
Vincenzo Agnetti

You weren't there. When your friend Piero Manzoni died, not quite 30 years of age, you weren't there, Vincenzo. Nor were you there when they opened the red line of the metro, the one by Franco Albini. When Milan was becoming a capital of design, of contemporary art and finance, you were in Argentina with your family. You lived there for five years, from 1962 to 1967, working on electronic automation of hydroelectric power plants. A technical, absorbing, rational, unemotional job. In those years you were ready to liquidate your past as an artist, the period you decided to call "no art." No art of the past, of the present, only life, freedom, horseback riding by the ocean, boundless horizons. You were striving to forget, writing endlessly in your notebooks packed with thoughts, formulations, theories. Written down to never be read again. In their own way, they were already your first work of art after those you had destroyed before your departure for the New World.

Your birth as an artist did not happen in Argentina, Vincenzo. And you never stopped being one, even in that five-year span in the Andes. You had known you were an artist since your youth, growing up at Porta Romana, graduating at the art school in Brera, taking courses at the Piccolo Teatro, where you met Bruna Soletti, your inseparable companion, instantly loved and wed. Just into your twenties, you were already the father of Germana. Had it not been for your lust for life, you would undoubtedly have pursued a career in the theater. As a young actor with Strehler at the Piccolo, your warm voice thrilled listeners. But for you, art was not a matter of separate compartments: you were a painter, a poet, an actor. You were something else, something you still didn't know about.

You kept an eye on new developments of expression, together with your friends. They were called Piero Manzoni, or Enrico Castellani. You had worked with them from the first issue of *Azimuth*. In the evening you returned home, you read the masterpiece on memory and time by Proust to your young daughter, in her room, where there was one of your paintings, depicting two acrobats. Nothing remains of that painting, or of the ceramics and other works of yours that were scattered around the house. You eliminated the work of your apprenticeship, destroying it, erasing it. Even "forgetting it by heart," as you put it in one of your enlightening mottos. It's a bit like the story of the Middle Eastern poet who asks his master to teach him the art of verses: "Learn all the great poems of the past," the master tells him. The conscientious disciple does just that, and returns to his mentor after a decade, his head packed with poetry. "And now?," he impatiently asks. "Now forget them," says his teacher.

This was the true essence of culture, in your view. Not fruitless reliance on citations, not sterile erudition. "Culture is learning to forget," you wrote. Just like eating: transforming flavors into energy. Absorbing the past in order not to sense it as a burden. We are offspring of our history, immersed in a language and a time that shape us, influence us. "The surroundings alter the surrounded," you wrote.

The five years in Argentina, Vincenzo, let you erase everything, forgetting it by heart. To begin from the end. But also, like a proper practical and determined *meneghino*, to earn enough from your techni-

cal work to be able to return to Milan with sufficient funds to support your family and to purchase an industrial building wedged between a barracks where entire generations of Milanese had been subjected to the customary three days of draft physicals, and an embankment that sloped down to the tracks of the Ferrovie Nord, where gangs of stray cats roamed undisturbed, which you often fed. It was and still is at Via Machiavelli 30. A large two-story space, where you sometimes played ping pong with friends who came to visit, with two lofts connected by a catwalk where you liked to run, shouting: "To be or to be?"

Because – it must be said, Vincenzo – the more rigorous and thought-provoking your art became, the more playful and ironic you became in life, and good company as well. Manzoni knew that, before Argentina, and often hung his Montgomery at the entrance to your house on Via Mac Mahon to spend evenings there, often with a tasty *risottino*. Cooking was a passion of yours. Traditional Lombard cuisine: *risotto, cannelloni, casseoula, nervetti*. After your return from your Andean retreat, this passion was known to Lisa Ponti, Luciano Fabro, Mario Merz, Salvatore Licitra, Alighiero Boetti. They also enjoyed your quips, your invented words and languages. A refined elocutionist, you knew that in the end the meaning of speech lies in the expression, the tone. You never had trouble making yourself clear, in Germany or the United States, by then a renowned international artist, even if you could not speak the languages fluently. Besides your impeccable Italian, the other language you spoke was Milanese, the dialect used with the workers, builders and craftsmen whose paths crossed yours for your work.

