

# THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE



## PICASSO'S PORTRAITS OF ISABEL RAWSTHORNE

A tabernacle by Paolo Schiavo | Giovanni Giacomo de' Rossi

Gustave Moreau and the theatre | Kandinsky in Tunisia

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79. *Woman in an armchair*, by Pablo Picasso. 1927. Canvas, 71.7 by 59.1 cm. (Minneapolis Institute of Arts; exh. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid).

resting, and placed beyond *Guernica* at the exhibition's end, is *Woman dressing her hair* (1940; Museum of Modern Art, New York; p.162), a work brilliantly illuminated in an essay in the catalogue by Jeremy Melius.<sup>3</sup> Through the inclusion of such works, Clark reaches out towards an interpretation of Picasso's journey from monstrosity to tragedy that avoids both the anecdotal and the hunt for sources.

There is a sense in which *Pity and Terror* incorporates discrete shows within shows, notably in Anne Wagner's focus on the *Weeping woman* series. The effect is sometimes alarming, particularly in the room titled 'Faces and Phantoms', which focuses on portraits of Olga Khokhlova in which her form is torn apart and her head reduced to a brutalised, toothy framework. Only recently has the depth of her psychological distress in the mid-1930s amid the bitter battles with her husband and the threat of divorce begun to be properly understood. Yet, seen *en masse*, the suite of paintings creates an effect of surprising, classicising calm, as if catharsis has already been achieved.

This show presents a seductive narrative of *Guernica*'s development, but, as Clark stresses, it is not the only one. It is not immediately

apparent, for example, that by focusing on *Guernica*'s spatial relations and its treatment of human figures, two of the painting's main protagonists, the bull and the horse, have been sidelined. Other omissions include the Spanishness of *Guernica*'s subject-matter, Picasso's meditation on rituals, from the bullfight to Holy Week, and the huge grisaille shrouds – the *sargas* – that play out the battle between interior and exterior space. Nor does the exhibition dwell on the history of the painting's reception, a subject recently explored by Genoveva Tusell García in a brilliant study of *Guernica*'s relationship to the Franco regime and its journey from the Museum of Modern Art, New York, to Madrid in 1981.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Catalogue: *Pity and Terror: Picasso's Path to Guernica*. With contributions by T.J. Clark, Anne M. Wagner, Jeremy Melius and Marisa García Vergara. 195 pp. incl. numerous col. + b. & w. ills. (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2017), €35. ISBN 978-84-8026-552-2.

<sup>2</sup> Reviewed by Neil Cox in this Magazine, 156 (2014), pp.541–43.

<sup>3</sup> J. Melius: 'Picasso's Survival', in Clark *et. al.*, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp.163–73.

<sup>4</sup> G. Tusell García: *El Guernica recobrado. Picasso, el franquismo y la llegada de la obra a España*, Madrid 2017.

## Giancarlo Vitali

Milan

by DAVID ANFAM

A MAMMOTH exhibition project at four venues in Milan (all to 24th September) returns to the spotlight a figure almost unknown outside his native Italy. Giancarlo Vitali has had only two solo exhibitions in other countries and there is no notable publication on him originating in English. Spearheaded by *Giancarlo Vitali: Time Out* at Palazzo Reale, Milan, and accompanied by a hefty bilingual catalogue,<sup>1</sup> the exhibitions make clear that Vitali's obscurity has little to do with the work itself.

Born in 1929 to a family of fishermen in the village of Bellano on the eastern shore of Lake Como, Vitali is a self-taught recluse who has rarely left his birthplace: he even eschewed the exhibitions' opening ceremony. His renaissance has been masterminded by his son Velasco, himself a considerable painter and sculptor. Clearly compelled to paint and draw just as others might eat or drink, Vitali uses imagery that has an existential intensity made all the greater by its relatively narrow range. Landscape rarely intrudes, with the notable exception of *Resegone* (1991; all works collection of the artist), a panorama that ruggedly captures a local Bergamasque mountain, capping the elegant display *Mirabili Naturalia Artificialia* at the Museo Civico di Storia Naturale. Instead, still-lives, portraits and figure scenes are his staple.

At face value Vitali is a realist of sorts. Deeper down, he is expressionist to the core. Keen observation, virtuoso painterliness (which suffers greatly in reproduction), grotesquerie, droll humour and death mingle in a synthesis greater than the sum of its parts. Behind his lake fish (Fig.81) may lurk the ghosts



80. *Pause*, by Giancarlo Vitali. 1951 and 2001. Oil on panel, 39.5 by 29.5 cm. (Collection of the artist; exh. Palazzo Reale, Milan).





