

Picasso in Havana

The Codes of Contemporary Painting
by Alessandra Galasso

Painting Codes was conceived as both provocation and challenge. Do the traditional categories of painting still have any meaning, and are they still a useful code of access to state-of-the-art research in the field of contemporary painting? The answer is yes. Nowadays, referring to painting in terms of the nude, still lifes, portraits, landscapes, and historical and religious subjects is tantamount to asking ourselves about the existence of thrillers, Westerns and musicals. Historically speaking, codes are paradigms applied to a genre with preordained rules which allow artists of diverse disciplines to express their own aesthetic temperaments and at the same time to analyse the world around them. Paradoxically, it seems that choosing a set of predetermined coordinates offers the artist greater expressive freedom. If accepting some shared guidelines creates an inevitable bond with history, and provides references for analysing and criticising the past, it simultaneously helps to define the present.

In painting, codes are no novelty. However, it is interesting to point out that, in every historical period, artists have modified them by changing and renovating their context. Greek painting chose to represent the human body, above all the male, as a being that dominates nature, an existential condition unknown to foregoing civilisations; in the Middle Ages, painting – North-European in particular – was intent on portraying the new bourgeoisie through the description of daily actions previously deemed unworthy of representation; that of the Renaissance brought perspective to painting, placing the human individual “squarely” in the centre, the position accorded it by the new humanism; when Velázquez painted *Las Meninas* (1656) he wasn't simply offering us a portrait of the Spanish royal family, but also a political-anthropological vision and a reflection on the painterly condition itself. Every historical age has represented human beings, landscapes, religious and historical subjects according to its own perception of the world. The idea of pure painterly realism, recording reality as it is, has never existed.

As for contemporary painting, however, we have to analyse the recovery of the past within the post-Modernist cultural context, which we simply can't ignore. Works such as those presented in *Painting Codes* would have been unthinkable before the 1980s, before what Thomas McEvelley masterly described as painting's return from exile. (1) The U.S. critic starts from the preliminary statement that from the Renaissance on, painting has represented the soul of Western visuality. “Despite occasional challenges by other media – now architecture, now photography, now cinema – painting has by and large remained our primary way of seeing the world, and of seeing ourselves, on a plane above the affairs of everyday life yet still involved in its passionality.”(2)

The twentieth-century had some glorious moments for painting, inexorably followed by falls from grace (into *dísgrace*) like that of the mid-60s. Since painting was intrinsically considered to be bound to modernism, when the latter was contested as being past its sell-by date; corrupt and incapable of representing contemporary life, painting was inevitably tarred with the same brush, as it were. In the middle of the last century, it was two basic founding concepts of modernism that were rejected. The first was the belief that history represented the coherent development of a line of thought, thereby following a preordained path of its own, though concealed to most. Such an idea came directly from the philosophy of Hegel, who claimed that history was the result of the unfolding of the Universal Spirit, a process which follows a series of causes and effects until it reaches a natural conclusion of its own. Historical events eventually demonstrated that this idea was above all used to justify colonialist expansion, political and economic, in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries. The second concept derives from Plato's philosophy and was subsequently embraced by Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790). It posits a common aesthetic sense, the values of which, when correctly expressed, are objective and universal (and, as a result, trans-national) justifying the primacy of one culture (and by implication, Western culture) above all others.

Historically, then, painting – as a visual medium, which, better than any other artistic language, was able to represent historical progress, by making it visible – was considered the utmost artistic expression. The appalling tragedies provoked by man during the twentieth-century irreparably refuted all meliorist theses trying to demonstrate that all was for the best of all possible worlds; two world wars, the holocaust, the nuclear threat, colonialism and the exploitation of the Third World, and the failure of technology to create a better world, all exposed the fallacy of Hegelian-derived positivism on which the predominant Western culture was based. This stage was followed by another one in the 60s and 70s that may be defined pre-modernist, when an attempt was made to put the clock back: flower power, the birth of the Green movement, a revival of matriarchal myths and social organisations, etc. Once this stage was over, there then appeared post-Modernism, an analysis originating from the realisation of the failure of the modernist project, the removal of one cultural primacy with respect to another and, generally speaking, from the refusal of a hierarchical order of knowledge. Though the term 'post-Modern' had already been used by a number of authors in the 1950s and 1960s, its true theoretical system was conceived around the mid-70s when, within certain subjects, such as philosophy, architecture, cinema, and literature, the importance of a variety of social and cultural phenomena started to make itself known. The debate developed in two directions. "First of all, each discipline produced more and more evidence of the existence of post-Modernism inside itself; second – and more importantly – each subject progressively drew from the discoveries carried out within the other subjects" (3): the birth of interdisciplinarity.

