Fehrenbach, Frank: *Quasi vivo. Lebendigkeit in der italienischen Kunst der Frühen Neuzeit, (= Naturbilder; 5)*, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter 2021
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Turel, Noa: *Living pictures. Jan van Eyck and painting's first century*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press 2020
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The most influential publications in early modern image theory over the last thirty years have either positioned the work of art as imagining its own completion by a beholder or described the actual responses of the beholder in front of a work. John Shearman's "Only connect … Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance" (1992) was an attempt to study period notions of spectatorship and the human imagination in order to reveal artistic "messages" as embedded in Italian Renaissance paintings [1]. David Freedberg's "The Power of Images" (1989) looked beyond the confines of 'high art,' untangling the psychological and perceptual mechanisms on the threshold between "life-like" images and the attribution of "actual life" to those images [2]. In particular "The Power of Images" marked a turn toward the interest in the experiences of works of art as capable of animation in early modern European visual culture, a shift also registered in Frederika Jacobs's "The Living Image in Renaissance Art" (2005) [3]. A more recent contribution is Horst Bredekamp's "Theorie des Bildakts" (2010). Bredekamp understands images as energetic agents with the power to both act on the viewer and cause actions on the viewer's part, amply documented in the conflation of body and image in acts of iconoclasm [4]. Alfred Gell's "Art and Agency" (1998) still looms large [5].

Two new books, both published in 2021, add important new angles to the discussions about the 'life' of images in Early Modern European art: Frank Fehrenbach's "Quasi Vivo" and Noa Turel's "Living Pictures". Both publications are rooted in the quest for a historically differentiated comprehension of art, yet their respective strengths lie in almost diametrically opposed approaches.

Fehrenbach's magisterial study on life and liveliness in early modern Italian art addresses a remarkable breadth of media and materials – prints, drawings, painting, sculptures, objects, manuscripts, and poems – from the 14th to the 18th century. He moves away from earlier ideas of the 'self-aware image' (Stoichita, Krüger) as an intellectual exercise in self-reflexivity toward what one might call a sensual rationalism, where the category of "living images" is neither understood fetishistically nor in terms of realism 'as' animation. Strategies of latency and emergence, the "dolce inganno" of the game of make-belief where art and nature blur and the dialectics of life unfold – these are the poles that mark his intellectual scope.

Turel's carefully produced book, on the other hand, looks exclusively at one image type: early Netherlandish paintings. In a series of studies dedicated to the spectacularly life-like artworks by

Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden, she establishes a new epistemology of fifteenth-century painterly realism in the Netherlands, reevaluating the role of two-dimensional images as training grounds of practiced empiricism. For Turel, Netherlandish painting of the 15th century does not simply illustrate a new empiricist world view. On the contrary: The compelling qualities of mimetic painting propelled novel concepts of knowledge production through detailed visual observation. Her study emphasizes the productive "agency" of early modern Netherlandish 'realism' and its epistemological value, and it brings together questions of mediality (paragone, the role of drawings) and materiality/alchemy with concepts of space, viewer experience, and the complex historiography of Early Netherlandish art.

Fehrenbach's "Quasi Vivo" sums up 20 years of scholarly work driven by a profound interest in phenomena of "vivacità" in the arts. Moving elegantly between large analytical concepts and detailed studies of works of art in 15 chapters and a conceptual introduction, Fehrenbach provides new inroads to the age-old topic of art and its existential ties with human life and death. He argues that by creating an experiential surplus through sensory and intellectual experience, that by consciously visualizing and pointing to the slippages between life and death, Renaissance art exposes the paradoxical nature of our existence in unprecedented and highly self-aware ways: Early modern art is sensory philosophy.

The introduction masterfully stakes out a dauntingly complex terrain: Life and liveliness as epistemological categories of knowledge production, representation, and aesthetic pleasure in both early modern sciences and the arts. In Renaissance Italy, sculpture and painting became the spearheads of unprecedented experimentation and, once charged with entering the difficult competition with nature itself, had to rely on an array of newly invented visual effects and optical strategies that foregrounded the primacy of the "visus", an idea amply discussed in Renaissance art theory. At the same time, ideas of liveliness were deeply rooted in early scientific discourses on the nature of the body and its functions, antique natural philosophy, and in the quasi-religious concept of the artist as an "alter deus", capable of rivaling nature in creations that are the result of divine inspiration: the unwritten pact between divine artistic "ingenio" and creator god.

