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## TRANSIT

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Elisa Sighicelli's images possess the simplicity and richness of a tragedy, where a central role is played by the fragment, the instant, the breakage hidden in the mazes of the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Milan. Museums have always hinged on the sacred image of a work of art. They present their art collection as immovable and as absolute, disconnected from time and pointing to an idealized world made of forms and contents. However, modern life burns time and upsets duration.

As a matter of fact, every museum has a story that is only half told. Through a large index in a catalog or a search device on its website, museums present the contents that they usually conceal in a space that is not accessible to the public. This is the storeroom, the archive of all the works that belong in a collection. A place hidden from the viewers' eyes that often gives rise to misgivings about its content, its state of preservation, maintenance, accessibility, and study. However, over time, museums have gained greater freedom and established different methods of intervention. And Sighicelli is part of this new dramaturgy, one of following, finding, and revealing what is hidden—as in a reportage. It's an investigation that reveals a multitude of possible stories, it's Barthes's *photographic paradox* that makes photography part of a system of culture and history.

Since photography has become the direct witness of our life, the camera has progressively replaced the ancient divinities and has become a god who watches us. The path of destiny is no longer observed from the perspective of fatalism or determinism, but from that of risk and the fortuitous event, forever recording a sequence of unpredictable moments that are entrusted to chance and the freedom of everyone. The inordinate growth of images in contemporary society has the effect of making people less able to focus clearly and broadly on a single issue for a long period of time. Throughout history, radical advances in technology have often produced drastic changes in the lifestyle of humanity. And these changes have yielded compelling dilemmas and have been the subject of debate as to whether they are harmful to humans despite their undeniable beneficial contributions to society and the way of life of individuals. One such debate rages on about recent technological developments that

have led to the production of advanced visual aids, and about their advantages and disadvantages.

The introduction of cutting-edge technologies such as television and computer has made it possible to visually depict complex objects, which, up until then, were difficult to understand as a whole. This acceleration of the cognitive process made it easier to move to the next stage, that of innovation.

This is exemplified by the unprecedented wave of scientific advances in various fields such as medicine, physics, mathematics, architecture, many of which have been largely backed by these cognitive means.

However, while these visual aids integrated the cognition of even abstract ideas and concepts, they had the negative effect of decreasing the individual's ability to visualize without external help. This, in turn, satisfied and then amplified the eternal tendency of humans to find instant gratification, which actually reduced the ability to focus attention clearly for an extended period of time on a single object.

In *As Above, So Below*, Elisa Sighicelli works according to a compensatory method. To our days' widespread acceleration, she responds by looking for what speed suppresses from sight. She replaces complex objects with hidden objects; to counter the difficulty of understanding what is represented, she offers a multiplicity of readings; and instead of instant gratification, she proposes mystery. This series by Sighicelli suggests a slowdown, it's an opportunity to stop and focus on what we are looking for. Image and photographic object will find their synthesis beyond the represented object.

This metamorphosis is what identifies the artist's creativity in the conception of a work that blends the literal or symbolic content of the photographic image with a specific form, in search of a new complexity of meaning that is similar to the complexity of our very senses. Sighicelli shifts from the internal meaning or iconography—sex, the environment, war—to a visual duality in which materials are incorporated as content and at the same time function as a tool for conceiving space. Her sculptural ideas revolve around specific volumetric properties that manage to intellectually and physically connect form, space, and light. The photographic space is designed to work in conjunction with what is literally a three-dimensional environment.

Reportage and the attempt to reveal a story are themes that resonate in what Boris Groys maintains in his essay "Under Suspicion": "The carriers of the archive do not belong to the archive, because although it sustains archival signs, it is not an archival sign itself. Much like the profane space, the carrier of the archive constitutes the outside of the archive . . . The carrier of the archive is constructively hidden from the gaze of the observer. Because the observer can only see the medial surface of the

archival signs . . . The relation of the viewer to the sub-medial space of the carrier is thus essentially a relation of suspicion.”<sup>1</sup> Summarizing what Groys means, the content of a collection is offered to us in most cases through images—a visual barrier which we sometimes happen to question.

Like ghosts covered with the residues of time, the hidden artworks remain over the years in dialog with each other, without any need to be moved, shared, or celebrated. This is something that deserves criticism, especially in the case of institutions exhibiting only a very limited part of their assets, without any willingness to rotate or modify what is shown in the section anachronistically called “permanent collection,” and without even mentioning the “minor presences” of that same collection, and therefore of that same story. In this way, these “minor” works are consigned to oblivion, sitting at the edges of their own narration.

Having been invited to go down to the storerooms of the Galleria d’Arte Moderna, Elisa Sighicelli explored this archaeology and decided to focus only on the sculptures—female and male bodies which she reproduced in large dimensions (three formats, the largest measuring 200 x 150 cm), making it possible for their voices be heard again, as though they were ghosts.

