

FROM ZERO TO INFINITY

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"It is so difficult to find the beginning. Or, better: it is difficult to begin at the beginning. And not try to go further back."¹

Vincenzo Agnetti may have been pondering Wittgenstein's reflection when he embarked on a new work idea, *Photo-Graffia*, in 1979. Perhaps he had glimpsed a further horizon in the interspace between the philosopher's words and what he had resolutely declared as an artist: "I started from the end."² He was commuting between New York and Milan at the time he was conducting his research into *Photo-Graffia*, but passed away suddenly in 1981.³ And despite the fact that he was tied to a certain conceptual climate, he was also probing a different cultural context – the return to painting, the idea of lightness, the search for the emotional value of the image. Indeed, at this point his poetic soul could emerge with greater power and freedom to become the most explicit and immediate part, the manifest element of his work. *Photo-Graffia* arose as a result and was defined at the cusp of different worlds, as was always the case with Agnetti's works. It was a contribution to the critique of language, but at the same time it was also the expression of an extremely vivid and vital lyricism.

Starting from the end was an ever-current point of departure as well as a lucid paradox because, in reality, the work was already finished before it was even started. And it resided in that space where thoughts float and then sediment, where everything is *forgotten by heart*. To make the work emerge, a process had to be sparked: in other words – to paraphrase Wittgenstein – it was essential to define the *rules of the game*. But also to go beyond those rules and get lost on the creative path – in essence, to work critically on the language of photography and then surrender to the poetic dimension. First of all, this entailed resetting everything to zero, to start from zero. And embark on this journey towards infinity. So in the case of *Photo-Graffia*, this is the rule: the *altered process*. Expose the sheet of photographic paper to light and let it turn completely black. Light effaces all possible images or, rather, it arrives at illustrating them all by dissolving them into black, to the point that the artist can make an image emerge precisely from this original void, this chaos, this totality. It is a trace he created by scratching the photographic paper in order to extricate his own inner eye from the blackness, a mental and manual drawing often enriched by the addition of colour that lends depth to the night and light to the sign. "If one of us uses a language, any discipline whatsoever to make art, soon he will find himself resetting that discipline to zero, bringing it back to the point of departure. This is the moment to exploit the discipline that was used, until its structure has been erased. Then concepts will be reduced to pure and simple signals. As a whole, the signals will form a composition that, in a certain sense, is the equivalent of the signs and colours in oil paintings."⁴

Resetting to zero, making photography a simple instrument released from all paradigms. A photograph without a camera and without an external reality to photograph. When Agnetti deconstructs a language he unmasks it to go on to revolutionize it, he negates it in order to bring its true essence back to light, to reveal the pluralistic and dialectical nature that makes it truly universal. Like Wittgenstein's philosophy, Agnetti's art also approaches life – it expresses it. Therefore, this is not a nihilistic negation as was the case in the Dadaist tradition.

It is instead an ethical and poetic commitment, negating in order to rediscover, forgetting in order to allow the most precious and necessary part to resurface, getting lost only to discover a new territory. Thus, the 1970 work *NEG* negates sound and allows us to listen to silence, just as ten years later *Photo-Graffia* – through the use of scratching – negates the photograph itself, negates the standardization and illusoriness of its language, to enter confidently into a space yet to be explored. When the photograph is effaced, what is encountered is thus something extremely intimate and submerged, but comprehensible to all if it is grasped through emotion. What we discover is a rarefied, evanescent place: it is the unphotographable territory of interiority. So here the concepts become signals launched from the darkness, forms and colours that are illuminated to show us a possible path, *in a certain sense the equivalent of signs and colours in oil paintings*. It is a pictorial work that bursts forth – luminous – from dark matter. As Wittgenstein wrote, “white is also a sort of black”.⁵

For Agnetti, content is the beating heart of the work. This is why he did not want his oeuvre to be “understood”, but to be grasped in its intentionality, perceived on an emotional level and thus lived as a real experience. By negating every code of interpretation, for him the death of the signified was the rebirth of the signifier. The object-work thus became a sort of *reminder* – a device capable of triggering a mental process – and so the observer could be projected into the spiritual dimension of the artwork through its very physicality. Moving in this direction, Agnetti ascribed great importance to the formal solution, technique and material he used. In particular, in his expressive research we should note his attention for the *support*. Taking up Marshall McLuhan’s admonition that “the medium is the message”,⁶ the physicality of the work supports its content, because it influences its expression and orients the observer’s gaze. So in *Assioma* the coldness of Bakelite is the support for a conceptual statement, in *Paesaggio* and *Ritratto* the warmth of felt is the support for a narrative, and in *Photo-Graffia* the alchemy of photographic paper is the support for a vision. But in the latter case, experimentation ventures even further. In effect, the short circuit arises by scratching that support, violating it with drawing and colour to bring out an image photographed with the mind’s eye.

