

Beauty and art are terms that have changeable and subjective meanings. They are related to different cultures, different historical periods, variable aspects of taste and society and currents in thinking.

Any and every definition is approximate, though the entire history of Western philosophical speculation is overflowing with literature and weighty essays.

By common convention these two terms are interdependent: art is beauty and beauty is art.

But on close inspection these judgements are superficial; they rely on mere appearance and go nowhere close to more complex considerations.

‘All human beings possess something beautiful’, says Antonio Guccione. This is the truth; it is a deeply religious concept, drawn from that ecumenical religious thinking that holds the whole of humanity within one ideal embrace.

And it is precisely this belief that beauty lies within every being that constitutes his strong point; it is what distinguishes him and his work.

‘Is it true Prince, that one day you declared beauty would save the world? Gentlemen, he exclaimed, calling on all those present as witnesses, the prince claims that beauty will save the world, and I say that if he has these foolish ideas it is because he is in love. What beauty will save the world? ... Are you a fervent Christian? The prince regarded Hippolyte carefully and did not answer.’ (Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*)

Prince Myshkin was silent. Perhaps he knew that ‘all human beings possess something beautiful’ but this was too precious a conviction to be wasted on a salon.

It is precisely through his photography that Guccione conveys the thoughts of the prince.

We live in a vulgar society that believes in exasperated ostentation and yet he knows how to discover and see its beauty and he presents it to us.

His is not simple photography, on the contrary it is so sophisticated in the balance of its elements that it seems to be a spontaneous event, a natural happening that takes place before the lens.

The image is the result of a delicate surgical operation of ‘removal’.

We are reminded of what Michelangelo said: painting is the art of adding; sculpture is the art of removal. The block of marble contains the sculpture that the artist, chiselling away the fragments, brings to light.

Michelangelo, however, knew nothing of photography—though many believe that, had it been invented at the time, he would have been one of its greatest masters, if not the greatest.

So photography is the art of what? Of adding or removal? This question should be put to László Moholy-Nagy, the absolute theorist of photography, though completely ignored in this mastery; too late.

It is most likely the art of both operations: a gifted photographer has the ability of removing everything superfluous to reach that state of rarefaction that is essential to the conveyance of clear, clean concepts.

And it is the art of adding objects that are not actually there, presenting them in new compositional solutions to create a new reality, completely invented, that exists in the artist’s imagination.

And Antonio Guccione is startling in his clever flexibility in exploring opposing positions through his visual skilfulness.

Distilled images, devoid of any redundant elements, as in the portrait of Mario Schifano, captured in a habitual gesture, one might say by chance. Yet that rapid shot is the result of ten days of cohabitation. Schifano kept him in his home for all that time, postponing the sitting: he wanted Guccione to observe him in his day-to-day activity, to truly get to know him.

Thus we understand that the portrait is the fruit of sudden inspiration, nurtured however through careful scrutiny of the subject.

The art of adding, of inventing anachronistic settings, is inspired in Guccione by fortuitous circumstances which he elaborates with intellectual sharpness.

The Last Supper: a large platter of delicious tagliatelle, twelve plates and three models. 1981, in Porto Cervo, incessant rain for days and days; it was impossible to proceed with the outdoor shoot-

ing of the ‘Spazio’ line campaign for Gianni Versace. Exasperated and bored Guccione went to the kitchen and ordered *tagliatelle al pomodoro* for twelve.

The idea took form. The photograph was never to be published, at the time it was considered too daring; it was probably the first to be inspired by Leonardo’s *Last Supper*. Andy Warhol’s serigraphic cycle is dated 1986 and was, in any case, an elaboration of the famous fresco.

In recent years several photographers have taken up this theme in different interpretations, the latest, censored image by Brigitte Niedermair: eleven women and one single man, taken from behind without a shirt. The Municipality of Milan prohibited its billposting; the Institute of advertising self-discipline thought it could offend religious beliefs.

Twenty-four years have passed, Guccione anticipated the times and the result is the same.

All his other photographs, which are anti-conformist stagings, have been published though they have created a certain irritation. The reason: free, independent, cultured, not artificial, much less a slave to trends, daring, being an authentic artist he perceives changes in custom and social turmoil before they are clearly evident and before they become the subject of debate and critical essays.

