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The plastic light

Elisa Sighicelli at Villa Cerruti, the infra-thin strategy and other stories

Davide Daninos

Has it never happened, you who read me, to enter one of these rooms? Haven't you ever felt the strange, dense and phantom quality of the light that stagnated there, and that seemed to separate the place where you were from all the rest of reality?

Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*¹

The recent research carried out by Elisa Sighicelli within the Cerruti collection² is a useful opportunity to reread and focus on the many experimental strategies that the artist carries out to test the boundaries of her photographic language.

The project is divided into two episodes designed specifically for two rooms in the Castello di Rivoli. The first, *Lumenombra* (2019), focuses on the aesthetic analysis of the mirrored *boiseries* of the Cerruti residence, encountered by the artist during the renovation works and therefore covered with protective plastic sheets. The three images are printed, magnified out of scale, on unframed satin fabrics, a support to which the artist often returns to portray transparent, mirrored and luminescent subjects³.

The second, *Lumenicta* (2019), is instead composed of two photographs printed on cotton paper and precisely installed inside two doors not used in the exhibition path of the Castle's collection. The subject in this case are two rooms of the villa – respectively the bedroom in the tower and the dining room –, captured at the end of the restoration and rearrangement work in a new photographic session, taken completely in the dark

¹ Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows* (1962)

² Commissioned in the context of Castello di Rivoli's exhibition cycle *Da parte degli artisti: dalla casa al museo, dal museo alla casa. Omaggi alle opere della Collezione Cerruti*, started in may 2019 at the same time as the opening of the villa to the public; whose eterogeneous collection, built up by Francesco Federico Cerruti (Genova, 1922-Torino, 2005) is managed by the Piedmontese museum. The third chapter, *Elisa Sighicelli. Lumenombra Lumenicta*, is curated by Marcella Beccaria (Castello di Rivoli, 2019.10.31-2020.01.19).

³ We can find the satin already in 2017, used by the artist to reproduce the wavy movement of Palazzo Madama's windows in her personal exposition *Doppio Sogno* (Torino, 2017). Thus in the project *Storie di Pietròfori e Rasomanti* in Villa Pignatelli (Napoli, 2019), the satin becomes the medium to give back the liquidness of the late-renaissance and barroque glasses, the ageing of the villa's mirrors and the plate interior of the 1800's carriages.

except for the cones of light projected by the flashlight that the artist uses to give shape to her images.

If in her most recent exhibition project,⁴ it was the chameleon-like relationships between the images and their supports that stood out, in this research photographic camouflage is not the only tool used by Sighicelli to construct her narratives.

Light, meant as a sculptural element and active collaborator, returns to be a central element in this latest production, showing the experience gained by the artist since the beginning of her research.

Lumenombra

Looking at the photographs of the mirrors of Villa Cerruti, which in their reflections enlarge the lights and the dimensions of the dining room, we can see how multiple floors live together, superimposed, within the same image.

In order to observe the automatic drawings that slowly widen like Rorschach spots in the centre of the mirrors, the gaze must first overcome the opaque plastic veil used to protect the panelling during maintenance work.

Plastic modifies the optical properties of the mirrors⁵, bartering its refractive capacity for a cosmetic patina, composed of highlights and uncertain shadows. The light, filtered through the artificial skin of the plastic sheet, gives a pale luminescence to the painted wood and glass, dimmed and blackened by time. This patina adds more levels of reading to the image. It makes it opaque. It softens the contours, mixing the luminous fragments with the darkness that imbues the objects below, darkened by the afternoon shadows.

Light and shadow are mixed within the same layer which, while extending optically beyond its two dimensions, brings together and amalgamates colours and *chiaroscuro* in a continuous play of pictorial veils.

This opalescent canvas coincides with the plane of the image, thus meeting the favor of the soft forms of the satin on which it is printed, able, not being framed, to bring back and keep moving its currents and its accidental topography. The delicacy of the support accepts the drier and more transparent contours of plastic, developing the physical and optical possibilities of both.

Like the positive of an instant film, this chimera of satin and plastic seems to have been able to copy reality, directly tearing off its outermost flap thanks to its light-sensitive

⁴ The already cited *Storie di Pietròfori e Rasomanti*.

⁵ Normally used as a background for the Cerruti collection's canvas, but naked during the shooting because of the resettlement works.

skin. Observing this surface we can imagine its agile flickering, easily reproduced by the sensitivity of the satin to the air movements in the exhibition space. Its thin mass is impressionable even just by the passage of our breath, capable of creating, like a sudden wind on the grass, wavy movements on its luminous epidermis.

