

those without eyes to see can fail to discover, in these photographs, a precise description of a new form of political space: the temporary, imposed and suffered sacred architecture of intolerance.



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Modern architecture and wall painting: a paradoxical relationship

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The title of the book by Romy Golan, *Muralnomad*, comes – as the last chapter explains – from a definition of Le Corbusier. In the catalogue of the exhibition “Douze Tapisseries” held at Galerie Denise René in 1952, Le Corbusier tells of his experience designing cartoons for tapestries, an activity he began in 1948 by suggestion of Pierre Baudoin, a master of design at the workshop of Aubusson. On the one hand, Le Corbusier explained, a tapestry is neither the covering of a piece of furniture nor a painting; on the other, it should be positioned at eye level, so it can be touched. Only in this way can it occupy its proper place in modern architecture, a role that is not decorative, but spatial and functional instead. Since the modern world forces us to live in apartments and to constantly move, he continued, wall paintings no longer make sense, whereas a tapestry that can be rolled up and taken with you can now replace them and – he implied – inherit their glorious legacy. For these reasons, he concluded, “I have decided to call it *Muralnomad*”. Le Corbusier’s rather lofty sounding statement, as radical as it is anachronistic – or maybe radical precisely because it is anachronistic (like all his pronouncements) – is analyzed by Romy Golan at the end of the book, but it contains all the elements of his research, themes that can be traced back through the chapters of the book. Starting with the attempt to come up with a negative definition – the tapestry is neither this nor that – passing through assertion of its functional and, therefore, according to the modern prejudice against ornament, not decorative but transcendent value, all the way to the transformation of its apparent weakness – the fact that it can be transported – into a strong point, which happily coincides with the nomadic character of society itself, we are faced with a series of questions that, to say the least, can be seen as symptoms of more important problems. Problems that actually have to do

with the very identity of art and architecture in a time of crisis, in which situations continuously change and the accumulation of experience seems impossible. From the social collapse and unprecedented devastation at the conclusion of World War II, to the enthusiasm of the reconstruction – totally fake when seen in relation to the true impact of the disaster that had just taken place – the scenarios seem very different and, at the same time, contiguous, like all the situations of destruction and reconstruction, in effect, that mark the years and places covered by the volume by Romy Golan: the period from the 1930s to the 1950s, and therefore before, during and after World War II in Europe. Le Corbusier’s refined definition, basically, is simply the umpteenth attempt to justify the (as yet) permanent powers of art and architecture. Nevertheless, this is still a demonstration based on the paradox of indicating art and architecture as nomads in a nomadic society, namely mutable things in a mutable society or, even better, transformists in a transformist society. Here we are reminded of the motto on the *Nautilus* of Captain Nemo, the submarine invented by Jules Verne and not coincidentally fingered as the great metaphor of the loss of possession as the obsession of modernity: *Mobilis in Mobili*, moving amidst mobility. The phrase might also function as an emblem of this book, whose deeper theme is the era of the new as always equal, of things repeated as if they had never existed – the era of hell, according to Benjamin – during which the works of its protagonists cannot help but become Sisyphean endeavors. The brilliant text by Romy Golan speaks to us precisely of the perplexity and discomfort from which those works inevitably spring. *Muralnomad* could first of all be interpreted as an analysis of the question of the mural (from painting to mosaic to tapestry) in the period and contexts indicated in the subtitle: *The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927-1957*. But just what is the “question”? Towards the end of the 1920s, in the same moment in which the European avant-gardes seem to dissolve into modern life, or when the mass media had gained a definitive foothold (from amateur photography and cinema to pop music and sports) and were able to uncritically absorb the foundations of the avant-gardes (machinism, massification, shock, leisure time, etc) as well as their techniques (collage, assemblage, etc), and when at the same time the intensification of the crisis was causing a shift of all this towards social spectacularization (the aestheticization of

