

WAVES, FALLS, GLANCES, SHADOWS.

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I first met Claudia Peill in London, around the end of 2002 or the beginning of the following year. I no longer remember who it was that put us in touch. I do remember that I saw one of Claudia's works entitled *Onde* [Waves] – a long strip of images in acid yellows, violets and sky blues, like a transparent and translucent veil covering a small selection of photographic “stills”, some in black and white and all given rhythm, and syncopated by caesurae of pure colour (whether pauses in the dialogue or full stops, I couldn't say).

At any rate, this particular work, so elegantly classical and yet so “cutting edge” (as we used to say back then), suggested to me an artist with a clear narrative vocation, a talent that engaged with narration as its natural fulcrum. At the time, and knowing nothing of her or of her work, I imagined Claudia Peill to be one of those eccentric artists, solitary and unpredictable, who, away from the usual rut of abstraction/figuration or subjective/objective, employ physical reality as the only credible means of transport towards purely metaphysical destinations. In other words: they use the language of the tangible to move towards abstraction.

As I have said, when I first met her I didn't know her work. Claudia was born in Genoa (and I would say the sea and water are a far from marginal presence in her work) under the sign of Virgo, and grew up in Rome (which explains her solid, worldly side). I had been to none of her exhibitions in Italy or Germany; I had not even read anything about her. What I really want to say is that when I came face-to-face with *Onde* my gaze was utterly virginal, innocent and, if you like, ignorant.

I saw that work together with a friend who has long since passed away, Claudio Ciborra, an Italian transplanted to London where he taught Information Science at the London School of Economics. He shared my own incompetence in matters of visual art; but whilst what he saw in the work was above all its progressive, contemporary aspect, looking towards the future of digital language, I was, in contrast, attracted by its allusions to the Renaissance and the elements of that orderly explosion of modernity which addressed the past as a place that was – it seemed to me – much more adventurous and surprising than the future. I can't say we weren't both wrong (today I would say that *Onde* is simply a successful and felicitous work which, as such, inevitably – if unwittingly – throws the coordinates of space and time into disarray), but in any event Claudio Ciborra and I discussed it at length and with enthusiasm. For me, this probably represented the first and last occasion on which I have felt I understood anything of what at that time we were beginning to call “information technology”.

Since neither of us were rich (writers and scholars are generally “inversely proportional” to the concept of financial wealth), we bought only a couple of sections of the work, our choices reflecting our respective reactions to it. He had a fondness for the idea of fragmentary, iconic time that emerged in some passages and which, in his opinion, suggested the qualities that characterize an algorithm: completeness, effectiveness, determinism, atomicity, conclusiveness and unambiguity. I chose the part of the series in which the allusions to pictorial classicism seemed most evident.

On one point, however, our focuses (which had been trained in two different mental gyms) converged: the idea that behind Claudia Peill's work there lay a need to narrate; that her stylistic language was effectively closer to that of cinema and literature than to photography.

Cinema was easily explained: the sequential flow of the images, the black pauses and the long strip of colour unfolding across the wall obviously brought to mind a film that pauses from time to time, or flickers, or of which perhaps only a single fragment comes into focus. What predominated, therefore, was the flow of one thing into another, the continual modification of a “body” that fragmented into gestures, the incessant transformation of a colour into its own negation or its own ghost, its shadow, its more menacing aspects. In this work Claudia Peill seemed to square the circle of modernity and tradition. She had, we thought, attempted to make cinema without the cinema; and in doing so she was trying to rip the language of cinema away from the medium’s own desperate semanticism, a literalness that condemns it to the mediocrity of an inexorably realistic art form. As Alberto Moravia said, in cinema a table is never a generic table, but is always that particular table. So – Claudio Ciborra and I reasoned – despite presenting faces, hands, necklaces and recognisably real objects, Peill assembled an almost purely abstract story in which the plot coincided with the form, while the content was provided by the code.

The title, *Onde*, alluded both to water (which is, in essence, time in liquid form) and to Virginia Woolf (so, other water). I have, I think, since found these two allusions (scattered, at times hidden, at times ironically acknowledged) appearing as a *leitmotiv* in almost all her work. I was sadly never able to discuss this with my friend Ciborra because cancer has, in the meantime, taken him from us. But today if I were to point to one constellation of themes to define the course that Claudia Peill’s work has taken since that far-off day back in 2002, I would use this simple succession of four words: waves, falls, glances, shadows – with nothing but three commas to link them.

They are, after all, talismanic words that she herself has used here and there in the titles of her exhibitions (*Sguardi condivisi*, 2012, *La città delle ombre bianche*, 2006, *Caduta libera*, 2004, *Waves*, 2003). In effect they are words that suggest an uneasy oscillation between (once again) realism and the abstract, the definite and the indefinite. And they are words that the artist presses into service to construct, step by step, exhibition after exhibition or, it is tempting to say, chapter after chapter, the resolutely individual, intimate and subjective narrative of a collectively-experienced era, which in large part we are still struggling to define.

In this sense, Claudia Peill’s work is, I believe, closely akin to literature. Because, freed from the realism that nailed it to the here and now of history, her “cinema” sails towards abstraction as only a novel can, when it constructs a world of characters and events unique to that *camera obscura* that we call imagination, leaving no trace of them in the real world except in the form of a book.

Claudia Peill does not produce books. She produces works that can, mostly, be hung on walls. They are not parallelepipeds but rectangles or squares; at any rate, they are always geometrical forms – primary forms – of communication, whose shifting and simultaneously immutable qualities suggest the idea that at the end of the day a narrative (whether contained in a book or in a painting is unimportant) is nothing but an algorithm of the human mind.

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