

De Chirico, Savinio and the other Face of Modernity

by
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The main thesis of the Exhibition *Die andere Moderne. De Chirico-Savinio*, by the curators Paolo Baldacci and Wieland Schmidt at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf – an excellent show that displays many of de Chirico's masterpieces from his first metaphysical phase – is founded upon an basic idea of which we all are aware: that his Metaphysics was really an invention of de Chirico and Alberto Savinio. Actually, the true invention was that the idea of metaphysical art came from his brother Andrea: his brother who would later assume the pseudonym of Alberto Savinio. We can only remember what Paul Gauguin from Tahiti would write to Maurice Denis (June, 1899) with reference to the accusations of Emile Bernard and his sister, who would claim that he had copied their ideas: "All the world knows that I underhandedly stole from my teacher and master Emile Bernard. He himself did the printing. I stole everything: painting and sculpture. And he was left with nothing! Do not believe that the sixty paintings I gave him which he sold to Vollard are mine. They are all plagiarized masterpieces by Bernard!" This pointed irony on the part of Gauguin very clearly indicates how things are when we talk of painting. Likewise, Gauguin was to write to the journalist, Fontanaïs – who had reviewed his great masterpiece, *Where do we come from, what are we, where are we going?* – by quoting a celebrated phrase from Mallarmé: "Do you know what a critic is? It is a person who puts his nose in other people's business," or, in other words, someone who doesn't understand anything. In fact, Fontanaïs had discussed the ideas expressed in the painting, its symbolism, the coherence of images and shapes, and Gauguin responded simply that the painting had to be "felt" like a piece of music, through the listening eye. And as regards the colours, the "agreement" between colours that is, Gauguin compared it to harmony in music. But Fontanaïs was talking about "literature" instead. We know that the same rebuke – "c'est de la littérature" – was made in Paris, between 1912 and 1915 and was directed at de Chirico. We also know that he was particularly wounded by these words, so much so that he would remember them some years later when he wrote a defence of his ideas in the magazine "Valori Plastici" (1919). This shows us that, like Gauguin, de Chirico thought that art is not a form of reflection, nor does it exist in its ideas, or in the ideas that are trying to be expressed, but rather how these ideas get expressed, and most importantly, how the artist is able to create and invent on the basis on these

ideas. This depends on the artist's ability to communicate his own feelings, which does not mean the simple communication of ideas. Instead, it is a new way of "feeling" the world. Certainly, reflections may enter into the process, but one cannot declare, as does the curator Paolo Baldacci, that "in reality, metaphysical art is not so much a way of painting, but a way of thinking that is best expressed through painting, but indubitably through other ways as well" (p. 50). Or, that "everything that proceeds from the metaphysical expression in Modern Art, or that has influenced it, is to be seen through reflection, from studying it, from intuitions or from the elaboration of the creative method" (p. 50). Starting with the fact that intuition is not the same thing as reflection, but more exactly something to do with its opposite, we must note that it is not possible to see what we call the artist's personal way of producing or of working as "the elaboration of a method." A way of painting exists that is different in every artist, even with artists belonging to the same artistic movement. Picasso's own "analytical cubism" may be similar to Braque's, inasmuch as Picasso would say of Braque "C'est ma femme," however, we cannot claim that Picasso's technique cannot be distinguished from that of Braque's. The artist's true way of working is an innate ability that may be perfected through practice, but it still represents the true individual nature of that artist. This is particularly true with de Chirico and Carrà, even when the latter was to move towards de Chirico's style of iconography, as in *La Musa metafisica* (The Metaphysical Muse): but we can see that behind the similar use of icons there is an inspired lyricism that is much different. Nevertheless, the main question lies elsewhere, especially with regards to de Chirico and Savinio. With Savinio, we can see how he arrives at his painting through reflection, after abandoning music. Endowed with a certain talent that permitted him to carry out different types of art, at one point he thought that what he was doing in music, he could do in painting, but also in literature which was to be his forte. Thus, we can see the fundamental element of his works relies on reflection, on the combination of ideas and desired studied effects, while the same may not be said in any way about the works of de Chirico, not even those of the 1930's and 1940's. Everything in de Chirico is spontaneous, or "from the origins" as Baldacci correctly points out, and not "original". Seen in this manner, metaphysical painting distinguishes itself from the sense of "originality" that obsessed the Avant-Garde school. All the reflection required by a work comes afterwards and follows upon the interior experience – which he calls revelation – that has created the ideation of the work. It is the same idea of the work that comes out of this emotion, from this original experience, to make a wholly new and other world appear, or in a light that is completely new. From a story that de Chirico relates regarding these experiences that occurred during moments of precarious health – including strong intestinal pain and an almost morbid sensibility that accompanied this pain – we can deduce that perhaps he was having a type of hallucination: the very same type of experience that Marcel Proust would speak of at the beginning of his work. It is this experience, this type of "seeing", that would permit de Chirico to change tracks, and not the fiasco achieved by his brother Alberto in his *Poema fantastico* in Munich, and which de Chirico worked together on with him, as Baldacci would have us believe (p. 51). When de Chirico in one of his Parisian manuscripts explicitly affirms – between 1911 and 1912 – that "music cannot

