

Review Palermo - An autobiography in the light - Giorgio Vasta/Ramak Fazel - HumboldtBooks - Doppiozero

Seeing a place, and writing it, are probably among the most complex actions in the range of psychic, organic, motor, and emotional possibilities a man can take on: among the human, geographical, linguistic, historical variables, the last fundamental variable where the result is determined by the gaze itself in trying to see, and to write - knowing what it is looking for, where it comes from, and by which roads it has gotten there. The book published by Humboldt Books "Palermo - An autobiography in the light" is the most elegant, powerful example of how much the eyes as well as the word can be dazzled, disoriented with no escaping urbanity, of a humanity that has been without a doubt present, always seemingly equal to itself, for millennia. The duet that Giorgio Vasta and the photographer Ramak Fazel bring to the stage is more or less theatrical, illuminated on the marrow of what is a painful homeland for Vasta, a moon landing for Fazel. The first forty pages that Vasta has composed resonate more in the subtitle: the writer's autobiography intertwines the temporal and spatial planes in an extreme impetus, as if he had finally been able to confess to himself of ultimately reaching that luminous point of looking into each other. The obsession that Vasta's eyes have had for light since he was a child, lucidly expressed in the breath held on the candles of his fourth birthday, in the films by Bresson and Cassavetes in which light is the wild and indomitable mistress, in the long pilgrimages made among the same streets, in the same hotel rooms, he reveals the intolerance of a "wanderer" who has become aware of a goal to be reached, but without knowing which one or where to. The flow, which can be considered a true poetic prose, is almost more reminiscent of a Sanguineti in moments of lyrical sincerity than a Joyce, the degree of prostration even in the faintest light makes it necessary to follow Vasta's resolute monologue-journey from the first to the last line. A journey that will lead to Palermo, to the streets of his childhood, to the house in Addaura where he will host Fazel to observe Palermo with him, for a while. Thus, as it happens in symphonies, the adagio will be followed by a movement that takes the lyrical theme of the previous one to resolve and renew it, and Ramak Fazel, traveling with Vasta through the soaked streets of Palermo, offers his own blinded gaze, dazzling.

After just over a year, Ramak Fazel tells the public a very different story from the one that, in March 2021, he had begun to divulge about Silicon Valley, California: this time the photographer finds himself projected into stratification, into heterogeneous space, into the center and at the same time at the limit of all civilization. Again, to face the journey, Ramak Fazel takes up his Rolleiflex, once again used as a means of investigation into the mysteries that we imagine surrounding him day after day. Rarely do we see literature and photography conversing together in this way, independently while remaining accomplices, like the two helix columns of DNA: in the images engulfed by Fazel's flash we find Vasta's fascination in discovering the bridge that binds him to its light, in the light of Palermo; each scene described verbally creates the "filamentous" - as Vasta would say - but resistant connection, for the grafting of the nitrogenous base onto the other column. To what appears to be an improvisation on a piano, Fazel juxtaposes glimpses of streets, human scenarios of the most diverse families at dinner on green checkered wax tablecloths, processions, fishermen, motorcyclists, each caught in a light that is no longer his own, but universal, aseptically democratic, placed to respond no longer to the where, but rather to the who, the how, the why of what it illuminates. Always without titles, as already seen in the Silicon Valley work, the images are the second flow into which the book leads, the natural disorientation - geographical and symbolic - in which we happen to find ourselves. Vasta, in fact, referring to

a previous project carried out with Ramak Fazel, this is how he speaks of the work on Palermo: “[...] if the North American deserts of *Absolutely Nothing* had served us to describe the sense of rarefaction experienced at the entrance to the so-called adulthood, *Absolutely Everything* would have updated that discourse by making it clear to us that adult life is really an immeasurable and dispersed time [...] and we liked the idea of going from the nothingness of the deserts to the everything of Palermo [...]”. A journey as multiple and various allegory, in which not only the city becomes the maze in which existence can find development, but also the Ithaca of a young Ulysses again, just like in De Chirico's paintings. In fact, it is within Palermo that Vasta finds the old films that portray his first days of life and discovers he was once looked at by a fearful glance, realizing that it had not been that kind of fear which led him away from the hometown, but the antechamber of unconditional love. Hence, returning home means returning to oneself, to the first true light in which the mystery of life becomes intimately connected to the miracle of looking. And it is in this way that the leap from words to images perhaps becomes more harmless and painless, although it necessarily means growing up, and looking at things with the filters of those who are destined to survive: Fazel, then, becomes the guide of a less sweetened world, deprived of the nuances of feeling and memory, to give the place a new meaning. Palermo is no longer the beginning or end of a life, it is a spiral vortex, as in Hitchcock, and solitary: very few subjects in Fazel's images look us in the eye, inviting us to sit among them. From the man who reads the newspaper with the title "Refuse" which often returns to Vasta's imagination, to the Indian girls who take a walk, to the women in fur coats who proudly turn their backs on us to get lost in the physiological penumbra where even the flash reduces its subjects, everything carries out its own flow, not paying attention to the light that generates and crowns it. Fazel's light is a short, artificial aura, overridden by darkness despite the fact that it could also be a full day; and this is how freezing a life in the process becomes an operation just as extreme as summarizing one's own in the lucid obsession that has secretly guided it for years.

The multiple, the "everything" of Palermo, is then dissected by Fazel into single and independent portions, analyzed one atom at a time, extracted from its secular and daily flow: on each page the eye closes and reopens on a different actor, a new meaning yet part of the whole in which it is included. If it is true that the whole is more than the set of its parts, Fazel's speech makes the axiom unequivocally explicit, taking into consideration every cell of the organism in its unique existence.

The passage from Vasta's Palermo to Fazel's almost seems like the one that in the course of evolution led to the birth of carnivorous plants: if the city once, in the memories and in the Vasta's evermore aware eyes, was nourished by natural light, of its own light, of that which the Sun generates hitting on its buildings, its streets, its people, for Fazel photosynthesis is interrupted in favor of the carnivorous engulfment of artificial light. The viewer is prey to a Palermo that is alive even in its own immobility, lucid even in its shadows, exactly like Vasta in narrating his approach towards the goal.

Photography, unlike literature, is unlikely to be able to invent something, intersect the spatial and temporal planes, and this is why it commits so well to the narrative plot of Vasta. The continuous emphasis on the present of Fazel's images offers a necessary counterweight to the figurative wandering in which Vasta leads us, to the labyrinthine wandering in the recesses of memory. Fundamental to all this is a *here and a now*, not so useful for proposing an improbable orientation among the streets of Palermo, as for confirming a presence and, therefore, an existence: just as Vasta finds the nucleus of his research in the

first glance, Fazel also follows the concept of seeing that is essential for the life of any phenomenon.

At the same time, if years are able to be recomposed in a few seconds to look at a photograph, then time is finally not only a literary fiction, but also a photographic one. As such, it is possible to truly contemplate the existence of the dinosaur with which the entire journey ends, which was a pilgrimage and return towards a light that also turns out to be the domain of literature, and not just photography.

There can be no sequel to such work; the project on Palermo led by Vasta and Fazel constitutes the single act just as it is constituted by adulthood intended to represent, and it is in this way that Palermo itself no longer finds history except in its present disconnected from time, in the existence and the gaze of only those who see it. Such a process will necessarily generate a suspension, that possible immobility of one who lives in time, and of one who, over time, has learned to see and to be seen.

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