The condescending forms of the support suggest a coincidence between the plane of the image, the satin and the plastic. But this correspondence produces two other results in our perception. The plastic blurs the contours of the landscapes below but, at the same time, allows us to perceive its presence only in the encounter between the light and the more pronounced folds of its surface, capable of revealing its most accentuated forms and reliefs and modulating its shadows in the transparent drapery. First of all, what we see in the three images are the protective sheets and the light, deposited in their hollows like many luminous puddles. Like the final highlights of an oil painting, these diaphanous scales are the first presences that our gaze encounters in its path. In this sense, plastic veils exist only as supports of light and, vice versa, light exists only as plastic.

This glass surface represents the thin border where transparent shadows and vacuous shades of light manage to meet. As Sighicelli herself suggests, this optical trench cannot simply be assimilated with the almost darkness of penumbra⁶, but expresses the active coexistence of two forces in equilibrium, a *lumenombra* precisely where "the particles of light blend with the darkness, revealing an ambiguous universe, with no boundaries between light and shadow" (Tanizaki, *op. cit.*).

Luminicta

Like a thief in the night, Elisa Sighicelli steals images.

In *Luminicta*, the light of her torch sculpts the contours of the rooms of the now deceased Francesco Federico Cerruti, now inhabited by its true owners, the furniture and works that have been resting here for years.

Here too, the coexistence of light and shadow sets the narrative in motion. It suggests the presence of movements, psychological and factual, within the image. It creates actors in this nocturnal interior, or underlines its absence. It evokes hidden shadows, invites the gaze, and stimulates voyeurism.

The contrast between the electric light and the shadows of the night stages possible representations. It awakens the works of the villa not as such, but as actors in that theatre of objects that may be the private residence of a collector. Where our gaze,

⁶ The prefix *pen-* comes from the latin *paene*, "almost", "close to".

guided by the new points of light, can be inserted into the empathic dialogue that still remains between the paintings and their now absent owner.

Thus, the many medieval icons and gold backgrounds, the *Ecce Homo* and the wooden statues that crowd the walls of the uninhabited bedroom, awakened by our unexpected entrance, come out of the shadows like many nocturnal animals disturbed in their rest, claiming the role of the only inhabitants of this territory⁷.

Portrayed by Sighicelli, even the two masks painted by Giorgio de Chirico, preserved in the dining room of the Villa Cerruti,⁸ are no longer just the muses of a metaphysical thought, no longer works preserved in a well-kept collection, but bodies that look out from the mirrors of the boiserie as silent witnesses of the artist's nocturnal walks and of our curious gaze.

Observing these two photographs installed with precision inside Rivoli's doors, even though we have grasped the strategy of the *trompe-l'œil*, we cannot restrain our curiosity, we have to look inside this broken through, to see what else is hidden inside their darkness. Our gaze is stopped only by the opacity of the cotton paper that, guarding the images, gives a physical body in the darkness of the night, whose darkness is confused with the soft lighting of the exhibition hall.

The ability to portray what cannot be seen and the coincidence between real and represented lights recall the pictorial strategies already used at the end of the nineteenth century by Edouard Manet. In *Le Fifre* (1866), for example,⁹ the French painter positioned the source of illumination outside the painting, perpendicular to the pictorial plane, to flood her subject with light and thus blend in with the real lighting as if the canvas, "in its materiality, were exposed in front of an open window".¹⁰

Sighicelli intuitively expands this strategy to the shadows of the exhibition space, controlling the brightness of the room and making the boundaries between the darkness of the cotton paper and the non-refraction of light in the room indistinguishable, blurring the distance between these two places even more.

The doors that portray the two dark rooms connect rooms that are distant in space and time: the Castle's collection experienced during the day by the spectators and the Cerruti collection in Sighicelli's night vision. These two openings are not only an

⁷ For a list of the works in the room, see *La Collezione Cerruti. Guida*, edizioni Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Torino 2019, pp. 62-65.

⁸ Giorgio de Chirico, *Muse metafisiche (Composizione metafisica – Muse metafisiche) (Composizione metafisica – Le due maschere) (Castore e Polluce)*, 1918, Fondazione Francesco Federico Cerruti per l'Arte collection. Long term deposited by Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Torino. See *La Collezione Cerruti. Guida*, p. 33, cat. B5.