It may seem absurd, though not so much so, that his photographs can be taken as a ‘reading’ of what we can expect in the near future and how we should adapt our thinking to the new currents to come.

This ‘reading’ needs to be interpreted.

In a miracle of fantastical inputs, Guccione brings his interior universe into the image, his human drives, the values in which he believes and his positive, joyful vision of life, his sentiments and his considerations.

Photographs, certainly, and like in all good photographs fragments of the individual who has created them are to be found.

The signs in Guccione’s work need to be deciphered.

An inscription in images revealing what is being filtered deep inside him.

The backgrounds in his portraits—he always waits for the subject to take on an attitude and pose that he/she believes can identify him/herself —play a decisive role: they are a sort of medium in penetrating ‘the mystery of life’, this is how Guccione expresses himself. And they are studied in relation to the subject and its position in the world.

It is of no importance whether it is an artist, a personality from the cultural elite, a child or a happy family. The backgrounds are invented each time and are not skilful artifices created to enrich the image with some other enticement, instead they underline a delicate feeling which, like a spiritual flow, has united the creator of the image with the subject.

Sensuality and eroticism, natural drives, can be observed in his work. These are insinuations he inserts with gentlemanly discretion, so as not to offend anybody, least of all himself.

And illogical, absurd solutions to ‘illustrate’ fashion, or better still the dress-object, which is transformed into an ephemeral artwork within his image.

And here we have the game of cross-relations, recollections that involve territories very far from usual photography. Clothing is the protagonist; the model/models are not inexpressive dolls, they play a decisive role and Guccione brings out their personalities giving them the utmost attention.

The observer is transported to a universe of the imagination, enraptured in an absolute dimension where the confines of reality are erased and fantasy reigns supreme.

There is a particularly significant episode in Guccione’s professional career that could be a key to understanding the many nuances of his work.

In 1983 the French magazine *L’Officiel* invited Angus McBean to do a fashion commitment in Paris. The great English portrait photographer had retired from his professional career ten years before, he had never worked in fashion, he was close to his eightieth birthday and he was blind. It was an impossible challenge and yet, despite everything, McBean accepted: his last work is a masterpiece of grace and fantasy, full of literary references and daring composition. His assistant prepared the set, put the models in pose following the master’s instructions; behind the camera, though already well established professionally, was the young Guccione.



Through some mysterious path of mind and soul this experience with McBean, the last sublime aesthete, passed something on to Guccione, he took on and renewed that quest for elegance and... a sense of the absurd, of a subtle play on the unexpected.

Arranging elegance and surrealistic tensions requires great class and can be seen in every image of *Fashion and Faces*, a collection of fashion and portraits.

It is true that they were created for different functions but it is also true that the borders between the two genres, in the particular case of Antonio Guccione, are often blurred. Many of the photographs are fashion/portrait or portrait/fashion, in the sense that what is conventionally considered as 'fashion' is in fact a portrait and a 'portrait' can be easily included within fashion.

Does *Lingerie, Paris*, 1982, really want to highlight silk and lace lingerie? Or is it really the portrait of a glamorous woman, a member of the jet set that Guccione has interpreted through subtle symbols?

And do the four men who brandish frightening utensils with charming smiles represent a famous New York family of butchers or are they an amusing invention to set work clothes that would otherwise have been of little relevance against the background of an oneiric Manhattan?

These deceitful appearances make fun of us; our certainties are questioned and we are forced to apply a more in-depth analysis. Being overcome by the unquestionable charm of a highly attractive image we must not limit ourselves to the 'pleasures of the eye' but should try to understand what is hidden beneath the surface.

Everything can be its own opposite.

It is probable that Guccione is not familiar with the teachings of the Cabala (indeed very few scholars are capable of penetrating its meanings), the deepest reading of the world and the Bible and certainly not the popular interpretation of numbers, and yet his photography is inspired by the Cabala which is the quintessence of paradox: there are multiple points of view that also become the affirmation of their opposite.

Moreover Tiferet, that is Beauty, is constituted precisely by the harmony between differences, the co-existence of many colours, of many tonalities and characters in infinite combinations; diversity of interpretation is considered enriching.

His photography, therefore, is a (cabalistic) interpretation of the world and of the beauty that is contained therein, in its every expression.

Antonio Guccione illustrates the ‘illustrious’. With a double point of view: reluctant and *chic*. He organises a journey through photography: from characters to people, a visual and introspective journey. For the rest, as always, seeing is united with knowing. Truly, an odd couple.

