

Ernesto L. Francalanci: *Freezer*

The freeze of time created by Alberto Frigo in *Subject*, is a performance on the instantaneous by means of the instants. It highlights the most difficult and painful characteristic of our postmodern condition, the loss of time as lasting and as a process of becoming, substituted with a sort of hallucinogenic temporal distortion. The past seems to become only the present of past moments, just as the future is the present of future moments, and the present, the present of present moments. It is the same as the digital experience, which presupposes a condition of space time, a soft metaphysics that enacts a *hic-et-nunc*¹ in a *simultaneous* and *simulative* dimension.

A similar concept is that of a subjective, psychological, and relative time that in the west goes all the way back to the classic age, specifically the IV Century C.E.. A historical moment that coincides with the irreversible crisis of the Roman Empire (a period marked by the loss of certainty and characterized by a deep existential uneasiness), this interpretation finds clarity in *The Confessions* by St. Augustine, and can be synthesized in the famous declaration: *Tempus per se non est!*² How do we measure time, asked St. Augustine, if the past is past and the future is yet to come? “The measurement of time,” responded St. Augustine is not time, “it is the *memory*, that measures the past, therefore it is the expectation of the future and the gaze of the present.” Let’s move on to the relations that this classical reflection has with our age and with the ‘performance’ realized by Frigo.

Today, in the postmodern culture there is another other epochal crisis, that of the western ‘Empire’ in its late capitalistic model, on which Jean-Francois Lyotard, Ihab Hassan and David Harvey have written quite profoundly. The mentality of St. Augustine, is clearly from a completely different point of view, though one finds strange correspondences. The preoccupation that characterizes the postmodern western for these authors, is the disease of history, which incapacitated the ability to represent the truth. A characteristic that was typical of modern culture, which knows how to think of the present as a consequence of a past and to prefigure a projectable future. This impracticable concept of history as a motor of reproduction of the world (which at the end intends to reassert the centrality of the subject) inserts into a much wider scope, profound and possibly irreversible transformations. I will try to emphasize some that are inherent in the context we are dealing with.

Post modernity is marked by the radical substitution of the ‘art object’, for the ‘process’ (performance) as a finished piece; creation for deconstruction, concentration for dispersion, semantic for rhetoric, metaphor for metonymy, selection for action. We find ourselves moreover confronted by a number of phenomena that have in common the loss of conceptual differences, or the dialectic opposition present in modern and classic thought. Therefore it is always more difficult to distinguish between the material and immaterial, essence and appearance, truth and fiction, reality and simulation, evident and hidden, authenticity and inauthenticity, original and copy, singularity and series, significance and meaning.

The ‘performance’ of Frigo is perfectly indicative of this postmodern culture and I think that many of the listed points above are confirmed as the characteristics most immediate in his work. It is a ‘demonstrative process’ deconstructing the fullness of experience and dispersing in metonymic fragments the great metaphor of existence. Not choosing between a choice of icons, but rather arranging them in a practical way, which disregarding the significance of the action, translating it into rhetoric. Moreover, it does not dig into the pending and fading places between the dialectic opposites of the philosophy of modernity, nor resolve or shed light on the elusive nature or inauthenticity that dominate its operation, or incite a semantic reflection of the significances. It does, however, highlight the ‘imitative’ process of reality, the only meaningful aspect.

¹ Here is now

² Time itself, does not exist!

By now it should be clear that I'm not listing a series of defects, but rather symptoms (referring to Deleuze to be clear). If at the end, as Harvey tells us, the paranoia of the modern man was determined from the continual frustration for not having reached a better future, the schizophrenia of the postmodern man is caused from the fragmentation of the subject into a multiplicity of roles and behaviours often irreconcilable between themselves. All resulting in a present compressed between a past that we do not want to remember and a future that we do not want to conceive. No longer a 'blow-up,' a progressive enlargement of a detail, "analyzed interminably," as Freud would have said. Instead a 'cut-up,' a destruction and recomposition of fragments. The sudden fall of images in the world, after the combustion of the real. The end of the profound relation of images with the world of objects, the end of naturalism as a significant narration.

The "objects" themselves do not possess value, giving sense to objects is predicated on the establishment of meaning through a semantic language that nominates and defines them and at the same time, realizes them. "The limit of my world," as Wittgenstein said, "is the limit of my language."

Something still more serious has happened in the passage from modernity to postmodernity as far as the future of the object is concerned. It is an entity has become indeed indefinable, putting to risk our very language and our descriptive ability. As Walter Benjamin prophesied, "the object, in the transformation provoked by the technical age, has become something that seems to possess its own sensibility, an autonomy from us and a more uncontrollable intelligence," therefore manifesting a sex-appeal that encroaches, over time, on a subject that feels more like an object.