As many writers have stated, the post-Modern condition manifests itself through the multiplication of centres of power (and, therefore, of intellectual production) and the dissolution of whatever totalising design claims to be able to explain the complexity of social phenomena and their representations. The concept of multiculturalism, for example, is already inherent in that of postmodernism. Despite appearances, however, post-Modernism has not brought about the disappearance of power centres, but only their redistribution and restructuring, as Edward Said famously considers the history of the twentieth century as a progressive withdrawal from general questions and responsibility and increasing collusion with a system that divides knowledge into specialisms, to disallow in advance any radical or effective engagement with general issues. (4)

But to return to painting: with rare exceptions, starting with Romanticism and until the middle of the twentieth-century, the artist's leading task and ultimate end was considered to aspire to the quest for the sublime; the role of painting was to demonstrate that art had to be an escape from the relativity of everyday life, that it went beyond technique and form, an art of the void and of the absolute (Malevic), that it levitated towards utter physical and spiritual freedom (Yves Klein), a blank canvas that, like Mallarmé's blank sheet, contain nothing, and therefore everything. The monochrome painting (Malevic's white or black one, Klein's blue, Rothko's softly shaded version, or Fontana's torn canvas, like those that followed by Newman, Reinhardt and Motherwell), more than any other artistic expression, represented the highest point of this line of thought.

Though some studies have shown that the deep influence wielded on abstract art in the twentieth-century by several occult and hermetic traditions – alchemy, the myth of the Rosicrucians, the Qabbalah, Christian exotericism and the Eastern philosophies – in the 1950s the Kantian system, whereby there exists subjective and universal beauty, and art is pure form, guided by a transcendental spirit, was 'raised' to being the official aesthetic thought, with the U.S. critic Clement Greenberg as its prophet. "Visual art should confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience and make no reference to anything given in other orders of experience" he wrote. (7) Again according to Greenberg, "artworks were to be granted a self-validating status like that of objects of nature, such as stones or leaves, which are not asked to refer, to signify, or to justify themselves in any external terms." (8) This was how, in an essentially mundane epoch, a new religion was conceived, attributing an aura of holiness to the work of art: *art for art's sake*.

However, this nth attempt to found an aesthetic doctrine by claiming cultural superiority was doomed to be contested and given short shrift. Minimalism, conceptualism and programmed art took it on themselves to shift the issue from an abstract and purely aesthetic plan to one that was

concrete and cognitive; to this the performance aspect was added, to recover the political and social dimension. For nearly twenty years painting was declared dead and buried. Later on, at the beginning of the Eighties, like the phoenix, painting was resurrected from its ashes: Robert Long, Anselm Kiefer, Eric Fischl and the artists belonging to *Transavanguardia* took a fresh look at basic tools and issues of painting, asking themselves questions about its potential, purposes and communicative abilities. But the relationship of painting and history – and more specifically with its own history – was above all the element that acquired a determining importance. In this phase quotationism was born, a style with which some artists, among them Carlo Maria Mariani, started to 'draw' from the archive of the images of history and to re-propose them on the canvas, out of their context. The parallelism existing between quotationism and the affirmation of post-Modernism in architecture, with its resuming architectural elements in an a-critical and trans-historical fashion, is more than evident. After this first, "primeval" appropriation stage, the theoretical and methodological post-Modern system was steadily refined and developed till it included, like an enormous blob, every kind of expressive language. In the realm of painting, we thus move from a more self-congratulatory initial stage to a vision where everything co-exists, and where equal dignity and consideration are granted to the whole of human knowledge. Painting is then free to include all expressive language, without any distinctions, by annulling every hierarchy of values. For the first time in its history, painting, inside itself, encompasses the modern and the ancient, the stately and the vulgar, the holy and the profane, the elitist and the popular: comics, cinema, pornography, television, religious and popular iconography, video-clips and advertising, consumer goods, political symbols, and anything that attracts the artist's imagination. Within this context, pictorial codes and genres themselves can be recovered and re-interpreted.

To these considerations I would like to add some thoughts of Umberto Eco's: "It seems to me that Postmodernism cannot be restrained in a chronological manner, but as a spiritual category, or better as a *Kunstvollen*, a way of operating. We can say that each era has its own Postmodernism, as each era has its own Mannerism [to the extent that I wonder if Postmodernism is not the modern term for Mannerism as a meta-historical category]. The historical *avant-garde* [though I mean *avant-garde* as a meta-historical category as well] tries to square things with the past. [...] The *avant-garde* destroys the past; it disfigures it...[...] The moment comes when the *avant-garde* [the modern] cannot go any further because it has produced a meta-language that talks about impossible texts [conceptual art]. The postmodern answer to the modern is to recognize that the past, since it cannot be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be considered: in an ironical, not an innocent manner." (9) And irony is one of the features that mostly characterise a great deal of paintings taken into consideration in *Painting Codes*.

