

Giovanni Giaretta

Giovanni Giaretta (Padua 1983) currently lives and works in Amsterdam. After graduating in Design and Production of Visual Arts at the IUAV University in Venice, he took part in a number of residency programs including: Dena Foundation for Contemporary Art in Paris in 2010; Macro, Rome Museum of Contemporary Art in 2012; and, most recently, De Ateliers in Amsterdam. Giaretta's work has been featured in exhibitions in Italy and abroad at diverse institutions and galleries such as: La Criée (Rennes, FR); Tegenboschvanvreden, (Amsterdam, NL); De Ateliers, (Amsterdam, NL); Foundation Botin (Santander, SP); Musée Départemental d'Art Contemporain de Rochechouart, (Rochechouart, FR); Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, (Torino, IT); and Motive Gallery (Amsterdam, NL). In 2013, his work was selected for the 5x5 Castellò. Premi International d'art Contemprani Disputaciò de Castellò (Castellò, SP). His films have been screened in several International programs and festivals, including the International Film Festival of Rotterdam (Rotterdam, NL) and the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival (Prague, CZ).

That which isn't there.
(But which is there because it is hypothesized)

Frankly I am more interested in that which is fantasized than in that which is experienced.

I am attracted by images which aren't there anymore and by those which could have existed, for, not having been fulfilled, they keep their potential and thus are more effective in floating around our imagination.

Fernando Pessoa Vs Robert Zemeckis

Pessoa composes the static drama "The mariner. Static drama in one scene" in 1913.

He wrote it on the spot in one night.

In one of the various dreams narrated by three young girls, during a funeral wake, a mariner appears, castaway and stuck on a desert island. Tormented by the nostalgic memory of his own home, he decides to dream and imagine a homeland which he has never had. A possible past which has never been. This leads to a short circuit of the memory, to a past which is so real that it no longer allows for any recollection of the true origins. A possible alteration, comparable to his previous life but not in correspondence with it. As in "Back to the Future - Part II" when Biff Tannen seizes the DeLorean and the big sports almanac bought by Marty, with the intent of betting with the results contained there. Biff, by stealing Marty's idea, goes back to 1955 and manages to modify the past and create an alternative 1985, an ambiguous, possible and resembling reality.

"Because he had no way to return to his homeland and suffered whenever he remembered it, he set out to dream a homeland

he'd never had, to make it so that it was his, and had always been—a different kind of country with other landscapes, other people, other ways of walking down streets, of leaning outside of windows... Every hour, he built in his dreams this false homeland, never ceasing to dream, by day in the brief shade of the great palms that cast their beaked images on the hot sand, and by night stretched on his back on the beach, heedless of the stars. [...]

For years and years, day after day, the mariner, in one continuous dream, constructed his new native land... Each day he added an imagined stone to his impossible edifice... Soon he had a country already many times traversed. [...] He began to encounter people he scarcely recognized... He'd get to know their life stories, their conversations, and all of this like one who goes on seeing a landscape he's merely dreamed... Then he traveled, by memory, across the country he'd created... And thus he built his past... Soon he had lived another life... [...]

One of the waking girls says: I don't dare look at things... What happens next in the dream?

“Look, certain things are possible only in Italy. Sickening, really. They should shoot all of them, but like really all of them...”

Over the past year I've traveled a lot between Italy and Holland, and during every one of those movements a conversation arose with a more or less intrusive person sitting next to me on the plane. Typical themes, besides a probable praise of the hostess, are

euro-scepticism, the Italian character, differences between Italy and the rest of the world and the World Cup of 2006 in Germany. Generalizing, anything “abroad” (an ambiguous geo-cultural area) is always better than Italy. It is better abroad because people there aren't racists like in Italy, or it is better because there are stronger laws and therefore it doesn't have all that illegal immigration like in Italy. It is better abroad because in Italy everything is going wrong, and, mainly, the cause of this are the politicians.¹ In general, abroad, politicians are not corrupt and citizens are honest because politicians make better laws (thanks to them being honest) and citizens have a larger and more pronounced sense of community. Abroad, culture is valued more, and if not it's because it doesn't exist, at least not like in Italy where there is History and Beauty all around. In these (probably light-hearted) discussions, “abroad” assumed the traits of a scenery ready to be used to evoke ideological demands and diverse imageries. When needed, it thus becomes a place with strong laws or more flexible and inclusive. A neutral concept to be exploited for whatever circumstance or discourse. Personally I have often thought that, abroad (an ambiguous geo-cultural area) was better anyhow. I often said, or ended my sentences with “... and in fact I'm thinking of going abroad”. Countless discussions ended in this manner. I wasn't the only one. The concept “abroad” represented (at least in the milieu which I frequented) a fantastic possibility to escape. I would dare to say that abroad was fashionable, also because of actual practical difficulties, especially

¹ At this point some people started blaming the Berlusconi era, some the entire political class, others with more historical interest or of older age blamed the Christian Democracy, Andreotti who would never die and the Socialist Party. Spared, generally, only Enrico Berlinguer and Sandro Pertini.

for who had studied humanities. These difficulties were effectively summed up by my friend Lia Cecchin in a Facebook status from years ago “Italy is a republic built on labor and whoever finds it wins!”