We return to the operation carried out by Frigo, an operation that does not regard the action of the subject, but rather that of the objects in the world. Not the modality with which the subject relates to the object, but the moment in which the objects fall into his visual and prehensile horizon. The appearance of the object is for Frigo an epiphany, an unexpected event even if continuously repeated day after day, there is always the shock of this incomprehensible apparition. The object comes into my hand, the object catches my eye. I do not see. I am seen from the object. I do not take the object, I am taken by it. The operation of Frigo is a novel in which not even a single verb exists therefore time, conjugation, and modality do not appear. Only names and nouns accompanied by some chromatically biological adjectives; a part of the hand, a reflection, a contraction of the fingers, the transparency of a vein. (I cannot not think of a literary monument more emblematic than this pure presence of the object/commodity in the postmodern horizon, then that perfect and chilly catalogue of products and places, that is the cannibalistic exercise of Brett Easton Ellis in *American Psycho*, 1991) It is as if the body were uncatchable, unattainable, unrepresentable or still worse reduced to a simple object among objects.

The performance of Frigo (not casually entitled *Subject*) is fusion of the subject and object, conceived like a sequence of frames in a sort of slow motion of his life, ad infinitum. Because Frigo, indeed a "refrigerator" or ice dispenser, freezes items of his existence on the anatomical table of the representation. It is not a story for the images, it is a neutral archive that neutralizes the data. A bone collector. Further still it is an image of something dead. It is an object that was. As Roland Barthes brilliantly states in his *Camera Lucida* concerning the photograph of a young person about to be shot. What does Barthes say in the caption under this 'impossible' portrait? [This condemned man] is dead and he is going to die!

In the secular dimension of modern art and even more in the present period the ultimate purpose of the image, of every image, is to arrest time and counter its destructive force: the ability to transform nature which is dead, into an immortal icon. This is the secret of the image, its role, and its function. If that is not understood than we cannot say more, why does man continue to 'create'? It is because he continues to try to stop the infinite transition of becoming. Putting on a performance, reducing expectation and memory to a single experience in the present.

Alas, this is the show. The representation of an obsession, the past becoming the future. This is the show, the nostalgia of the past that invents a future hope while realizing a bearable present.

It is the end of every perspective conception of space and time. As Panofsky states, "it is not the case that the renaissance perspective, demonstrating its symbolic essence, deconstruct itself with the invention of mannerism that makes time and spaces its obsession. Pontormo writes in his notebook every meticulous detail of the day (similar in another manner to what Frigo does) making this apparently neurotic and paranoiac exactitude, his most dramatic work. The manic and compulsive translation of life into a fragmented sequence will render his biographical notebook eternal. As in his pictorial representation, which already had a futuristic dynamism in the bodies, cloaks, veils and gestures that indicates the irreversible crisis of the classic image and its entrance into the overarching language of modernity. Between the single frame of the *The Visitation* (1528) by Pontormo and the 'time stretching' of the video by Bill Viola in *The Greeting* (1995) to which it was dedicated, there doesn't seem to be a distance of half a millennium. There is a further intensification of the gaze and an increase of visual and psychical engagement. The two works possess the same meaning, to think of the fragmentation of time as a universe and therefore already in itself is supplied with a limitless duration (the stoics conceived a long "moment" as a whole life and vice versa, thinking that all of life is a fleeting moment).

Also the same technique applies to 'fast forward', or linking to create historical confrontation. For example, the motion picture of Georges Méliès, *Carrefour de l'Opera* (1898) to the film *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983) by Geoffrey Reggio, to the amateur footage of today. The obsessive presence in every shot of natural horizons tending between dawn and sunsets, windy clouds and flowers in bloom, architecture under construction, cars and pedestrians in frantic metropolitan agitation. What is it if not to try to reduce the phenomenon of the reality to one more economic temporal jam, a 'fragmented object-reality', the opposite of direct experience and existential life?

There is never anything tranquil and serene in our images of time, since they are prefiguration of the dead. Life is a walking shadow! Every representation of time since antiquity conjugates together extinguished candles, browning leaves, worm-eaten fruit, hourglasses, skulls, a plate ready to fall at our feet, and a fly clinging to a painting which we can't discern whether it is real or painted. Moral representations of 'vanitas' the illusion to be for a little while, forgotten by the implacable voracity of time.

