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Anachronisms. Persistence, Citations, Reactions

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In medieval art, anachronisms can be identified in a wide range of contexts and on multiple levels, sometimes arising from deliberate choices and at other times from spontaneous mechanisms. The reiteration of traditional expressive formulas and resistance to ongoing processes of evolution may result from phenomena of delay, generated by geographical or cultural distance from centers of creative innovation—centers that did not necessarily coincide with urban hubs (Enrico Castelnuovo, Carlo Ginzburg, "Centro e periferia", in Storia dell'arte italiana, I, edited by G. Previtali, Turin, 1979, pp. 285–352). In other cases, the art of a past era is consciously revived, because it is associated with myth, origins, or the apex of a civilization—one's own or one that one seeks to emulate. This is evident in the frequent imitation, throughout the centuries, of classical or Early Christian models. Such dynamics emerge both in the realm of material memory, through spolia (Lucilla De Lachenal, Spolia: uso e reimpiego dell'antico dal III al XIV secolo, Milan, Longanesi, 1995), and in formal language, through the numerous "Renaissances" (Theodosian, Carolingian, Macedonian, etc.), as well as in iconography. A striking example can be found in the ninth-century Asturian church of San Miguel de Lillo, where one of the stone jambs of the entrance portal reproduces in relief the leaf of a fifth-century ivory consular diptych. At the same time, the Middle Ages also offer instances in which the present is evoked within representations of a remote past. This occurs, for example, at the beginning of the 14th century in the scene of the Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple in the Scrovegni Chapel cycle: while unquestionably avant-garde in the expressive innovations introduced by Giotto, the scene is anachronistic in its use—mediated through Byzantine models—of contemporary Trecento liturgical furnishings, complete with ciborium and ambo, to evoke a synagogue.

As far as it concerns the Early modern, in the now-classic essay by Sergio Bettini, Venezia nascita di una città (Milan Electa, 1978), one of the implicit components of the scholar's analysis is undoubtedly that of anachronism. In Venice, this concept resonates in terms of persistence and return to composite formulas, comparable to a form of cultural multilingualism that extends far beyond any notion of premeditated intent. Exemplary buildings, ranging from private to public architecture, contribute to the definition of an authentic urban landscape which—although composed of multiple languages and "anachronistic" reuses in terms of origins and materials—achieves an organic unity of meaning that has become deeply identitarian. Similar dynamics underlie early modern visual and figurative culture, characterized as it is by persistence, returns,

and resistances that give rise to a multitude of heterogeneous scenarios, now intelligible precisely because they have been historicized. When Lorenzo Lotto, confronted with the rising stars of Tintoretto and Titian, perceived the obsolescence of his own art, he moved elsewhere—paradoxically triggering a process of figurative renewal that might otherwise have been delayed. The modern world is itself intrinsically anachronistic and resistant to linear interpretation. Giordano Bruno's philosophical foresight was anachronistic with respect to his own time. Like a karst river, latent themes and issues resurface across history, breaking against islands of resistance, permanence, or urgent renewal through processes of re-semantization that may be either legible or fundamentally ambiguous. In this sense, early modern culture appears diffracted along an ideal rectilinear temporal model.

During the twentieth century, the golden age of anachronism can be situated between the 1970s and 1980s, at the height of the postmodern moment. When opening the first edition of Aperto at the Venice Biennale in 1980, Harald Szeemann declared: "The official line of the Seventies has passed. In 1980 I am in favour of mixing. I was so before." It was indeed the Venice Biennale that inaugurated a new series of eloquent exhibitions: in 1982, with Art as Art: The Persistence of the Artwork; in 1984, with Art in the Mirror, curated by Maurizio Calvesi, a true manifesto of the citation-based "New painting" movement, subsequently pursued by Italo Mussa with Pittura Colta (1983) and Italo Tomassoni with Ipermanierismo (1985). In such cases, the narrative of time is therefore not to be understood as a crisis of (art) history, but rather as an approach to the past conceived as a palimpsest—not linear and progressive, but cyclical and spiroid, constantly returning and folding back upon itself, without ever fully repeating. Such sensibility is evident across the Atlantic, where a master of erudite yet pop citationism such as Roy Lichtenstein designed the cover of the exhibition catalogue Art about Art (Whitney Museum of American Art, 1978).

The 2026 issue of Venezia Arti thus aims to investigate revival, flashback, and déjà vu as practices in both artistic and art-historical terms, consolidated since the 1970s and continuing to the present day (Il revival, edited by Carlo Giulio Argan, Milan, 1974; Romy Golan, Flashback, Eclipse. The Political Imaginary of Italian Art in the 1960s, New York, 2021). All of this unfolds under the banner of a deliberate mixing of genres, styles, and epochs which—returning to Venice in 1980—-found its first coherent embodiment in the First International Architecture Exhibition, entitled The Presence of the Past. Here, Strada Novissima emerged as a sequence of architectural façades—quoted, reinterpreted, imagined—from different historical periods. The exhibition inaugurated the use of the Arsenal (thus complementing the Giardini pavilions, a legacy of 19th and- and 20th century nationalism) as a venue for the world's longest-running international exhibition of contemporary art. This circumstance stands as a powerful demonstration of the potential of anachronisms within art-historical, architectural, critical, exhibitionary, and curatorial discourse.

As is now customary, the 2026 issue will also welcome a number of contributions outside the monographic theme, in the specific section Alia itinera.

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