⁹ Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *La pittura di Manet*, curated by Maryvonne Saison, Italian translation by Simona Paolini, Abscondita, Milano 2005, p. 50.

instrument to sneak into the night solitude of the villa, but they act as portals: they extend the public visit to the Piedmontese museum to the solitary and intimate one of the residence at dusk, eliminating any distance and underlining its contiguity.

The first subjects on which the artist focused her attention at the beginning of her career were the doors and windows, which have always been used in the history of art, as synonyms for the frame, the pictorial plane and the photographic frame. They are in turn optical instruments, framing landscapes and interior views, making them an image. They separate and connect environments, in this case not contingent.

The windows, recurrent in all Sighicelli's work,¹¹ have been chosen from the beginning as a privileged subject to stage her idea of expanded and bright photography, created through the use of light boxes partially illuminated in a selective way.¹²

But it is precisely with the life-size reproduction of doors and interior views that the artist begins to create her illusions. It is with *Porta* (1996), a duchampian memory device,¹³ that the planes of image and reality become contiguous. By fitting the photograph of a door closed inside real uprights, behind which a neon light enhances in a controlled way the two frosted glasses reproduced in the image, the artist extends their glow inside the three-dimensional space of our experience. Here too the lighting sets the narrative in motion: the soft light filters through the opaque glass, suggesting the presence of another space, inhabited by what we cannot see, where light and our imagination can coexist.

These are the same spaces that today we find hidden behind plastic films and inside the doors of the Castello di Rivoli, "familiar places", as Elio Grazioli wrote, "but at the same time strangers, devoid of living presences and yet populated by scenes that have just taken place or are about to happen. 'Crime scenes', Walter Benjamin said, places where everything becomes a trace of something that has happened or is about to happen, belonging to a before or an after".¹⁴

In the same room of the villa, right next to the wood paneling portrayed by Sighicelli, there is a second painting by de Chirico that portrays the painter accompanied by his

¹¹ I refer once again to the aforementioned *Doppio Sogno* in Palazzo Madama as the most recent example on this theme.

¹² See the works *Kennington Road* and *Wilkie's Street*, both dated 1996, where the artist already uses the technique of positioning neon lights on the back of photographs in correspondance to the light sources in the image: in the mentioned cases, the glow of the electric lights filtering through the curtains of some English houses, under the darkness of the streets at twilight.

¹³ See for example Marcel Duchamp's *Fresh Widow* (1920, MoMA, New York) and *La Bagarre d'Austerlitz* (1921, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Stuttgart). For a list of Duchamp's works on doors and windows see Daniel Naegele, *Duchamp's Doors and Windows, proceedings of the meeting "34th Annual European Studies Conference"* (Omaha, October 2006) [https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/arch_conf/85].

¹⁴ Elio Grazioli, *Scolpire la luce*, in *Elisa Sighicelli*, Electa, Milano, 2010, p. 95, which I refer to for further analysis on the artist's research using the *light boxes*.

shadow:¹⁵ not a simple projection of his contours on the wall, but a white silhouette, intent on contemplating the city and metaphysical landscapes that look out from the small window behind him.

This opaline shadow has already been identified as a symbol of her inner life,¹⁶ not secondary and parallel to the public and outer life. Sighicelli's photographs could be read in this sense as a portrait of Cerruti with his own shadows, or rather, only through them. An investigation of the private and inner life of a reserved collector, through what remains of his luminous shadows, his collections and his aesthetic legacy.

The subtle deception

Continuous study of Elisa Sighicelli's works can produce side effects. The main symptoms include confusion and unexpected attention to detail. After having observed her mirror images for a long time, when looking at any reproduction of photographs with a drapery cloth as the background, our brain cannot avoid automatically wondering what these images were printed on.¹⁷

The confusion between media and surface is not random. It accompanies the artist for years now, always interested in testing the limits of the photographic object in our perception.

In addition to the aforementioned camouflage – through which the subjects are printed on materials with which they maintain a physical affinity, an example for all, the classic statuary reproduced on travertine and statuary marble – one of the first strategies Sighicelli put in place was the use of the *trompe-l'œil* photographic, in its most classic application, the representation that appears as reality, and in its opposite version, the reality that appears as representation.