In the beginning, geography is geography and you cannot escape that. Then geography becomes history and we move into different possible directions, based on our various needs, interests or the simple idea of wiping the slate clean.

And there is always someone who leaves, but where does he arrive, when he leaves. Bye.

One time a friend told me that she felt an immense nostalgia for the Cadore mountains and that she would never feel at home anywhere but there. The writer Dino Buzzati also wrote about nostalgia and the pain of not being recognized by his mountains anymore after years in Milan. “Now it seems to me that I can't be happy anywhere else than in the mountains and that I don't desire anything but them.” Another friend asserts that Venice has shaped his mindset. It's a unique city and everywhere he goes he treasures and searches for the absence of that landscape and of the symbiosis between architecture and sea. I lived for months with someone who considered Umbria to be the center of the World, and another one for whom the center of the World is Castelvati (Brescia). All viewpoints were genuinely compromised by innate territorial bonds.

I have never had this love for the place in which I was born. In a time in which everyone wants to go anywhere (I am no exception), in which everyone complains about their birthplace (again: I am no exception), I'm fascinated by whoever goes against the grain. Despite my efforts, I have never felt any "Heimat", any trace of a homeland, only a sensation of being an absolutely random appearance in the records.

I've tried many times to feel it, and envy those who feel an intellectual and sentimental tie to the place in which they were born. I'm fascinated by the relationship with some kind of origin, a "safe" thought, a sort of certainty. Like saying "I AM LIKE THIS BECAUSE I WAS BORN HERE AND MY OUTLOOK WAS SHAPED BY THESE VISIONS"

A dear friend of mine from Turin is Sicilian. He is Sicilian because of his family, his accent, his countenance and his passion. He lives in Piedmont, where he was born, but (in my opinion) his outlook and his sensitivity come from the summers spent down there in Sicily, with some help from research, work and study trips to the South.

More than once I have asked myself what deeper feelings Padua aroused in me, but nothing. Only some rational attraction to suggestive locations, such as the Botanic Garden or the Minici-Zotti Museum of Early Cinema.

A certain passion for the Vicenza Stone and its crumbling away inside buildings.

The Esapolis insectarium.

The Palazzo Liviano made by Giò Ponti with the Campigli frescoes.



Padova promoted to Serie A at the end of the season 1993/94

The tomb of Saint Anthony and the pilgrims who, by touching it with their hand, wear it away in prayer.
The relic of the incorrupt tongue of the Saint.
The abandoned villa in Via Palestro.
The anatomical Theatre (the oldest one in the world!).
The Observatory.

The fake grotto in the Arena Gardens.
Abano Terme in the winter, when smoke comes out of the manholes like in New York in the 80s, because of the thermal water which runs beneath.

I also like to stop for a few seconds below the windows of the Pollini Conservatory, listening to the students practicing piano.
I also adore the Riviera del Brenta with its haze and the sudden appearance of somewhat Palladian villas. I have sympathy for the local use of swearwords, intended as a form of prayer: the invocation of the supernatural in daily life. An evasive view of something generally considered as extremely vulgar.

I also appreciate the expression "ma va in figa de to mare" ("go back up your mother's cunt"), in its connotation of a person unfit for this world, in need of finding a safe environment.

I admit that I have been following the results of the Padua football team for many years. I do it more as an intimate private ritual than as an excited supporter.

Nothing speaks, however, of love for my provenance, of an image upon which a mindset has been built.

No profound affection was obtained in my childhood.

Perhaps bigger was the intolerance I felt towards a small town which believed itself big, a typical fault of the province. Moreover, in

Italy, small towns (everywhere which is not the Capital) always have a certain history to reclaim: this is the reason for all that arrogant flag-waving. History which has lead, however, to an excellent lack of center. I admit that I hadn't thought about this before; I like the lack of a center in Italy.