In 1974 Agnetti had already commenced his research into the photographic support, and the *interrupted process* was the rule on which he based this work. Here the camera and the external reality to photograph were already abolished. “In our case, the camera is the medium that has been excluded to block the process (photography) and politically overturn the message. To exclude the medium, I simply painted or plunged sheets of sensitized paper into the photographic developer. The evidence of this interrupted process consists of drawings chemically impressed without the contribution of the lens. This is why I call the sheets of paper drawn using developer *free-hand photographs* or *naked-eye photographs*.”⁷ In 1979 *Photo-Graffia* led Agnetti to yet other fields, albeit based on this fundamental experience. Because now he went beyond the material of photography; in a certain sense, he moved away from the area of experimentation of photography itself. And the result of this further shift was another leap of death into the void.

Photo-Graffia represents a world in which analytical rigour no longer suffices. Poetry now enters forcefully into a conceptual operation, multiplying its potential and making its message all-embracing. Just as, starting in 1968, *Macchina drogata* was a work that created other works, *Photo-Graffia* now became the root for an entirely new expressiveness for Agnetti. With *Vetrata* – literally, “stained-glass window” – the artist was able to further expand the concept of gaze and make it tangible. Because between one frame and the next, in place of glass there is blackened and scratched photographic paper, there is *Photo-Graffia* that allows

us to peer into a possible interior universe. Following this line of thought, in 1980 at PAC in Milan Agnetti presented *Le quattro stagioni*, a work composed of four large “stained-glass windows” and two panels on which one of his poems, *I dicitori*, is written in Italian and English. Agnetti read these verses aloud and recorded them, and listening to them emphasizes the vision of these works. From one field to the other, *Photo-Graffia* and words dig deep down, and “As in a sixteenth-century painting | the storyteller points to the seasons. | References references of the lucid enigma”.⁸

Agnetti would have wanted to stage a major exhibition on *Photo-Graffia*. A few months before he died, he presented his last solo exhibition in Milan at the Galleria Bruna Soletti, accompanying it with a poem: “I cat owl and bat | scratch the sidereal blackness | that emerged with light | and when I am dog | I brush against the tender | leaves of the pergola”. These verses were a fully fledged work in which writing merged with drawing, with colour, with *Photo-Graffia*. But this work was also a prototype for the manifesto he would have liked to produce for the large exhibition he was pondering, a multiple through which to convey the essence of his poetics. By scratching *the sidereal blackness*, Agnetti was able to plunge into his own instinctive sphere, into the universe that overarches emotions. At the same time, by brushing against *the tender leaves* he could savour the experience and knowledge that would then be *forgotten by heart*. Therefore, once again this was about resetting everything to zero, to start from zero. This is precisely what he was doing when he was busy working on his *Lucernario* in the summer of 1981: an immense skylight, an allegory of day and night, of life and death. And a picture of the artist – *Il suonatore di fiori*, “the player of flowers” – was the link between heaven and earth. Agnetti thought about composing the nocturnal part of the skylight using *Graffia*, a work on blackened and then scratched Formica. It was a work specifically conceived for this great unfinished oeuvre, an evolution of *Photo-Graffia*. On a sketch that Vincenzo left behind, there is a poem written in his own hand, and the verses “Before the short evening | we will return to take up arms” beckon us to *start from the end*. Reset, reset, start from zero. And embark on this journey towards infinity.

Notes

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 5 April 1951, § 471.
2. Vincenzo Agnetti, *Ciclostile*, no. 1 (Milan: Vanni Scheiwiller Editore, 1970).
3. Vincenzo Agnetti (Milan, 1926–1981).
4. Vincenzo Agnetti, *Immagine di una mostra* (Milan: Edizioni l’Uomo e l’Arte, 1974), p. 82.
5. Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Movements of Thought. Diaries 1930–1932 / 1936–1937”, in *Ludwig Wittgenstein. Public and Private Occasions* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003 [1997]), 1 December 1936.
6. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man* (New York: Mentor, 1964), p. 9.
7. Vincenzo Agnetti, in *Aphoto. Fotografia come superficie* (Milan: Studio Marconi, 1977), pp. 8–9.
8. Vincenzo Agnetti, *The Storytellers*, trans. Richard Milazzo (New York, 1979).

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