The two photographic openings on the Villa Cerruti recall the classic *trompe-l'œil* frescoes, used as an architectural tool to open the interior walls onto natural landscapes or perspective corridors. Thus the illusion of transparent plastic, imprinted in the delicate forms of satin, evokes the even more distant echo of Parrasio's curtain, painted to deceive Zeusi with the false promise of a painting behind him.¹⁸

¹⁵ Giorgio de Chirico, *Autoritratto (Autoritratto) (Autoritratto metafisico)*, 1920, Fondazione Francesco Federico Cerruti per l'Arte collection. Long term deposit by Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Torino. See *La Collezione Cerruti. Guida*, p. 34, cat. A91.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ For an immediate check of this pathology, I invite you to try, after having seen the works of this catalogue, to look at the reproduction of the famous Jean Cocteau's portrait photography shot by Philippe Halsman (1949). If your eyes don't fail doubtfully on the white background, which neutrality is interrupted by the shadows of the drapery, to wonder which support it is printed on ("paper? cotton?"), then you're safe and sound.

¹⁸ Gaius Plinius Secundus, *Natural History*, XXXV, 65.

In a more synthetic way, the photograph *Untitled (Wood)* (2012) reproduces in 1:1 scale the surface of the same wooden support that supports it. The image, trying to go unnoticed, continues the same design of the wooden block that supports it, making the distinction between real and reproduction as subtle as our perception.

"All the 'identical' however identical they are, (and the more identical they are) come closer to this infra thin separative difference," Marcel Duchamp wrote in his notebooks¹⁹ to describe the slender boundary that separates, at the limits of our perception, two contingent or continuous states and conditions, so close together that we must resort to the intellect to distinguish their minimal differences and give them shape in our experience.²⁰

The imperceptible distinction between supports and surfaces made by Elisa Sighicelli's *trompe-l'œil* photography seems to evoke this perceptual interval, visually asking the same questions: where can we set the boundary between marble and statuesque bodies, between the transparencies of glass, the reflections of mirrors and the satin of "iridescent silk"²¹? Where is the boundary between light and shadow?

It is in the impossibility of finding an answer to these questions that the aesthetic and intellectual pleasure of her photography arises. The indistinct boundaries between shadows and light, support and surfaces, images and material enhance the aesthetic possibilities of your photographic objects. Just as light itself can be read either as a wave or as a corpuscle, so Sighicelli's works find in the complementarity of their status as object images an indetermination rich in semantic possibilities.

With an procedure inverse procedure to the one in *Untitled (Wood)*, with *Untitled (1429)* (2014), the deception is reversed: the folds of a golden satin drapery are photographed after hanging its edges on the wall with two nails, the same nails that, coming out of the image plane, support the print on the wall. The coincidence between the past and present nails hides reality in the representation, reversing the poles of the classical tradition of *trompe l'œil* painting.²²

¹⁹ Marcel Duchamp, *Note sull'infrasottile*, italian translation by Elio Grazioli, in *Sovrapposizioni. Memoria, trasparenze, accostamenti*, E. Grazioli and Riccardo Panattoni (eds.), Moretti & Vitali, Bergamo 2016, note 35rv, p. 54. published posthumously in *Notes*, curated by Paul Matisse, Éditions du Centre Pompidou, Parigi 1980.

²⁰ The coexistence of the smell of tobacco smoke and the mouth exhaling it, the hollow in the paper, the reflections of the mirrors, the glass painting view from the unpainted side, the shadow vectors, the differences between two objects manufactured in series, are all examples used to describe the infrathin interval. See Marcel Duchamp, *op. cit.*

²¹ In Duchamp's words, already a "possible support of visible infra thin" (see *ibid.*, note 11r, p. 47).

²² Already in the 1400s one can find rare examples of objects inserted into the pictorial representations, like the gilded stucco medal in Botticelli's *Ritratto di uomo con medaglia di Cosimo il Vecchio* (about 1474-1475, Galleria degli Uffizi, Firenze) and San Peter's keys in Carlo Crivelli's *Trittico di San Domenico* (1482, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milano). In both cases, though, the illusionistic research is secondary to the devotional or commemorative value, even if a continuity can really be suggested between painted subjects and real objects.

The operations of "piercing" and "camouflage"²³ recall the strategies used by Duchamp in his painting *Tu m'* (1918)²⁴, where, under the shadow of his ready-mades, we can see both an infinite series of coloured lozenges joined by a real bolt and a painted tear on the canvas held together by three real safety pins.

Unlike Duchamp and the illusionistic tradition in painting, in their photographic translation Sighicelli's *trompe-l'œil* deceive reality with reality itself. They do not create pictorial tears but document draperies really nailed to the wall, whose three-dimensionality of plastic elements, 'sculpted' by the artist, is not completely annulled thanks to the presence of relief nails.

