

## Vision and Phúsis

A Comment on "The Calm Movement of Phúsis Revealed" by Gerald Cipriani

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I believe we were able to visualize the process of the concept of the Still Life being renewed or innovated just now, thanks to the presentation by Dr. CIPRIANI. At least, as far as I am concerned, I am accepting with a good deal of astonishment, that the Still Life, which is a traditional category, has an unusual power to allow us to experience the inner movement of an emerging presencing of meaning, or put differently, the actual movement of 'significance' generated from the signifier.

Dr. CIPRIANI's presentation covers a broad area of topics, but I wish to limit my comments to cover a few issues for the most part, namely, the duality and the gap therein of the duality between the distinctive ability of representation in the Still Life and the inner movement which becomes visible to us by the Still Life. And it has already become apparent through Dr. CIPRIANI's presentation, that this duality on one hand means the duality between the ability of representation in the Still Life and the presencing of *phúsis* as revealed by this ability, while on the other, it also means the duality between the metaphysical and the phenomenological in the Still Life. Furthermore, it is also apparent that such duality does not signify the static structure in the Still Life, but rather, a mutual or bilateral relationship that generates an ecstatic experience. Dr. CIPRIANI's explanation on the ecstatic experience was very remarkable. I wish to quote some of Dr. CIPRIANI's words, as follows :

Unlike Antiphon's idea of 'stable presencing', such a movement is destabilising precisely because, during the perceptual experience, it prevents us from ascribing to it a fixed representation. When it comes to the still life, the movement is certainly calmer, but nonetheless also ecstatic.

I understand from these words that the ecstatic experience in the Still Life shakes the causality, which says that the works of art are always generated by artists, and perhaps acts as the very basis to free the works of art from this very causality as well. In other words, the Still Life, once freed from causality, can now be experienced as an incomplete, suspended being-on-the-way, within the ground interwoven by the movement of the dimension of making together with the dimension of reception. We might say that we understand the ground, in which such a movement of the dimension of making and that of the reception interweave with each other, under the name of "text" as used by the French literary critic Roland Barthes. And we can further understand this Still Life to be the inner movement of presencing of meaning and its representation incorporated within the field of such "text", which is visually uncovered to the human eyes, as the process of a currently on-going existence, at the present point in time. And if that is indeed the case, then I should believe that the Still Life has always been a series of, or a thread of, artistic practices, which try to be faithful to the actuality at each present point in time. In other words, we could say, from the viewpoint of making, that the choice of the Still Life as the theme, for example, is fundamentally different from choosing such themes as historical events or mythological heroes. That is to say, the awareness that is intentionally directed towards the Still Life is different from the narrative awareness or intention vis-à-vis the historical past or idealistic models. The awareness that is directed towards the Still Life is the awareness directed towards the "inner movement of *phúsis*", and this "inner movement of *phúsis*" can be, as introduced to us at the beginning of this discussion, understood as the nature as faithfully represented or described by Parrhasios and Zeuxis in Classical Greece, or to be more exact, the movement of nature that is currently, or just now, in the middle of self-generating and self-ordering.

The arguments of the "inner movement of *phúsis*" by Dr. CIPRIANI, which were accompanied by quotations of Aristotle and Heidegger, make additional explanations difficult, in my opinion, but I understand that the idea does not refer to the movement of object to be seen from the outside, but rather a concept that possesses much of the characteristics of the vital activity to be experienced from

the inside. And this seems apparent from the fact that such movement can be explained by words like “*metabole*” and “impulse to change”.

If my understanding, as described above, is not mistaken, then I have two questions with regard to Dr. CIPRIANI’s presentation. The first question relates to the relationship that is generated by the Still Life, between the viewer and the work of art that is subjected to viewing.