politics in the 1930s is perhaps the most evident aspect), architects and artists begin a complete revision of their role inside the society in crisis, unable to not feel to a great extent responsible for its problems. In particular, the machine and the masses, which can no longer be seen in the same positive light as in the 1920s, are replaced by a world of “natural” or “used” objects in which the imprint of time or man returns to its status as an appreciated sign of experience. We should not be surprised by the fact that this reassessment, so visible in artists like Léger or architects like Le Corbusier (just to cite two of the names that appear in the book by Romy Golan) can be interpreted as nostalgia. At the same time, it should come as no surprise that one of the ways of expressing that nostalgia – nostalgia, in the final analysis, for the capacity of the artist to give form to the world from an ethical position that goes beyond the betrayal of the machine – is the dream of the union of the arts, or their synthesis (the term most often used by the voluntarism of the artists) and with it the dream of recovering the collective value of the arts through major public works, in which architecture returns to being the place of the “natural” encounter with monumental painting and sculpture. *Muralnomad* discusses how this all emerges as an insolent and even pathetic utopia, as well as the tools with which it was supposed to be realized, and the inherent contradictions that simply intensified instead of being resolved. And the book does so with a structure that clearly identifies and circumscribes the problems. The first chapter clearly outlines the problem of the large mural of the 1800s through a view that focuses, essentially but not exclusively, on the case of France. The discussions centers on a work that might be said to have concluded the history of that century, while ushering in all the problems of the next: the *Nymphéas* cycle painted by Monet for the Orangerie, unveiled in 1927 (the year chosen as the starting point of the book) but begun in 1914, in completely different circumstances. On the one hand, with respect to the apparent solidity of the large mural cycles of the 1800s, Monet’s water lilies seem to melt the walls on which they were painted. On the other, the place and the way they are shown, in a bunker-mausoleum, arranged like a panorama, make it possible to trace their origin back to more ambiguous contexts, like the banality of popular entertainments and the emotional impact of spectacularized tragedies, respectively embodied in panoramas and the trenches of the Great War

converted into subjects for public photography and tourism. The first chapter, then, does not simply introduce the state of the question, but also represents a tool of interpretation to use in the chapters to follow, in a kind of loop that leads to its main demonstration in the last of them. In effect, it is significant that the Nymphéas were greeted mostly by negative comment, and remained silently buried for some time, until they were rehabilitated in the 1950s—the years of the dream, or the nightmare, depending on your viewpoint, of a synthesis of the “major arts”—with which the book concludes. The cycle was then praised for the same reasons it was criticized at the start: for the almost religious disquiet, the sense of pantheism. This sort of critical loop is typical of Romy Golan’s method of analysis, and as a result the clarity of this first chapter is also perceptible in all the others.

In the second chapter the theme is presented in terms of the polarity between the two nations—we choose to define it as such to stay in line with the conceptual vocabulary of the age—that developed it most: France and Italy. The Triennale exhibitions in Milan and the Exposition in Paris in 1937 are the concrete settings of a dispute that is internal to art—the prestige of the monumental mural as opposed to the bourgeois miseries of easel painting and its conversion into merchandise—but also expressed as a staging of operative and political ideology. When oil painting, for example, can be presented as a Gothic invention, the enemy and destroyer of Italian art, the stretching of points in art and its ideologies becomes quite clear. Nevertheless, besides analyzing, over and above the works themselves, the meaning and usefulness of this stretching in political situations as different as the French Popular Front or Italian Fascism, Romy Golan also explores the inner contradictions. For example, the “occult” relationship that links this art of transcendental and collective pretenses to the manifesto, or the way in which the most modern techniques, such as photomontage, are used in the murals that champion more traditional lifestyles, like that of the countryside, while instead painting is used to describe the more modern aspects of urban and cosmopolitan life, from factories to aeronautics; or the way in which ruins seem to be implicitly exploited for the claims of the aura, etc., etc.

Many of these themes find concrete treatment in the third chapter, thanks to one of the main protagonists of the volume: Mario Sironi. The title of the chapter refers precisely to his “pseudo-ruins”. On the one

