

SALVO: EGOISTIC PAINTING

SALVO HAS TRANSLATED THE THEMES OF THE SEVENTIES INTO PICTORIAL LANGUAGE.

ANGELA VETTESE



PHOTOMONTAGE, 1969.
PHOTO PAOLO MUSSAT SARTOR.

*For the mighty Air chases them into the Sea, and the Sea spews them forth on to the dry land, and the Earth drives them towards the rays of the blazing Sun; and the Sun hurls them into the eddies of the Aether. One Element receives them from the other, and all loathe them. Of this number am I too now, a fugitive from heaven and a wanderer.
(Empedocles of Acragas, Purifications, Fragment 115).*

FRONT

For a viewer observing the works of Salvo—these paintings in oils with pastel colors and comic-strip forms—it's embarrassing to have to admit that there's nothing more in them than would appear to be. Those who have attempted to discover implicit values in these obviously empty figures have frequently done them an injustice, making them the object of an irony that quotes and makes fun of them at one and the same time. Running up the common flag of the rediscovery of painting, such commentators refuse to resign themselves to a poetic system that doesn't engage the unconscious, and they presume the existence of some decadence beneath the appearance of so much infantile luminism.

But the doll-house atmosphere that seems to dominate both form and color, on one hand, and all notions of a sounding of irrationality, on the other, are both denied by the work's lucid spatial constructions and calculated games with light. The compression with which Salvo expresses him-

self isn't to be confused with infantilism, as extreme simplification contains the substance of a vocation for synthesis, and such a sense of synthesis has nothing in common with any unfortunate hypothesis of ingenuousness. These paintings aim directly toward a center without passing through the recesses of the mind.

No matter whether he's dealing with barroom scenes, Saint Georges, or funeral wreaths, Salvo sets up his compositions as fixed scenarios whose stability is not at all upset by possible descriptions of things or persons in movement. In *Hercules and Hydra* (1981), the muscular tension of the hero has nothing to do with striking out to deal a blow, as the myth would suggest, but is intent simply upon exhibiting itself. The elements of an omnipresent geometry, made up of cubes and cylinders, gives an ineluctable visual staticity to tree trunks, columns, houses, and personages. Even the little clouds—sausage forms that wink a playful eye at serious ruins, or that settle onto the top of a tree to form a second crown, or that hover above chimneys to make them smoke—aren't pushed along by



ST. GEORGE AND THE DRAGON, 1975.

the air and assume a stable collocation in the sky. Every figure is contaminated with stasis, taken as something absolute, pulled outside of time and reproped as a literal example of a still life: nature frozen into immobility, *nature morte*.

The truth that remains is death as utter stasis, the certainty that cancels out all other certainties and gives thought no other option, once thought has reached it, than to paraphrase it. Only light, circular and always changing, dares to enter into rivalry with such an absolute: if things stand still, the light that engulfs them remains capable of transfiguring them. Formal immobility, on one hand, and a continuous flow of colors, on the other, seem finally to be conceived as dependent polarities. It's the light that speaks of the phases of the day, and if the relativity of time is superimposed upon the absoluteness of static form, change may have been exiled, ushered out the door, but it finds its way back in through the window of color.

Though temporality and movement are introduced by alternations of light, they're by no means accompanied by any faith in possibilities of positive becoming. These ruins are marked by no romantic awareness of history, the houses show no signs that identify them as individual, the landscapes are without connotations that would make them anything other than generic. There's nothing that testifies to any course being run, or to any direction in evolution. The circular pulse of the days takes place without ulterior meanings, before confuses itself with after, and an overall immobility reabsorbs these series of motions that flow back into themselves.

*All the facts we have to be concerned with stand visibly before us. But it's the use of the substantive "time" that confuses our ideas. If we investigate the grammar of this word, it seems hardly less surprising that men should have thought of time as a god than it would have been for them to attribute divinity to concepts such as negation or disjunction.
(Wittgenstein, The Blue Book).*

BACK

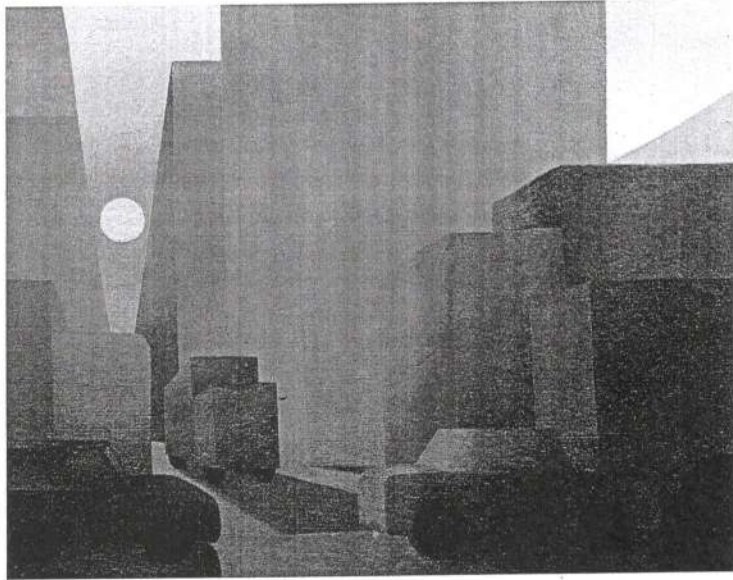
Salvo's attitude as an artist has been variously described, but the most stimulating characterization of all refers to his