One could ask whether this relationship may be something that is very similar to the “non-theatrical relationship” as described by Michael Fried. Michael Fried explained, in his dissertation titled *Representing Representation: On the Central Group in Courbet’s Studio*<sup>1)</sup>, about the antitheatrical enterprise on the part of Gustave Courbet, or his attempt to reject such factors as are theatrical from the relationship between the pictures and the viewers, and signified that this attempt was materialized as “representation of nature” in Courbet’s paintings. Fried argues he can identify an image of nature’s absorption in the act of representing itself, within the representation of nature, when he looks at paintings by Courbet, such as “*Le Puisnoir (or The Grotto)*” (ca. 1860–65, Baltimore, Museum of Art, the Cone Collection), for example.

According to Fried, it can be argued that the early Modernist painters, as typically represented by Courbet, destroyed the theatrical factors such as stereotypical gesticulation, stylized poses, and theatrical layouts. These factors are generated by some basic practices or fundamental habits that are based on the causal relation that “pictures are made to be seen”. And the early Modernist Painters chose to portray such persons or matters that are not aware of the existence of the viewers of the pictures, and deeply engaged in their own existence of the commonplace persons or matters that were contemporary at the time. However, can we not say that such non-theatrical relationships have always existed between the viewer and the work of art in the category of the Still Life, as expressed by Dr. CIPRIANI?

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1) *Allegory and Representation*, selected papers from the English Institute, 1979–80, New Series, no. 5, edited, with a preface, by Stephen J. Greenblatt, the Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, pp. 94–127.

The other question goes somewhat further based upon the first question. This question has to do with the distance and relationship between the viewer and the presencing of *phūsis* as seen in the work of art, in the experiencing of the Still Life including *le tromp l'œil*.

As I mentioned earlier, the non-theatrical relationship between the viewer and the work of art that is being seen seems to materialize in the category of the Still Life. And this non-theatrical relationship shakes the causal relationship that "pictures are made to be seen", and the relationship of agreement or consistency between the seeing and the being seen, and tends to dissolve such causal relationship, or the relationship of agreement or consistency. I assert this, because the presencing of *phūsis*, which is seen in the Still Life, not only forgets the existence of the viewer, but also is indifferent about the existence of the viewer. Furthermore, it gives the impression that it exists without regard to the existence of the viewer, without any causal relationship whatsoever. It is as if there lies a deep gap between the presencing of *phūsis* and its viewer. This gap between the viewer and the *phūsis* can be well summarized by the words of Aristotle, as described in Dr. CIPRIANI's presentation, which say, "it is ridiculous to want to prove that *phūsis* is". However, on the other hand, words by Heidegger, which say, "the open *phūsis* has already shown itself and stands in view", seem to stand in contrast to the words of Aristotle. In other words, these contrasting sets of words can bring to us the following understanding. This understanding has two parts. On one hand, according to Aristotle, there exists, potentially, an unintelligible abyss between the viewer and the *phūsis*. On the other hand, however, according to Heidegger, the presencing of *phūsis* is already visible or visual, and that is open to visual sensation.

Based on this premise, one may interpret that Heidegger inherited the way of thinking that places priority on visual sensation, which has been taken since Plato, and grants privileges to visual ability. For example, in contrast to Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas says in his main oeuvre *Totalité et Infini* that the visual sensation is a kind of the forgetting of a gap between the subject who is seeing and the object which is being seen<sup>2)</sup>. In other words, speaking differently from Heidegger, the Still Life seems to have uncovered the abyss between the

seeing and the being seen and the fact that the causal relationship between our visual sensation and its object has been lost.

Because of that, the inner movement of an emerging presencing of meaning in the Still Life is the third meaning outside of the relationship of agreement between the seeing (subjective) and the being seen (objective). The Still Life seems to have been the medium of passing the third meaning to the other, which is the stranger or the guest outside of us, outside of our community. And if that is indeed the case, then we can understand that the original meaning of “xenia”, is the “gifts of hospitality”, and it is fundamentally the representation of the process of welcoming the other such as “xenos”, which is a commonplace but necessary cultural activity.

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2) Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini, Essai sur l'extériorité*, Martinus Nijhoff, 1971, pp. 203–210.