express that non plus ultra of feelings", he is actually referring to this experience of revelation as it is described in the very same manuscripts. The irrevocable choice of being a painter, even if he is to write some verses and lyrical prose, does not come about from a desire to attempt an expression of ideas in a new medium, as he would effectively do in his autobiographical novel *Hebdòmeros* (1929), but above all from a desire not to mix literature and painting. This means keeping to the original inspiration of what he has seen and heard while carrying out a painting. In other words, to follow the exigencies of the painting only, as much as the painting represents a projection on canvas of the original experience. This makes for painting that is "absolute", and consequently, an "absolute" work of art. Ambroise Vollard recounts a story where he had to pose for a portrait by Paul Cézanne for hours. In the last session and after he been posing for more than three hours, Vollard made moves to leave, but Cézanne said to him, "not yet, I still need to do two or three things in order to make the colours harmonize; and if I make a mistake now, I'll have to start the entire thing over." Gauguin spoke about the musical nature of painting, of the harmony between colours being the animus of the painting, distinguishing it from what he called literature. At the height of his period of Symbolism, he called his own painting "Syntheticism." For this reason we cannot agree with the Savinio's opinion on his brother, and that which Baldacci repeats in the name of praise: "for a painter, painting is the aim. Instead for some painters, it is a means, but only for a very few painters, among whom I would name: Dürer, Böcklin, Giorgio de Chirico, Picasso.... These painters were also able to write and compose without diminishing their value." And about his brother he added, "If he had continued to practice with notes as he did with his paintbrush, he would have composed through the means of notes the same thing he composed using lines and colours." In order to understand all of this, it is necessary to interpret what he says within a certain context. "Only in these cases is painting interesting. Otherwise I find painting a bore. Superfluous... Painting does not interest me. Which does not mean that I am indifferent to it and that I pay little attention to it. On the contrary. Because they are works of reflection, I feel even more duty bound to translate them into the best type of painting." This tells us everything about the difference in painting between Savinio and his brother and it explains also why the fascinating aspect of Savinio's metaphysical art is different from that which his brother's work evokes. But what is Metaphysics? A poetical or musical way of painting, or is it something to do with the entire work, as in Richard Wagner? Who is it that assigned this name – used as it is in its full philosophical sense – to a way of making art? "The term metaphysics that already in my Parisian period I was calling my style of painting" says de Chirico in "Valori Plastici", "caused a scandal and provoked the irritation of the *rive secuane*" (in Paris), and raised that criticism of Gauguin's period "c'est de la littérature". In reality however, the term was used for the first time with reference to his painting by his friend, the poet Apollinaire, who denominated it as such in a 1913 review, referring to the fascination inherent in de Chirico's canvases: "*étrangement métaphysique*". By this he meant the unreal and dreamy atmosphere full of mystery and melancholy that we find in his canvases and that very few people understood. Hence the common and consequent imputation of "literature", as if we were dealing with simple reflection, or, in other words, the very opposite of what it really was. The term, as

adopted by Apollinaire, hit the nail on the head, but for reasons that were completely different: metaphysics was the effect of these canvases, since they put the viewers under a spell, in an extremely gentle fashion, and took the viewer beyond the daily world. But due to this violent and oneiric rupture away from the dailiness of the world that we find in Savinio, as was to be found previously in Jean Arp, Juan Mirò, René Magritte and André Breton's circle, Apollinaire created the term *surréalisme* instead. Thus, to maintain that "*metaphysical poetics*", or "*metaphysical art*" was created between 1909 and 1910 in Milan, or Florence, or in Paris, by the two brothers is completely false for two reasons. Firstly, in that period metaphysical art did not exist, nor had it been theorized upon by either of the two. What was spoken of at the time was simply an art that brought out the artistic origins from myth, along with their childhood experiences in Greece, themes from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, all of which de Chirico referred simply to as "*profound art*". Secondly, we have to ask ourselves when talking about "*Metaphysical art*", if we mean "painting" or "music". It is obvious that the two are different, even if the same artist should produce both genres. It is necessary to recognize that de Chirico created Metaphysics as a form of pictorial poetics. The only thing that Savinio produced in this period was the drawing *Oracolo*, which when seen as a "pictorial representation" is very distant from, and we could say almost insignificant in, its relationship to *Enigma dell'oracolo* and other paintings by de Chirico in that period. It seems to me that the curators of this exhibition intend, with their concept of Metaphysical art, a type of world view, or more simply a conception of an artwork in *die andere Moderne* – the other face of modernity – and that they are thinking about the intense cultural exchange that almost certainly took place between the two brothers, both of whom were orphaned by their father and lived the life of vagabonds; and, that the curators are also thinking of the two artists' re-evaluation given to myth, of their search for a personal identity, which would bring them to rediscover historical memory as the fundamental element of their artistic language. But if this is so, we must make two necessary observations. The first one being that this other face of modernity would be more accurately called "Post-modernism"; the true initiator of Post-modern art is now more than ever seen in the personage of Giorgio de Chirico, and not Savinio. Secondly, their ideas, their reading, their consequent world view, or concept of artworks, may well share common elements, but this is not art, per se, and is even less "*Metaphysical art*" as created by Giorgio de Chirico, if we mean his "*pictorial poetics*". If we wish to speak of this latter concept, and therefore of painting, as it is indeed this that we find on display in Düsseldorf, then in the comparison of the paintings of the two (and certainly there are their most beautiful and most important works on display here), we can see right away that their styles are completely different. Apart from the fact that the Savinio's paintings on display date back some twenty years before those of Giorgio de Chirico's, it is in the latter that we can see true metaphysical art, in the way it was termed by Apollinaire, while with Savinio we clearly have painting of reflection that could be called Surrealism, even if Savinio did not use – as did André Breton and the others – dreams as the basis of his painting. It is indeed a type of painting that is very close to Surrealism, even if it is full of a new type of symbolism and intellectualism. *Quae sunt Caesaris Caesaris, quae sunt Dei, Deo.*

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