"Stendahlia egotism." Such a term might refer to an escape from the bitter trials of the immigrant, but it should be interpreted, more abstractly as a reference to an affirmation of values that elevates itself into a poetic system.

After his first precocious attempts at imitative painting, it's clear that Salvo interpreted the tautological vocation of conceptual art as a perfect coincidence of art and its artificer. In Salvo's case, the act of creativity didn't flatten itself out into the givens of existence: by turning the forced objectivism of conceptual art inside out, it found its concretion as the epiphany of an individual subjectivity.

This is the sort of interpretation that I'd give to the photomontages in which he inserted his own face, and that were made, generally speaking, between 1969 and 1972. And I'd say the same thing again of the self-portraits—at first photographic and later painted—that make clear and explicit references to works of the past. Salvo began to do these works around 1970. His *Self-Portrait After Raphael* was borrowed from a work that he finds particularly evocative, and it can be thought of as the ideal beginning of a search for artistic identity, where the search is understood both as emulation and identification with respect to its chosen model.

Works such as these were also paralleled by the development of the "verbal" aspect of Salvo's activity as an artist, and the meanings of these two phases of his work are quite similar. These "verbal" works center on the repetition of his own name, frequently pressed into word games and paradoxical couplings. We find it sculpted into marble (*Salvo is Alive*, 1970).



UNTITLED, 1987.
OIL ON CANVAS, 81 x 100 CM. PHOTO SAPORETTI.

inserted into contexts of enormous prestige, almost as though to denote an identity that finds definition on the basis of its relations (*Forty Names from Aristotle to Salvo*, and *I Am the Best*, 1971; *Improvisation*, 1970-75; *Thirty Italian Painters*, 1975), or substituted for the names of the protagonists in rewrites of famous novels.

The theme of substituting himself for an illustrious protagonist forms a part of the conceptual leitmotif of the work, in a

simple movement of appropriation and *nominatio* on the part of the artist. But, for Salvo, this was also to become reformulated into an excursion through the privileged places of the image, no matter whether that was a question of a photographic chronicle of urban guerrilla warfare, or of a recapitulation of traditional portrait painting and the themes of classical iconography. If Salvo is to be included among the ranks of the "quotationists," it's with reference to these particular works, and taking account of these particular intentions. Any such classification would have very little to do with his more recent work.

Holding up his hermit's lamp in his hand, Salvo has wandered on a pilgrimage from one image to another and from one book to another with the stubbornness of a self-taught man. And after abandoning a search along roads already traveled by others, leaving his phase of "adolescence" behind him, he found a solid and fully autonomous identity of his own. He conquered the freedom to dedicate himself in an unmediated way to the problems of that form of painting which had most "fascinated and seduced" him when he was a boy. Since 1978, there have been no hesitations or second thoughts, and he has dedicated himself to a solitary, heroic, again egotistic climb up the mountain of "quality." It doesn't matter whether painting and quality really have a sense in today's world: the point is the idea of challenge as a way to prove and improve the self.

If we look back at Salvo's itinerary as



STILL LIFE, 1980.
PASTEL ON PAPER MOUNTED ON CANVAS, 100 x 120 CM.

SUNDAY ON EARTH

NOTES ON SALVO

BARRY SCHWABSKY

1) From the beginning, two concepts have ruled Salvo's artistic production: *emulation* and *the list*.

2) Salvo's "imitation of Wittgenstein," *On Painting* (1986), is a numbered series (list) of aphorisms, observations, remarks (Gertrude Stein: "Remarks are not literature"—a remark which has become part of our literature), questions. Ludwig Wittgenstein's early work the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is a structured set of propositions, numbered in such a way as to set out analytically the hierarchical relationship of one proposition to another. By contrast, Wittgenstein's late, posthumously published works are simply numbered sequentially. From a logical point of view the arrangement of paragraphs is arbitrary, and the numeration emphasizes the detachment of one thought from the next, *even when there is an apparent continuity among them*. This is the form of Salvo's book and of his artistic career as well.