In her compositional choices, the relationships between the characters are deliberately left ambiguous. A man seems to whisper in a woman’s ear: does he want to tell her a secret or is he threatening her? Two bodies lie naked: is this an erotic scene or are they dying? These are difficult questions, as much as they are useless. What Sighicelli’s photographs offer us are still images of a system that relies on criteria other than the curatorial gaze, other than a notion of narrative. This is raw material that reveals itself to our gaze, that requires our involvement for the formation of a story of our own. “The photo-grapher is not simply the person who records the past, but the one who invents it.”<sup>2</sup>

In her descent into the museum’s “underworld,” as if she were visiting one of the underground tombs around Tarquinia or Cerveteri, the artist introduces us to a wide plural dialog. The evocation of the dead, or necromancy, is something that has recurred in literature ever since *The Odyssey* and that has been largely taken up by a discipline that derives its name from the notion of ontology, “hauntology” (in fact, a portmanteau of “haunting” and “ontology”). Coined by Jacques Derrida in his book *Specters of Marx*,

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<sup>1</sup> Boris Groys, *Under Suspicion. A Phenomenology of Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 11 (translated by C. Strathausen).

<sup>2</sup> Susan Sontag

this word refers to the study of the ghosts of the past as a field of critical work. While not implying belief in the actual existence of ghosts, “learning to live with ghosts” means disrupting power, disrupting knowledge, and confabulating to obtain new possible outcomes and therefore a new perspective for the future.

The act of confabulation resonates with the concept of *conjuratio* theorized by Derrida, which in turn designates two things together: on the one hand, a conjuncture of multiple temporalities and on the other, a magical spell intended to evoke, to bring out with the voice, to summon an enchantment or a spirit.

Sighicelli’s sculptures—or rather, the three-dimensional images she created—converse in a low voice and in secret about their subsequent revelation. In her attempt to revive them, to make them almost human, the artist used a single source of illumination that translates the subjects she photographed into a sort of cinematic still images, snapshots that freeze in time commemorative busts, vestiges of propaganda, scale models of monuments, and plaster maquettes, all preserved in the GAM storerooms.

Driven by a strong imaginative power, we find ourselves reflecting on a possible desire, that of knowing what is hidden behind this surface: a mediological desire (that is, linked to the medium, the carrier) and a hauntological desire. “No doubt, the question concerning the media carrier is nothing but a new reformulation of the old ontological question about the substance, the essence or the subject possibly hiding behind the image of the world.”<sup>3</sup> Sighicelli applies this question to the portrait of a multitude of presences, of moments of breakage and repair in an uninterrupted continuity of the body, the copy, and its context.

The first peoples separated from the Romans for thousands of years knew the art of portraiture, albeit with substantial differences. The Egyptians painted portraits of their kings, officials, priests, and ladies-in-waiting, a magical refuge for the soul that had been left homeless after the death of the body. The Greeks had their own portraiture, whereby a victorious young man would willingly lend his features to represent the gods, while the portrait of a general, philosopher, or poet was modeled as a statue of the divine and was endowed with superhuman features. The Greeks did not wish to reproduce particular details but to present an image that embodied the idea they had fabricated. Hence the contradiction: the Egyptians, who considered the body as a temporary dwelling for the soul and the soul as the only true reality, sought, in their art, to stick to the aspects of the body; on the other hand, the Greeks, who saw the body as

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<sup>3</sup> Groys, *Under Suspicion*, p. 11.

the only reality and the soul as nothing more than a transitory inspiring breath, did not seek to reproduce a fleeting resemblance but to represent an eternal identity. The Greeks idealized the body, the Egyptians the soul.

By creating images that remove her subjects from both factual and metaphorical obscurity, Sighicelli seeks through the exhumation of bodies to depict the soul of the place that guards them.

All photography requires light, but the light used to shoot in the dark is unique—shocking, intrusive, and abrupt. It explodes suddenly into the darkness. The history of flash goes right back to the challenges faced by early photographers who wanted to use their cameras in places where light was insufficient—indoors, at night, in caves. The first flash photograph was likely a daguerreotype made with portable battery-driven lights (which Nadar used in his well-known photos of the Paris catacombs) and with magnesium.<sup>4</sup>

Elisa Sighicelli makes a similar use of light. Instead of the theatrical unpredictability of the flash, she prefers a portable, large light that can be moved easily, so as to design the proper lighting and direct it toward the desired expression of the statues. Using this expedient, the artist makes visible what would otherwise remain hidden—an unwanted intrusion, a stolen conversation, an unfinished story. A precise use of light reveals every fracture, the wear of time, every accumulation of dust, every wrinkle. She manages to take out of darkness the appearance of things that have perhaps never been seen before with such clarity. These images create the illusion of suspended movement: bodies that through photography are returned to the unpredictable and exciting category of the sublime. Dust accumulation on sculptures makes them into photographic negatives, which are displayed with their twin positives, in some cases with the addition of sculptural three-dimensionality. In any case, we are unable to decide whether we are looking at the representation of a story (the story of the collection or of its individual works) or at the story itself. It is certainly one of the possible stories. These images are corporeal and immaterial at the same time and allow us to accompany the artist in her katabasis and anabasis. This attempt to reshape the narrative of the GAM sculpture collection is carried out with a poetics of decomposition, composition, and re-composition that shatters our conventional learning approach and processed, suggesting that historical narratives are fictional constructs too.

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<sup>4</sup> Magnesium was available in pulverized form and blown through a flame, or ignited in lengths of wire, or mixed into various unstable, if brightly explosive compounds.