The book starts fittingly with a chapter on death. Fehrenbach notes how early modern tombs transform the medieval opposition of life and death into an aesthetic experience in limbo: „In der Oszillation zwischen den Polen setzt das (tote) Kunstwerk ein Surplus frei, das die Zeichen des Lebens als Latenz und Emergenz visualisiert" (39). The following chapter looks at the culmination of this trend in Michelangelo's Medici mausoleum in the New Sacristy in San Lorenzo, densely analyzing the complex relations between the sculptures and their maker, between facture, iconography, and space. Michelangelo's "non finito" appears as the signum of the transitory nature of human ingenuity, marking the sculptures as immortal documents of the artist's mortality. The immobility of the two statues of Lorenzo and Giuliano and their timeless postures are interpreted as a sculptural anticipation of the beatific vision, when the soul itself turns immobile in the act of the permanent vision of the immutable. Fehrenbach concludes his interpretation with the observation that what the Medici dukes contemplate from inside their niches is their own creator, but twice: God – and – Michelangelo who, although he was infamously absent during the production process, is present in the ingenuity of his 'living' statues and their visible toolmarks. The various chiasms of life and death are aptly expressed through the chapter's motto: "In vivo marmo morte".

The second chapter revolves around a fascinating anatomical treatise by Guido da Vigevano from the mid-14th century, with its reinterpretations of religious image types on the one hand and its intellectual anchoring in the history of philosophy on the other. It is a prelude to a longer chapter on Leonardo da Vinci's anatomy of the living body, one of the highlights of the book. It shows how the paradoxical structure of early modern art – objects and images that are de facto dead yet seemingly alive – were tied to Renaissance concepts of the human body. Leonardo understands the body as simultaneously living and dying, caught in a complex system of physical processes that generate and consume, create and absorb. The dynamism of the body's conflicting powers, the flow of liquids, the tension of muscles, all this is not only represented in new and naturalistic ways in Leonardo's anatomical drawings. It is also expressed through the style of his later anatomical drawings that reenact, or retrace, this dynamism of bodily fluids and movements.

The chapters "Oberflächen der Skulptur" and "Das Leben der Farben" are dedicated to questions of materiality, the wet surfaces of fountain figures, and the vitality of tonal color coordination. They argue for the structural and material analogies between Aristotelian and Galenian concepts of human physiology, the ensoulment of matter, and their pivotal role for Renaissance art theory (Zucchari) and practice (Titian, Lippi). The artistic strategy of the "non finito" is discussed in depth in the chapter on "Michelangelos Ungeborene". Another study explores paintings by Titian and Tintoretto and their strategies of compensating for the dilemma of human transience with the glamour of nudity and money – vital forces that both exemplify and ignite human desire. The chapter on flower paintings, an enlightening excursus into the Northern Renaissance, consults sources in early modern botany, moral philosophy, and metaphysics to rethink the role of the still life – "natura morta" – in both activating our senses and reminding us of death. The essay "Tra vivo e spento" explores Giambattista Marino's ekphrastic poems and their pan-dynamic perspective where everything is a living image, activated by sympathetic recognition under the magnetic attraction of love. The book's culmination point lies, not undramatically, in the "colpi vitali", the vital blows sent to us by Bernini's sculptures – those exclamation marks of artistic virtuosity. Fehrenbach not only shows how Bernini is an ingenious director of light who anticipates and factors in the drama of natural illumination. Rather, he emphasizes underlying philosophical and scientific ideas on the conglomerating forces of life as the signum of Bernini's living artworks.

"Quasi vivo" is an erudite book that fruitfully complicates artistic concepts such as mimesis, ingenuity, and the power of presence through analyses of works of art in their intellectual and experiential contexts. The images are neither understood as acting on their own behalf nor are they performative in a supernatural or aesthetic sense. Art, in the Renaissance and Baroque periods, and beyond, is an intellectually self-aware play of the senses, and its sensual appeal leads to profound insights in human nature. In other words: Art is always 'just' "quasi vivo", and that is exactly what makes it so powerful.

In 2023, it will be 70 years since the publication of Erwin Panofsky's important study on "Early Netherlandish Painting". Turel's book "Living Pictures" recasts the story of those early oil paintings north of the Alps through the lens of the Middle French term "fait au vif" – a concept that she situates at the root of the novel pictorial language and the meticulous painterly 'realism' developed in the Netherlands. Like Fehrenbach, she positions the master trope of animation, and its artistic simulations, at the center of early modern image production. In a broad exploration of sources from literature, science, and historiography, the book reclaims the specific agency of ear-

ly Netherlandish paintings in producing knowledge and shaping the early modern world.

“Living Pictures” starts with a methodological introduction, in which Turel formulates her goal of revising the early modern connections between empiricism and pictorial realism, followed by five chapters that revolve around major works by Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, and their followers. Turel takes aim at major highlights of the genre, offering new angles of interpretation for Rogier’s famous “St. Luke Drawing the Virgin” (chapter 1), van Eyck’s majestic “Ghent Altarpiece” (chaper 2–3), and his iconic “Arnolfini Portrait” (chapter 5). She also looks at lesser-known works such as the monumental “Redemption Triptych” in the Prado and the “Presentation in the Temple” in the National Gallery in Washington (both in chapter 4), attributed to followers of Rogier. The chapters are somewhat heterogeneous in their argumentation, yet they offer ambitious interpretations driven by strong hypotheses.

