all they knew, the round of Bernard Piffaretti's drawings executes the merry dance of his paintings, confirming their precious singularity, which is that of having drawn time, of having, for a time, embodied the miraculous awareness thereof. And like them, finally, their quantity refers more to the sense of their anonymous resemblance than to that of the singular identity of each one, which, if that were necessary, gives a particularly clear measure of the degree of abstraction of this painter's approach.

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March 1998