81. *Shad*, by Giancarlo Vitali. 2004. Canvas, 29 by 26.5 cm. (Collection of the artist; exh. Palazzo Reale, Milan).

of Courbet's *Trout* (1873; Musée d'Orsay, Paris), Soutine's sundry dead creatures and more besides. Yet the image holds its own against them, the energetic impasto gleaming within darkness. The same applies to his many renditions of slaughtered bulls and rabbits, while even a halved *Pomegranate* (1993) spills its fruity guts. Equally memorable is *Pause* (Fig.80), wherein a fanciful self-portrait in a top hat fades, ghost-like, behind blood-red slashes of paint applied half a century later. Mortality and transience also run through Vitali's many treatments of blossoms and sunflowers, the last grouped together in the corner of a gallery where they hang *en masse* in several tiers like a bright efflorescence soon to dim.

It may be this morbid aura that has entranced the British film director Peter Greenaway to collaborate with the painter. *Mortality with Vitali* at the **Casa del Manzoni** is a series of installations (replete with multifarious sounds) by Greenaway that enter into a dialogue with the cycles of life and death in the pictures on the walls. Spanning the period 1950–2008, these have an earthiness reminiscent of Neorealist films by Luchino Visconti and Roberto Rossellini. By contrast, Vitali's assorted musical bands are Felliniesque and upbeat in their bright uniforms, while his portraits of goats exude wiry capriciousness.

*Artificialia* in the **Castello Sforzesco**

offers a wide selection from the more than 450 prints Vitali has created since the 1980s. There they confront old-master prints from the Bertarelli collection, by Rembrandt and Goya as well as James Ensor, who has bequeathed to Vitali elements of *vanitas*, satire, the multitudinous crowd and bright revelry. In the medieval underground Sala Visconti, Velasco Vitali has created a hushed installation in which his father's used copper plates hang from the vaulted ceiling above blank sheets laid in two rows on a long red carpet in a serial arrangement that alludes to those of Walter De Maria.

Contrary to the impulsive or loose impression that the works in oil sometimes give, Vitali is in fact a formidable draughtsman. This accomplishment emerges in the meticulous monotypes and other works on paper shown at the **Museo Civico di Storia Naturale**. They seem as 'modern' as the paintings feign to look backwards. Covering a career of seven decades, these exhibitions bring an inveterate outsider vibrantly back into the continuum of the present.

<sup>1</sup> Catalogue: *Giancarlo Vitale: Time Out*. Edited by Velasco Vitali, with contributions by Gian Luigi Daccò, Peter Greenaway, Giovanni Mori, Giovanni Testori and Andrea Vitali. 240 pp. incl. 280 col. + 11 b. & w. ills. (Skira Editore, Milan, 2017), €39. ISBN 978-88-572-3637-7.

## documenta 14

Athens and Kassel

by JULIAN STALLABRASS

TO STAGE ONE of the world's most important art events across Greece and Germany, and to have it dwell upon the unequal and invidious relations between them, was bound to cause controversy. *documenta 14* is staged equally between **Athens** (closed 16th July) and **Kassel** (to 17th September), and so touches the nerve of a flagrant imbalance of economic power. Even so, this *documenta*, with the working title 'Learning from Athens', has had a very rough time at the hands of critics. Liberals, unsurprisingly, moan that the dead weight of politics has crushed the delicate flower of aesthetics in an alienating and oppressive series of displays. Despite its steadfast anti-colonial and anti-neoliberal stance, some on the Left (including Yanis Varoufakis) have condemned this year's project for the vague way it assigns blame for recent evils, including the financial crisis and incessant warfare in the Middle East; and for its exploitative relations to Athens, which, it is claimed, unwittingly reproduce the very power dynamics it purports to critique. While works of art that condemn neoliberalism are common enough, so far we have had no pieces that show, say, Wolfgang Schäuble, a prominent architect and enforcer of austerity, snatching food from the plates of Greek infants. This *documenta* has been seen generally as a manifestation of curatorial hubris and implicit elitism. There has been much complaint from all sides of a lack of coherence and explanation, which has left even expert viewers floundering in confusion.

Is there anything, then, to be salvaged from a cooler look at the display at Kassel? The aim of *documenta*'s main curator, Adam Szymczyk, was in part to provide symbolic restitution: to let Athens and Kassel be equal, at least here; to let the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens display its collection (which the economic crisis has left shut away) in the major *documenta* site, the Fridericianum; to explore the long, imperial history of German–Greek relations, including the nascent German state's Hellenic vision of its civilising power – an alliance of cannons and Neo-classical architecture, the Nazi invasion and the financial crisis; and to give Greek artists a prominent place in *documenta* as a whole.

If there is an inverse correlation between an art event's size and its cogency, Szymczyk's *documenta* defies it, being far more lucid than one would expect given its vast scale and complexity. It takes some effort to see this, however. Viewers need to work through a fair bit of the 700-page *documenta Reader* and preferably follow the narrative laid out by seeing the venues in the recommended order.<sup>1</sup> If that effort is taken, and certainly when compared to the baggy, agreeable and mystificatory character of its predecessor,<sup>2</sup>