Therefore, if we are to understand contemporary art and, particularly, painting, the post-Modern cultural context is the inescapable departure point. Inevitably, traditional painting codes are also set inside this framework, the common denominator of all artists appearing in *Painting Codes*. As a result, if the themes dealt with no longer follow a linear development, and the structures have become unstable, by internal interference and intercontamination; and if none of them can claim to have a dominating position, it follows inevitably that traditional pictorial genres have undergone this same transformation. Paradoxically, then, the choice of painting one genre instead of another no longer corresponds, *per se*, to the attribution of a specific worth or meaning; according to the post-Modern vision, one nude is equal to a holy representation and a landscape to a historical subject. To demonstrate this, all the works exhibited in *Painting Codes* could be included in more than one category without thereby jeopardising their reading.

In a similar fashion, but with a significant head start, scientific matters, too, developed in a way that may be defined post-Modern. The general theory of relativity, quantum mechanics and the concept of entropy have modified the very notions of time, space and matter, thus demonstrating that dynamic states of matter can be generated reflecting the interaction of a given system with all that surrounds it. Prigogine and Stengers call these structures, characterised by their non-linearity, instability and fluctuations – *dissipative*. (10) Other concepts, such as those of hidden variables, have forever undermined notions such as predictability, coherence and reversibility, not

to speak of the effects of the more recent chaos theory, and of the related theories of games, of knots, etc.

A phenomenon that more recently has been provoking historically-important changes, transforming our way of thinking, is *hypertextualisation of knowledge*. It is by no means accidental that hypertexts (11) share a number of aspects with the theories mentioned above – for example, the subversion of the principle of logical sequence, the atomisation of constitutive elements and the absence of a leading organisational axis. Hypertexts do not exist in a final and definitive version; they are mobile by definition, and fluctuate in the virtual space of the interface of a computer. A hypertext is deconstructed by definition. (12)

This turns out to be an extremely precious tool for decoding a large number of the works present in this volume. Consider, for instance, Dexter Dalwood's 2004 *Bay of Pigs*, relatively representative of his way of working. The featured subject is the United States' failed attempt to eliminate the Cuban government in 1961. Dalwood chooses a tropical setting that seems to have been borrowed from a touring brochure. In the lower section, however, he inserts a detail taken from Picasso's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*; on a rock to the left we read 19.04.1961, a date which, besides coinciding with the year of the title episode, appears in another painting by Picasso executed while he was staying on the French Riviera. The structure of the painting, therefore, is hypertextual, since the elements are not arranged according to a logical and consequential criterion, but coexist inside several temporal and spatial dimensions; the landscape bespeaks a tropical country but also the French coast; the episode described is that of the Bay of Pigs but at the same time Picasso's own, on the Riviera; there are references both to politics and to art history.

Just as the reader of a hypertext can choose what path to follow, the observer of a contemporary painting can decide which way to look, which connections to make and which interpretative paths to follow; in both cases it is up to the spectators to activate a plot, having at their disposal the elements chosen by the author. Like Dalwood, Aoshima, Cannavacciuolo, Dawson, Di Piazza, Eisenman, Essenhigh, Guolo, the Luo Brothers, Majerus, Meese, Ocampo and Pessoli too all paint in a hyper-textual manner. If in a pre-post-Modern painting the composition was arranged so as to offer a logical, organised and unidirectional succession of elements, in post-Modern painting the order of the matter has been undermined.

Hypertexts bring us to a wider discussion concerning technological development. Only if we acknowledge the central role of technology in creating new languages can we possibly decode contemporary expressive languages and, in our case, that of visual arts, and especially of painting. Had the new technologies never arisen, most of the works presented in *Painting Codes* could not have existed. Computer hard disks have become the greatest data banks ever to exist. Nowadays, we could load into – and store in – a normal household computer the materials that were preserved in the Library of Alexandria in Egypt. The opportunity given by a hard disk to store millions of images, like the possibility of generating or manipulating them, are tools that contemporary artists exploit to create their own works. According to McLuhan's lesson ('the medium is the message'), transformation has gone so far that today we think like a computer, and there is no shortage of painters who tend to arrange their canvases as if they were computer screens. The fractal multiplication of iconographic references to be found in so many contemporary paintings ensues directly from the enormous image storage capacity of computers; the hypertextual modality deriving from the specific interactive nature of the computer, that I've already mentioned, and in many cases the creation itself of elements and the general composition of a painting, all take place as a result of possibilities offered by a computer. In this, the Japanese artists Chiho Aoshima and Takashi Murakami are especially emblematic. They both produce sketches on paper which, after being scanned, using special software (Adobe Illustrator), are transformed into graphic images; shapes, colours and compositions are arranged thanks to the use of a computer. The results are printed eventually transferred onto the canvas and finally executed by assistants. Apart from the technical aspect, it is interesting to note that the aesthetic visions of both artists derive from the technical tools they use; the *superflatness*