It is not possible to comprehend how many sought to lengthen time, continuously labouring at exercises to ward it off. For example, Roman Opalka, who painted 'time' starting in 1965, representing on canvas after canvas an incessant sequence of progressive numbers (the controversy of the work is in the 'paradoxical' title of the entire process, *1965 / infinite*) or On Kawara, who since 1966 has continued to realize a long series of "date paintings" uninterrupted, every work consisting solely of a representation of the date on which it was executed. These two examples are also characterize by the insatiable obsession of time, or the horror the time, confirmed in the fact that Opalka shows at every new exhibition only the self-portraits executed for that occasion, while On Kawara sends postcards to his friends in which he emphasizes details of his day, and telegrams that contain the message: I am still alive.

The horror of time, determined by the nightmare of the end and by the secular certainty that this is the only life at our disposition, induces the passerby, the metropolitan nocturnal *flâneur*, to leave traces of himself on walls of the city, a signature that marks his short passage between, and above all convinces him of being momentarily alive in the land of the dead.

The Italian artist Franco Vaccari in his famous performance-installation, *Exposure in Real Time*, at the Venice Biennial in 1972 gave a photo booth for the public to use. Day after day the enormous exhibition space was filled up with thousands and thousands of small self-portraits. A testament to

the passing of time within that space and within this life; a multitude of faces, bodies, and thoughts that will never communicate

How can it not be remembered, among the numerous films that have been made around the cataloging of images, *Amélie* by Jean-Pierre Jeunet (2001) and *One Hour Photo* by Mark Romanek (2002)? *Amélie* is a beginner's course in the 'mania' of collecting, this fetishistic obsession that unites art collectors, hobbyists, and serial killers. An obsession that finds its exemplary shape in the search to reconstruct the whole, from fragments (the letter recomposed with pieces of other letters, and above all the mysterious figure of Nino, the employee of a sexy-shop with the obsession of the collecting photos discarded from photo-booths). In the masterpiece by Romanek, Sy Parrish (played by an unparalleled Robin Williams), not only threads the negatives into an automatic machine to print, but takes care that every photograph adequately represents a "moment in time" (on his shoulders, inside of the laboratory appears for a moment a photo wall comprised of copies of taken from customers: photos of photos a catalogue of that can be synthesized in the affirmation "There's nothing more dangerous than a familiar face!").

It is the image that assures us the entity represented is true, this the node of the postmodern dimension. As Daniel Boorstin (*Image. A Guide to Pseudo Events in America*, 1961) and Guy Debord (*Society of the Spectacle*, 1967) have said the entire life of societies, predominated by the modern conditions of production, is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles.

The operation of Frigo to carry out a recording of his life, can be compared to the invention of Brendan Dawes, the skilful computer scientist who was able to enclose an entire film in a single image. The film was composed of a series of frames, one for every six seconds of film, the result is a composition similar to a genetic imprint of the film, its DNA. Demonstrating the colour waves of the various scenes and the rhythm of the story.

Alberto Frigo encloses all his life in an analogue sequence of photographic fragments that comprise a daily synoptic table of the objects he has come in contact with. The material culture joins together with the instruments of the technique, allowing us to make a 'work' and to exercise a function, which Alberto Frigo obsessively and instantaneous freezes in a frame, furthering it from life itself. Just as we do not see the film, reduced to a synthesis, in the work of Dawes we will never perceive the real life of Frigo, no matter how many images he could ever give us to document its course. We can say that by being exposed Frigo hides himself. Letting us see his material world and depriving us of his psychical and biological world because in the tragic postmodern world, nothing more can be said being of life and the subject can, if its not included in the reign of objects.

The time duration of a film cannot be synthesized, the existential time of a life cannot be outlined. This absence, the excruciating lack, is in effect the work of Frigo. No 'mnemonic art' will ever be able to reconstruct the infinite phenomenology of the feelings and the emotions, or even the largest and most expansive map of the land (like that one described by Borges, "as large as the territory itself," realized by the Chinese cartographers to appease the emperor) nothing can be said of the traveller that crosses it.

In conclusion, the performance realized by Frigo shows the passage from "the eroticism of action to pornography of the real," as Baudrillard would say. The postmodern condition lacks the possibility to transform the object into a sign and into significance, the subject lacks the ability to realize a new story. To lack is, as Foucault proclaims, to be "between the word and the object." This absence could only be filled on the condition that time is given back the conjunction that passes through the past, present, and future, and would allow a new history that would let the subject to affirm and to act on the objects in a universe of sense.

Translated by: Jason Waite