3) The elementary form of a history of art would be a list of names: of works, of authors—those it is necessary to account for in a more developed form of the same history (which, through the process of development, might well turn out to involve the insertion of some names, the effacement of others, etc.) Salvo asks, "How would things differ if we doubted the quality of works by Giotto, Masaccio, Caravaggio, Velazquez etc., etc.?"—and immediately goes on to ask, "But this etc., etc., what does it mean? Is it a list of names that ends at a certain point?" Before replying, our first consideration must be that every list ends at a certain point, but is also an open-ended structure that permits the addition of new items; the list does not contain any *internal* factor that could tell us where it should end.

4) The Museum of Modern Art in New York, at least in its pre-expansion heyday, was a history whose construction could be compared to that of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. It used paintings, sculptures, etc. as a number of aesthetic propositions, and through their arrangement showed them as steps in a process of immanent development progressively revealing further elements of the inner structure of art itself.

5) The Civico Museo d'Arte Contemporanea in Milan, on the other hand, is not structured through causes and effects, relations and affinities, challenges and developments. It is structured like a list—a list of artists who have operated in Italy in the 20th century. (Salvo, however, is not included.) There is no "mainstream." Can one speak of a history of excep-

tions? Salvo's career resembles this experience.

6) "The imaginary museum: a personal criterion." In his early "conceptual" or "povera" works Salvo was not operating as a conceptualist or poverist but simply as an artist whose imaginary museum already contained the works of Alighiero Boetti, Luciano Fabro, etc., whom he therefore emulated.

7) I have a theory of painting (if we allow that a theory be implicit, incomplete, and contradictory). My mother has a vague notion of painting (if we allow that a vague notion be strict and consistent, though still implicit). At least initially, my theory fails to pick out Salvo's paintings as painting (as part of the series Giotto, Rubens, Picasso . . .) My mother's notion would easily allow her to recognize Salvo's paintings as belonging to painting (a question of working materials, recognizable subjects such as landscapes, mythology, etc.) This suggests that Salvo's works are directed toward (or better: *aimed at*) my theory of painting.

8) Among Salvo's works are some which I might not pick out of a flea market. Is it only the institution of the gallery, of the museum, that forces me to recognize them as painting? Or have they already internalized that authority sufficiently to compel my recognition? Some yes, some no, taken individually—but as a series, a list, a sequence of emulations: yes, absolutely.

9) Nonetheless, it's a relief to know that at least a few of Salvo's paintings would compel my attention in any context.

10) Salvo's paintings never have the same qualities as those of the painters he emulates: "I pretend to be Napoleon. I think that I am not Napoleon. I am not Napoleon." The specificity or "identity" of Salvo reveals itself negatively. It is a difference.

11) Salvo is invisible (styleless) but not self-effacing.

12) In emulating the painters of the museums, Salvo also emulates the painters who are not painters, the painters who are not part of Modern Art, the hobbyists, the Sunday painters. Once again, however, there is a difference (one of a series of differences). By comparison we see that there is a grandiosity to Salvo's ambition that is not ordinarily found among hobbyists; this is not, after all, Sunday painting, it is the painting of the Kingdom of Sunday on Earth (cf. Rimbaud, *Une Saison en Enfer*: "Noël sur la terre.")

13) Salvo's text imitates (and quotes) Wittgen-

stein's. This one imitates (and quotes) Salvo's. Does there remain a relationship between this text and Wittgenstein's?

14) We don't judge Salvo by the standards given us by Raphael any more than we do by those given us by Wittgenstein.

15) To which sequence does Salvo belong? The one he calls "too recent, less believable, more problematical?" Or the one he calls "firmer, more consolidated, ramified?" Duccio, Beato Angelico, Botticelli . . . ? Or Picasso, Mondrian, Fontana . . . ? Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday . . . ? Or just Sunday?

16) The standards by which we judge Salvo are more like the ones given us by Fabro than the ones given us by Picasso. And more like the ones given us by Picasso than the ones given us by Raphael. Doesn't it seem more likely that the standards given us by Salvo will in turn be more useful for re-evaluating Boetti than for re-evaluating Matisse or Caravaggio?

17) Just before Easter I visited Salvo's exhibition of "Nocturnes" in Brescia. The gallery assistant told me that had I come a few days earlier I would have been able to see more pictures:

—The collectors who purchased the others wanted to have them at home for the holiday.

—Were the ones that were sold pretty much like the ones I see here?

—No, they were . . . not necessarily better . . . but the ones with landscapes, trees, and so on: the "classic" Salvos.