From traits to portraits, where portraying does not mean denying but repeating that which is not wholly repeatable, but is perfectly reproducible.

Indeed, in this volume Antonio Guccione ‘hears’ the problem of ‘listening’ to photography. An issue that lies in the roots of photographic theory. Guccione has clearly embraced the important question underlying photographic representation: in other words, whether that which is represented *agrees* or *disagrees* with the reality from which it set out. It is quite a dilemma.

In portraits, usually, this matter deals with a pleasurable and perverse ambivalence: to understand whether the photographic face *represents* or *re-presents* the face put in pose. It is from this viewpoint that Guccione, like a wanderer, takes on and pursues a curious and suggestive photographic itinerary of celebrities whose nocturnal identities he brings to light.

The photographic eye has something paradoxical, original yet common at the same time. In the words of Roland Barthes the paradox is expressed thus: ‘how can one have the look of intelligence without thinking of anything intelligent?’¹. But such a paradox can be upturned with equal effectiveness: only a subject captured while deep in thought or concentrated in a certain mental attitude is capable of conveying depth to the image. The photographer’s skill consists of the ability to capture the indefinable moment. And, what is more, frequently, the subject portrayed has no awareness of the mental process in action, the traits of which are reflected, despite him, in the expression *captured* in the instant of the photographic shot.

Guccione’s photographs create a relationship between subject and object, the eye and the ear, in a dimension which is simultaneously active and passive. And it is in this perspective that the possibility arises to photographically witness a movement of thought. A theme from an artistic school that has its roots in prestigious names such as Angus McBean and Richard Avedon, masters recognised by Guccione as his own, sources of creative and emotional stimulus at the outset of his career.

Photography reaches and encloses that magic and mysterious instant in which a subtle dialogue is born inside our being. The subject Guccione portrays is in the photograph to the extent to which he/she enters into a relationship with the photographer. He sets up (and puts himself into question) a relationship based on respect.

This relationship however is refractory to the humiliation of a banal, brief summary of a rightful meeting. There is something other in these scenes. This *other* is the hidden *ego* living within, a psychological *ego* that occupies the photograph. And pre-occupies the photographer.

Guccione seems to oscillate between a radiographic examination—as if sounding the hollowed and silent soul of his patient/model—and a topographic survey, a reconnaissance of the physical and expressive landscape.

The internal and external confines of his guests are confounded within this dimension, adding clarity to the beauty of ambiguity.

No photograph refers solely and uniquely to the subject portrayed. The image is insufficient by excess and by deficit when compared to the imagination. Guccione is aware of this. In this way he dialectically interprets this insufficiency with an objective that for once does not belong to the camera but to the man: the conjugation of beauty in *memory*.

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Guccione thus becomes a wanderer in this journey where he travels without a return ticket; a trip where he risks because he wishes to ‘scrape’ away the pathetic patina of a certain way of thinking and creating fashion. This volume digs deep and uncovers feelings and situations within fashion. Not about fashion.

And when fashion is no longer in fashion it truly comes into its own. This is the area where Guccione’s movement acquires suppleness and elegance. Here fashion is transformed into *Fashion and Faces*, the portrait becomes authentically *Scenario* and *Sense*.

¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on photography*, 1980.

One of the most interesting and intriguing aspects of this photographic anthology lies in Guccione's ability to embody a double presence within the same image: on the one hand the physical presence of his protagonists and, on the other, the fleeting presence of nature often evoked as a background.

So the city comes into play, as a scenery and a very complex creative source for a photographer like Guccione. In some cases it offers a sort of protection from surrounding distractions (as in the case of Milan) allowing greater intimate concentration, in others (Paris) it becomes an extraordinary urban scenery for the photographs, and still in others (New York) it unleashes, frees its unstoppable pulsation.

In these photographs we witness nature in disturbing movement. Natural, cultural nature, where it is experienced through the filter of ideas. Here and there—irregularly—before our very eyes we are presented with scenes agitated by change, the creative destruction that originates every time we stand before a truly living contact. Not a contract.

Guccione's approach goes in this direction: towards seeking a context for aesthetics. Fleeing from other concrete interests, the author knows that the photographic material itself is lost and losing because it belongs to the sphere of the past. But the photographer exploits this defeat and grasps a *chance*: a call to testify.