theorised by Murakami is, *de facto*, an aesthetics that is rooted in Japanese traditional painting, but through the use of the computer it finds a contemporary synthesis of its own, thus becoming a global language.

Cannavacciuolo doesn't use a computer, but creates an expressive language of his own by using a slide projector. Through access to an immense slide archive, he is able to project dozens of images onto the canvas simultaneously, tracing their outlines before finally completing the painting by applying the colours. Also in this case, the artist's expressive language is the result of the choice of a technical means. Naturally, this by no means belittles the image-producing power, which every artist is endowed with, to create his/her own unique expressive language, and is the result of choices and influences that have to do with the special personal, cultural, historical and political context of that particular artist. However, we must emphasize that technique comes before any such language, and predetermines it; only later is the artist in the state of attributing a meaning to the images. We have to stress the fact that painting is amongst the most ancient forms of representation, and in the changes to styles and subjects we find the recording of fifteen thousand years of humanity's history. The human being has been entrusting images with the task of communicating meanings for centuries, independently of the technical tools employed to achieve them. All the same, each great technological innovation has changed our way of thinking. Nobody can deny that the appearance over the centuries of writing, of the press, the telegraph, cinema, television and computers, has modified our way of thinking and, as a result, of observing the world around us. (13)

To quote Thomas McEvilley again: "The post-Modern form of representation is not to attempt to represent things in the world but to represent modes or styles of representation: the film, the comic book, the classical painting, the advertising mode. [...] The art of our time has offered us, in place of the simple pictures and definitions of the past, a meta-picture involving multiple models that constantly shift and balance, to a degree, negate one another. There may be a picture of the future here, but it is at present still a picture that is shaped by negation – a picture that cannot yet be directly seen." (14)

I share this interpretation and would like to add that, despite the fact that images – and, by extension, paintings – are not able to predict what our future will be, the ability to narrate the present is always an excellent starting point on which to base our choice of future direction.

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(1) Thomas McEvilley, *The Exile's Return. Toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 1.

(3) Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture. An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, Oxford, UK and Malden, Mass., USA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997, p. 6. First published in 1987.

(4) W.J.T. Mitchell, «Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community», in *The Politics of Interpretation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, pp.7-32, quoted in Steven Connor, p.12.

(5) On this subject see: *Thomas McEvilley, Art & Discontent. Theory at the Millenium*, Kingston, New York: McPherson & Company, 1991.

(6) On this issue seminal were the publication Maurice Tuchman (ed.), *The Spiritual in Art, Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, and the exhibition organised in 1987 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.

(7) Clement Greenberg, «Modernist Painting», in Gregory Battock (ed.), *The New Art*, New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1973, p.74.

(8) Thomas McEvilley, *Art & Discontent. Theory at the Millenium*, p.27.

(9) Umberto Eco. *Il nome della rosa*, Bompiani, Milano, 1984, pp. 528-533; (Eng. trans. *The Name of the Rose*, Fort Washington, PA: Harvest Books, 1994).

(10) Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *La Nuova Alleanza. Metamorfosi della Scienza* [The New Alliance. The Metamorphosis of Science], Torino, Italy: Einaudi, 1993. First published in French: *La nouvelle alliance. Métamorphose de la science*, Paris: Gallimard, 1979.

(11) T.H. Nelson describes hypertext as a non-sequential writing, text that branches out to allow readers to make their own choices; something best exploited in front of an interactive screen. As it is generally understood, a hypertext is a combination of pieces of text whose links allow readers to follow their own paths (*Literary Machines*, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, USA: published by the author, 1981). On this issue also see: George P. Landow, *Hypertext 2.0. The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, Baltimore, Maryland, USA: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994.

(12) Quoted from Alessandra Galasso, "Sciamani Iperstestuali" [Hypertextual Shamans] in Luca Beatrice, *Facts & Fictions*, Roma: Castelvecchi, 1999.

(13) On this subject see Neil Postman, *Technopoly. The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992.

(14) Thomas McEvilley, *The Exile's Return. Toward a Redifinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era*, p.102.