The drive towards an impossible resolution of contradictions (has any artist ever been more intrigued by the aporia, the oxymoron?), the desire to make art into pure concept, though aware of the fact that it cannot exist without a physical support, made your work an anomaly in that artistic current that went by the name of "conceptual" in those years (though Fabro recalls it was also known as "mental"). You always took a philosophical, pensive approach to art. The thoughts expressed were yours, distilled from pages and pages of notes, not simply stolen from others and put on display.

You, the manufacturer of your thought and the surfaces that displayed it like secular icons. You were not lacking in manual skill: that of the art student, the painter, the chef, the electrician who fixed the wiring of the building where you worked, with a bench full of tools, often stretched out on the floor. You spent most of the day at Via Machiavelli 30, and often the night as well, resting on a cot in an adjacent room. As the years went by Germana, who had become a doctor, also came to live on the same courtyard. You spent time together every day, you told her about your projects, your breakthroughs, over a plate of risotto seasoned with laughter.

You did everything without haste, but also without relenting. You were exact to the point of fanaticism, and incessant at the same time. All in a span of not quite fifteen years, Vincenzo. Beginning from the end, from what you had stopped doing in your years in Argentina: writing. For the publishing house of your friend Vanni Scheiwiller you kicked off the series of the "Denarratori" with the novel *Obsoleto*, featuring a cover by Castellani. A non-novel that becomes increasingly illegible, page after page, until you make it totally unworkable by filing down the lead type. A book, an object, a performance. Everything that is to come is already there. And what is to come is the *Macchina drogata* (Drugged Machine). An Olivetti *Divisumma 14* calculator you altered by replacing the numbers with letters. The viewer was not asked to merely observe the object, but also to intervene, to interact, producing "drugged" texts that were printed and displayed. A work in the making, a performance, where it is hard to find the bound-

aries between artifact, artist and visitor. A disturbing work, an operative critique of language and the technological myth, which you knew far better than most, Vincenzo.

And so on, little by little. By way of *Architettura tradotta per tutti i popoli* (Architecture Translated for All Peoples), where from all the iconic works you could have chosen, as a proper Milanese you showed the dome of Santa Maria delle Grazie, cutting out your *Libri dimenticati a memoria* (Books Forgotten by Heart), inventing the Static Theater for your *Amleto politico* (Political Hamlet) made of numerical sequences that became thrilling in your reading, without overlooking the series of the *Assiomi* (Axioms) engraved on black Bakelite, the *Enunciati* (Statements) on felt, true visualized thoughts, and the telegrams, the “self phone calls,” the poems, the installations and performances... it would be impossible to account for all of your creative energy.

Your work was traveling around the world, and you were a trailblazer, opening a studio in Manhattan, the world art capital, where you spent time with artists like Shusaku Arakawa or gallerists like Ronald Feldman. Without haste, but relentlessly, at the end of your days you had arrived at a new field of artistic experimentation. You worked tirelessly in your studio, on a workbench covered with photographic paper and vats of acid, on the *Photo-graffie*. You exposed the paper to light, passing it through the acids, blackening it with an excess of objective reality. You passed from light to darkness, and then – in a sublimely poetic way – you scratched and etched the sheets, rediscovering inner images that were much more authentic than conventional reality. You ended up where you had begun, returning to a figurative dimension forgotten by heart. Your last exhibition was at PAC, where you showed four large glass pieces, *Le stagioni* (The Seasons), depicting a landscape of the soul etched on blackened photographic paper. In a poem written for the exhibition, you said you scratched “the sidereal blackness that came out with the light,” the infinite darkness of a future you knew you could not meet.

Naturally you aimed your gaze at the future, and yet you knew, in private, intimate family conversations, that your time was short. You were certain that you would not see the turn of the millennium. “My father died at 48,” you once said to the person beside you, “and I too will die young.” Your energetic work was a race against time, Vincenzo. Until that morning in September. You called your daughter, who was at work at the hospital, telling her you had a terrible headache. You agreed on an afternoon visit. Then came a stroll in that late Milanese summer, and a stroke. Sudden death, absolute black. And perhaps even the awareness of the end of everything. “When I saw myself I wan’t there.”