The meta-pictorial subject of the St. Luke’s Madonna is an apt starting point for Turel’s detailed semantic analysis of the concept of painting “au vif”, or “après le vif”, and its role in the courtly and civic environments in which van Eyck and Rogier operated. She establishes, convincingly, that these terms were understood as painting “into” rather than “from” life – a crucial distinction for her reading of the achievements of Netherlandish painting “à rebours”: They were the cause, not the effect, of the turn toward empiricism, that hallmark of the early modern period. Not the flattening of the world into meticulous representations was its main impetus, but the idea of making images come alive in the experience of the beholder. Hence, Rogier’s “St. Luke Drawing the Virgin” is interpreted less as an example of authenticity and objectivity than as a painterly demonstration of animation produced by “the power of artistic meditation” (p. 22). In this first chapter, “Drawing Miracles”, Turel demonstrates solid command of a broad range of concepts of animation, early modern metaphoricity, and Western intellectual history from the 14th century to the present.

Chapters 2 and 3, “Resuscitating Sculpture” and “The Painter as Alchimist”, are dedicated to the enigmatic “Ghent Altarpiece”. On its closed side, the polyptych shows a fascinating interplay between sculpture and painting, grisaille and color. It is both an altarpiece and painted art theory. Jan is spelling out the entire palette of animation: from the faux stone grisaille sculptures of Saint John the Baptist and the Apostle John in the lower register, flanked by the two patrons in their bright red clothes, to the prophets and sibyls in the crowning part of the altar, figures rendered in more subdued colors, as if animated sculptures. Those registers frame the central row with the Annunciation, a scene in which word becomes flesh. The incarnation is presented as an act of animation-by-color, and hence by the artist’s hand. Turel here unfolds the intelligent entanglements of van Eyck’s “Promethean” painterly self-promotion in a visual culture still largely defined by sculptural thinking, and how he merges it with the visualization of Salvation.

Chapter 3 provides a novel interpretation of the altarpiece’s inside and its intricate, crowded iconography. In the 1430s, medical alchemy was already firmly associated with Christian metaphors, and neither painting nor sculpture but alchemy was understood as the true, all-encompassing artform. According to Turel, alchemical ideas pervade and cohere the altarpiece’s unprecedented visual language around salvation and revivification – exemplified in the central scene of the “Adoration of the Mystic Lamb”. A superimposed iconography of liquids seems to be at play here – the water of the fountain as the source of life, the mystic bond of Christ’s blood, and the painter’s oil paint as the liquid that paints the figures quasi into life. Everlasting life

appears as the ultimate goal that unites alchemy, Christian salvation, and the painter's ambition.

The concept of painting as a spatial practice forms the fundament of chapter 4, "Painting in the Round". It is something we can see in Leonardo da Vinci, south of the Alps, who was trained in a sculptor's workshop and thought as a sculptor in both his drawings and paintings. Turel approaches her difficult goal of reconstructing fifteenth-century viewing experiences and spatial perception through a look at the practice of actual 'living pictures' – Renaissance pageants and their decors, which were mostly created by painters. These controlled spatial environments, or "hyperspaces," provided immersive experiences as walk-in environments, and they were as much part of the painter's job as the production of panel paintings for homes and altarpieces for churches. Early Netherlandish paintings were more than highly mimetic yet flat media of representation. They were 'in life,' spatially perceivable, sculpturally conceived, and their "disguised symbolism" (Panofsky) was, very much anchored in the reality of lived experience.

"Making Histories", the final chapter, looks at the 'living images' of early Netherlandish Painting as time transcending "Bilderfahrzeuge", rhetorical and epistemological vehicles that effectively connected past and present. The superimposition of different historical times, as expressed in the insertion of donor portraits into biblical settings, became a cultural practice in which mimesis and historical fiction went hand in hand. Accordingly, the common Middle French term "historier" meant both: to "add pictures" and to "write history". Turel argues that the new appreciation of artistic mimesis provided a powerful political tool that brought the past alive in front of everyone's eyes and allowed for the retro-fiction of seemingly immediate encounters of fifteenth-century patrons and rulers with historical "exempla". The truthfulness of painterly realism became the magic formula for representations of authoritative truths. Fictions of presence now also allowed for reformulations of artistic presence in those images, as can be seen in the "Arnolfini Portrait", the last painting Turel discusses in her book.

"Living Pictures" is a thought-provoking and original tribute to the achievements of early Netherlandish pictorial realism. It is not always an easy read; at times the argumentation is a bit entangled, and the discussion of source materials creates redundancies. Yet Turel is a pleasantly provocative and innovative thinker who neither shies away from strong hypotheses nor the discussion of much-studied masterpieces. The book is beautifully produced, and its high-quality images reveal stunning details – it makes up nicely for the shortcomings of Panofsky's early classic and its black and white images. This is a publication that appeals to the mind – and – the senses, and it should find curious readers within and outside of academic circles.

Notes

[1] John Shearman, Only connect... Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance, Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1992

[2] David Freedberg, The Power of Images, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989

[3] Frederika Jacobs, The Living Image in Renaissance Art, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005

[4] Horst Bredekamp, Theorie des Bildakts, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010

[5] Alfred Gell, Art and Agency, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998

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