Guccione is useful to us if we want to interpret photography as a discourse, something that guards a truth that has yet to be fully expressed. A truth that can be brought to light if, and only if, memory is brought into play so as to visually reflect the possible and the impossible words, the identity and the alterity—of oneself and of the other—what is image and what is real, and finally, within the folds of film yet to be developed, the relationship between love and knowledge.

Dealing photographically with the leading figures of public life over the last thirty years would not mean abandoning the more demanding fields of the analysis of ordinary people, especially if this involves taking the more comfortable routes of popular communication. It is exactly the opposite.

Referring to well-known personalities (such as Fellini, Moravia or Antonioni for example) to reveal that part of them that goes beyond the official image, and favour a beauty freed from the subject's *status*, is the task that animates Guccione. A neurotic and noble undertaking.

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In Guccione's photographs there is no longing for the past. These are points of a path that unwinds through the course of time. They crystallise, in unique unrepeatable instants, singular moments of life. Fragments of emotions and thoughts, rarefied atmospheres, metaphysical outbursts that overcome the immanence of their settings. There is always a reference, especially in his animated landscapes, to the precarious and transitory nature of the human condition. Shapeless forms, flaming

"Faces of New York", The Time Is Always
Now Gallery, New York, 1992



clouds and discomposed scenes accentuate and reveal the photographer's state of mind; he recognises himself and participates in them. Gearing himself towards the quest for a spatial and interior depth. In this way it is possible to enter an 'artistic circle'.

All this is framed within the contours of memory, almost like a warning not to forget what has been and has left tangible signs of its passing.

It is an act of strength against the oblivion of speed and what is transitory. An act so intense and courageous as to extend beyond the field of this publication, ideally containing those portraits and subjects not included in this volume but belonging to his extensive professional activity numbering, already in previous collections, more than 400 noteworthy photographs.

The unifying element of this anthology lies in what is technically known as the photographic layout. For Guccione, this means returning to where he belongs, transmitting a sense of the ground hitherto covered. This gesture also implies a turning point: undertaking new paths, in the aftermath of a revolution, following many false revolutions. With an ethical imperative: to go ahead without forgetting that the past can sometimes overtake us. Thus, he reaches, in his awareness of this power, a photography for future memory. Photography as a link that entertains the moment. The ability to hold an instant, giving it a life of its own, an existence. And perhaps this is the essence of photography, as underlined in the words of Guccione: 'this is the terrifying and at the same time extraordinary thing about photography'.

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It is, however, difficult to give a well-rounded definition of Guccione's technique. This is because it is an extremely complex technique, which can initially seem to be incomprehensible. Due to the widespread influence of digital photography even some young photographers are deceived into seeing computer manipulations and post-production effects in his technique. The mistake lies in wanting to believe only in that which we believe we know. Ideological deception?

Instead Guccione works with a double camera. He creates personalised settings (also in colour tones) for the subjects he portrays with respectful and attentive examination, similar to a medical consultation (this is how he describes himself). It would be difficult not to be reminded of the disturbing affirmation made by Thomas Mann regarding the impossibility of making certain conquests of soul and self without the experience of illness, of suffering, of crisis.²

Here we are speaking of a general practitioner, a 'patient' doctor who is intent on establishing a dangerous relationship with his interlocutor: a silent exchange of knowledge and empathy, full of truth and passion though lasting only one fleeting instant. An absorbing instant where time is, so to speak, suspended and the aesthetic-ecstatic pleasure of the image prevails.

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Yet, today there is an underlying contradiction: photography has been raised to the state of art form. But not all photographs are art photographs in themselves. And the massive quantity of photographic exhibitions in galleries, museums and institutional spaces is a confirmation of this. It raises the suspicion that behind these initiatives legitimate economical issues prevail. In effect these installations are inexpensive, profits are good, spaces are easy to find and the returns for the promoters in terms of advertising, especially when indirect, are gratifying. In reality these exhibitions have a blocked potential, being incapable of discharging figures, utopias and artistic freedoms to the full. The difference here is really made by the depth of the photographer and his desire to devote his work to an aesthetic value that is not necessarily economically fruitful, a value that is a choice.

Guccione is one such photographer.



Gucci Parfum, 1979

² Thomas Mann, *The enchanted mountain*, 1924.