The *trompe-l'œil* was invented to deceive our sense of space, enclosing within two dimensions the perception of a three-dimensional space. Sighicelli's photography tests the limits of this illusion, continuously pushing her images towards a sculptural and objective dimension, never hiding her supports, creating moving satin walls, irregular marble slabs, plywood boxes and portals towards alternative dimensions, hidden behind door jambs or in the opaque reflections of oxidized mirrors. As Duchamp wrote: "Opaque reflections that give a reflection effect – mirror in depth – could serve as an optical illustration of the idea of the infra thin as a 'conductor' from the 2nd to the 3rd dimension".²⁵

Duchamp applies the infrathin condition to every "brought / grazing shadow" and every "typographic / photographic impression / etc...".²⁶ In *Untitled (Wunderkammer)* (2013), Sighicelli offers us a direct example of such postulates by photographing a porous and semi-transparent sheet of paper, behind which a selection of objects from the collections of the Poldi Pezzoli Museum in Milan are projected, backlit, their shadows on the image plane, producing a new passage of state: the contours of these *Wunderkammer* objects are blurred into a symbolic and abstract landscape, made vibrant by the diaphanous refraction of light that, like an X-ray scan, crosses them and modifies their shapes.

The infrathin gap has already been applied to reinterpret in photographic terms the creation of the ready-mades themselves which, in the immediacy of their recontextualization, acquire a new status and meaning, becoming a work, image and sculptural object. And, in the instantaneousness of this gap/shot, they show "the minimum difference, the most subtle, that of oneself by itself"²⁷.

²³ Both infrathin operations (see *ibid.*, note 26v, p. 50).

²⁴ Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, note 46, p. 58.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, note 21, p. 49.

²⁷ Elio Grazioli, *Infrasottile. L'arte contemporanea ai limiti*, postmedia books, Milano 2018, p. 20.

Thus the coexistence of the two complementary and simultaneous statutes also enriches the reading of Sighicelli's works, adopting the strategy of appropriation and metamorphosis of objects into images, and of images into objects.

For Duchamp, however, the infrathin border is imperceptible but distinct. In his first publication of this concept, the artist uses the formula "*s'épousent par infra-mince*" to indicate the mode of union between two substances.²⁸ As Grazioli writes: "In getting married there is no transformation, metamorphosis, nor fusion, neither in the sense of uniting and forming a single, third other, nor in that of the mould with which a copy is fused. Rather, there is overlapping, in the sense of being together of the two, inseparable but distinct, although overlapping to the limit of perceptual difference, to form a third party that is properly the visual manifestation [...] not only of the whole but of the 'visual' [...] itself".²⁹

In this sense Sighicelli's "lumenombra" ("*shadowlight*") can be read as the visual manifestation of two distinct but perceived together states: light and shadow united by an infrathin boundary, married in a simultaneous co-presence, whose romantic union can be separated only in the improbable decomposition of their own corpuscular particles and their wavy spectra.

Pearls in the dark

The coincidence of shadow and light moves the reading of all the images taken at Villa Cerruti. Whether it results in the nocturnal contrasts of the silent interiors or in the opaline paste of the plastic reproduced on satin, "lumenombra" remains the instrument by which Sighicelli sets unconscious narratives in motion, giving body to the ghosts hidden among the folds of our vision and accompanying our gaze through the thin lines that separate the objects photographed from the plane of our experience.

Unlike the classical canons, light and shadow are not at the service of representation, but the true subject of Sighicelli's images. The objects that bathe in their glow and opacity are the attribute, the support. The mirrors and rooms of Villa Cerruti become resonance boxes, where the artist can stage her shadow theatre and light paintings. As Tanizaki writes, "the pearl, phosphorescent in dark places, loses much of its charm in

²⁸ "Quand / la fumée de tabac / sent aussi / de la bouche qui l'exhale. / les deux odeurs / s'épousent par / infra-mince" [When the tobacco smoke smells also of the mouth which exhales it, the two odors marry by infra-thin], back cover of the newyorker magazine *View* number dedicated to Duchamp ('View The Modern Magazine', *Marcel Duchamp Number*, series V, no. 1, marzo 1945).

²⁹ Elio Grazioli, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

the sunlight".³⁰ Its true beauty comes from the contrasts of shadows and light in which it is soaked.

³⁰ Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *op. cit.*, p. 47.