hand, the use of ruins makes modern art posit itself in an anachronistic, atemporal time frame, defined by the permanence of a History without gaps, a restored History, in fact. The recovery of the aura, seen as the sign of a trans-collective and trans-historical experience, in which the references to the paintings of Pompeii, the reliefs of the Ara Pacis and the Arch of Constantine, or the Byzantine mosaics, contract in an aura understood as a tactile patina. At the same time, though, these ruins unexpectedly manifest themselves in less transcendent, more concrete ways: above all in the ironic “portable mosaic”, namely the mosaic that changes its location and can be shown at fairs or exhibitions. I’d go so far as to say that this oxymoron, the “portable mosaic”, ironic and tragic at the same time, represents the nucleus of the whole analysis of Romy Golan, and therefore some of the book’s most brilliant paragraphs have this focus, and are decisive for the overall development of the work. In an extremely acute and meaningful way, Romy Golan explains the vicissitudes of the important and courageous mosaic by Sironi, *Lavoro fascista (or L’Italia corporativa)*, shown first at the Milan Triennale in 1936, then in the Italian pavilion of the Paris Exposition of 1937, and finally installed in the Palazzo dell’Informazione in Milan. He then analyzes, in an equally incisive way, the work in itself and, above all, the two different projects for its installation, done in Milan and Paris by Giuseppe Pagano. In particular, Romy Golan’s analysis is exemplary in the case of the Paris Exposition, when with great metaphorical force and disquieting vis ironica Pagano literally suspended Sironi’s mural in the air, allowing viewers to pass below it and to have a clear view of the back. This episode represents the visualization of one of the book’s main themes, clearly indicated in the subtitle: paradox. In what does this paradox consist? In the fact that the murals discussed in this book are not convinced that they should be part of walls. They no longer trust walls. The nostalgic dreams of the art and architecture of the 1930s, and those of the synthesis of the arts in the 1950s, are denounced through the tragic humor with which Pagano interprets the suspended mosaic of Sironi, a frightening metaphor as well as proof of the impossibility of reaching any form of restoration or trans-historical pacification.

In this same critical perspective, the fourth chapter exposes other contradictions. The title, “real and painted photomurals”, is already eloquent: with its converging of mechanical, artistic and media forms

—photography, collage, advertising, etc.—and its technical and economic possibilities, the photomural should be the characteristic and essential example of the era, and that is actually the case, in many ways. Nevertheless, as I have already underlined, Romy Golan conducts his analysis along more complex, revealing paths. The photomural, in fact, has a dialectic relationship—as demanded by the vision of the time—with the grisaille mural, which though it apparently sacrifices the potential of painting, goes beyond its mechanical reproduction, determining and announcing it in advance thanks to a decision with which the artist attempts, in a certain sense, to anticipate any manipulation of the work. Obviously the protagonist of this chapter is Guernica, the large black and white mural painted by Picasso for the pavilion of the Spanish Republic at the Paris Exposition in 1937, a pavilion designed by Josep Lluís Sert. As opposed to the way the work is presently displayed at the Museo Reina Sofia—like a banal “large painting”—if we observe the photographs of the original pavilion we can immediately understand that Guernica was set into a niche, under the pressure of beams like those seen in the painter’s studio during its making, behind a row of pillars and aligned with the mercury fountain of Calder. This position forced observers to look at it in glimpses, as if it were part of a temporary work of architecture—and this is what counts—just as much as the gaze itself. Romy Golan does not only tell us about these essential aspects; he also analyzes Guernica in the context of the political photomurals, many of which changed every day, that Josep Renau made for the pavilion. The fate of Guernica, then, to be a work of grisaille painting or, in keeping with Golan’s radical perspective, a “false” hand-painted photomural, is not the conquest of the aura, but of the myth.

Based on this, the last chapter, on the “redeeming” synthesis of the arts and focused, with a crucial shift of political scenario, on the tapestries of Le Corbusier, is used by Romy Golan to explain the “unredeemed” patheticism inherent to that dream of redemption. The final scenario moves from the Europe of the reconstruction to the dramatic colonial context of the Punjab, whose terrible tragedies—villages divided by new borderlines, over 13 million refugees, hundreds of thousands of deaths in religious massacres—cannot be “redeemed” by a monumental architecture and “muralnomadism”, now seen more as balms for the conscience.

As in the case of the previous book

by Romy Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia* (Yale, 1995), this magnificent study can also be aptly remarked on by using the lucid reflection of Calderón de la Barca on the induced delirium of Segismundo, the protagonist of *Life is a Dream*: “Because knowing who he is, what comfort could he gain?”. He who awakens from a dream, in effect, can find no consolation. This, then, is a critical text, well-written and well-constructed, which through a concrete and meticulous historical analysis takes a stand, in a lucid but passionate way, against the dream of the powers of art and architecture, warning all those who are willing to understand against their false consolations.