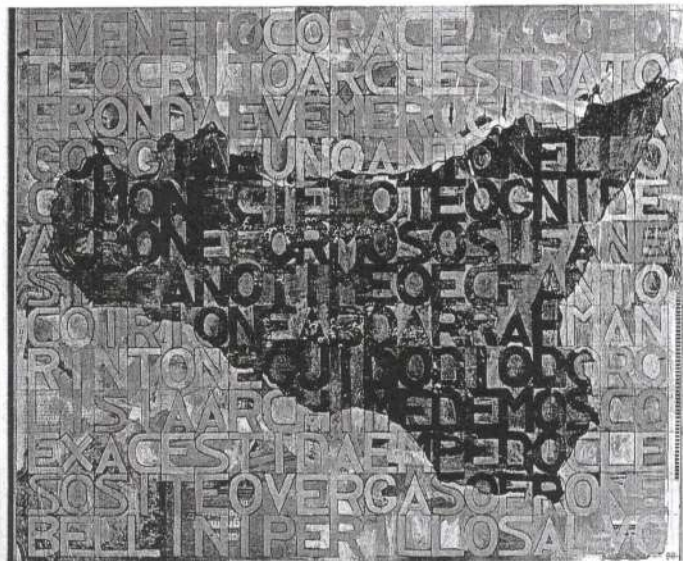
—In two years the collectors will want "classic" Salvos that look like these new ones here. My reply was not ironic—or at least it should not have been.

18) Is a classic universal—or *sui generis*?

19) Let us suppose we have decided to admit Salvo into the history of painting—into our imaginary museum. Would we then have any criterion for not admitting, say, Funi? Dudreville? Sassù? Any of the other painters whose works haunt the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, but not our imaginary museum? How might we articulate that criterion?

20) I can imagine circumstances in which I would not notice one of Salvo's paintings. Having noticed them, I am not capable of *not* noticing the questions they raise. Not all of these questions seem soluble. Would I be justified in concluding that Salvo's paintings show us how far we are from Sunday on Earth?

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35 SICILIANS, 1977.



SELF-PORTRAIT AS ALI ADIL SHAH, 1974.

an artist over the years and take account of its unquestionable variability, it can easily lead us to dubious conclusions. What we see at first seems less a road toward painting than a way of making fun of the overweening seriousness of conceptualism. When his gigantic Saint Georges made room for a not yet fashionable need for the pleasures of color and manuality, he was anticipating the future but still had not made a radical choice. At Documenta, in 1975, he showed an art that was entirely made of words, and an almost definitive abandonment of the word didn't take place until after a period of conciliation—the period of his *Sicilies* and *Italies* (1975-77) where written phrases outlined these geographical forms.

Even though it may have been marked by hesitations that a longer view from the vantage point of the present may tend to minimize, Salvo's evolution thus seems natural and coherent in the way it absorbed and digested the themes of the art of the 1970s. The aesthetic of egoism is transformed and translated into pictorial language. It's no accident that Salvo looks towards the great artists of the past, and he's certainly not afflicted by false modesties. The plastic values of Giotto and Piero della Francesca; the values of light in Caravaggio, Rembrandt, and the last period of the work of Raphael; the simplifications and delicate solidity of Piero di Cosimo: these are a few of the guidelines of a wholly new direction in Salvo's art. And this direction in his work was quick to open up as well to experiences that lie in a more recent past, taking a careful look at the division-

ism of the French; at the divisionism of Balla, Carrà, and Boccioni (with special reference to the rendering of the play of artificial light); at Sironi (the factories, the compact volumes of the buildings, the atmosphere of the outskirts of cities); at Rosai and the other painters of the Italian Novecento; in his latest phase, since 1984, at the abstract-geometric tradition.

Salvo is intent upon writing an imaginary book, a titanic encyclopedia of personal visions in which all the things of the world are collected in different chapters.



FLIPPER, 1983.
OIL ON CANVAS, 100 x 70 CMS.

and for some time now he has employed a serial way of working in which he spends considerable time with each of his individual subjects: here are the ruins, the churches, the spring landscapes, and then the ones of summer, winter, and fall; the factories, the still lifes with objects, the lamp-posts in the city streets, the trolley cars; all the various kinds of bars; the volcanoes, the citrus fruits, the cemeteries.

In this most recent phase as well, everything turns on a subject that turns itself into the center of the world, reckless challenger of the greats, encyclopedist. And this gratuitous centrality of the self, now without any ideological support or romantic philosophical foundation, turns to the mere ostentation of itself and in a Nietzschean manner declares, "I am all the names of history." This characteristic is one that emerged in various forms in much of the art of the decade 1975-85; I am thinking, naturally, of the recuperation of expressionist subjectivity, but also of the presupposition common to the various "counterfeiting" operations of Sherrie Levine, Mike Bidlo, or George Condo, or of the stylistic promiscuity of Jiri Georg Dokoupil. The ego is the center, the reason, the purpose, as in the years of earliest infancy.

Reflection on the work of Salvo thus raises in my mind an enormous doubt: can it really be true that the postmodern subject, that is, the subject of the era of Maggie, Ronald, Karol, and Raissa, can be defined as weak, fractured, scattered?

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