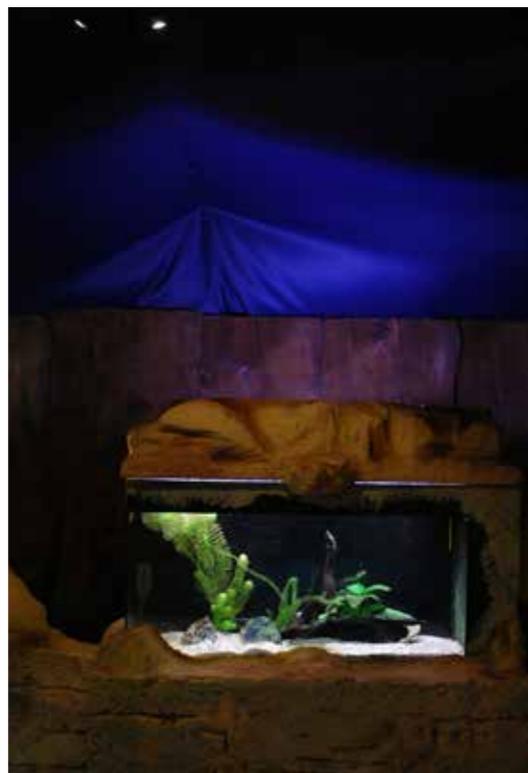
In France and then even more so in the Netherlands I felt, or thought to discern, and nourished, or better analyzed a certain melancholic geographic specter. Satisfied of how geography then becomes a story of movements, at times unconsciously, I now notice a certain bond to Italy.

Nothing tangible.

I don't miss it and I am not sentimental about it. Sometimes I am about Milan because "In Milan you find everything". What interests me about Italy (and about Veneto) is a sort of personal metaphysics which surfaces indistinctly in me at times. I like to think that the repeated and sluggish car trips along the coast of the Brenta, from Venice to the Dolomites or Tyrol (towards the krauts in any case), can "metaphysically" transfer themselves into the possibility of better understanding Mediterranean cultures without however not understanding more Nordic or rigid and pragmatic cultures, without perceiving those as non-familiar.



The incorrupt chin of Sant'Antonio during the traditional procession



Terrarium at Esapolis - Museum of living insects

From Sanremo to Vladivostok

In 2004 I was in Warsaw, I had a female friend there. We weren't in love but there was a lot of passion, expressed by an unbridgeable and rather hesitant English. When we went out at night, and they would, by coincidence, discover that there was an Italian guy at the bar, they would always play "L'Italiano" by Toto Cutugno.

Anka didn't speak Italian.
Anka didn't speak Italian.
She thought that Turin was the capital of Italy.
She thought that Sicily had been independent and that pasta had to cook for at least an hour.
She also thought that Rome was part of the Vatican (and therefore not part of Italy).
She, however, knew the text of the song "L'Italiano" by heart, just like the rest of her friends.
Everybody asked me about Toto Cutugno who for me was only a faint memory from popular national television.
One verse of a song of his goes: "There's the RAI, there's the RAI, there's the RAI. Which keeps you company, if you like, you only need to smile a bit like in a Totò movie".²
After I had gone back to Italy, I discovered that he was and is extremely famous and admired in the entire Eastern Europe and that he often tours in central Asia as well.

² I make note of the fact that, searching the internet for the lyric of the song "C'è la Rai", the only available websites are Romanian and Hungarian, such as the site of the "Toto Cutugno Fan Club Romania".

Despite the fact that the Polish people I hung out with were of a certain "higher middle class", Cutugno was always cited, perhaps even next to the Rome of Pasolini's Accattone, and he was as evocative as Fellini's Rimini which was rebuilt in Cinecittà. In Amsterdam I often end up in similar situations when I spend time with Russian, Polish, Lithuanian and Hungarian acquaintances. Two Bulgarian friends told me that Toto Cutugno often plays in Bulgaria and that his song, "L'italiano", has also been translated into Bulgarian.

In the supermarket with Russian and Ukrainian products in Amsterdam where I occasionally buy "Russian stuff", Cutugno's greatest hits are always next to those of Adriano Celentano.³ Cutugno in fact explains in an interview with the Corriere della Sera that "There is no doubt that my success is also linked to the unavailability of Adriano Celentano who remains the most idolized artist of the ex Soviet Union. And I, who in a certain way remind him as an author and with my tone of voice, am considered head and shoulders above all of my Italian colleagues". The image of Toto Cutugno is therefore an image of melancholia from the get-go, as he is a replacement for the absent Celentano. He calls him to mind, his tone of voice reminds of his, it's the trace left by an image already present in memory but never truly possessed. After all, performances always have that flattering power of falsification on their side.

³ The Corriere della Sera, 26 August 2007

“Buongiorno Italia, buongiorno Maria con gli occhi pieni di malinconia.”
(“Good morning Italy, good morning Mary, with eyes full of melancholia.”)

There is little that can be done at this point, Toto is bigger and played more. Perhaps only during the start of his move towards Eastern Europe he stumped along a little pompous, as the cheap supermarket imitations of Coca Cola. I presume that his music matches better with how a Russian would conjure the cultural panorama of Italy. Cutugno sings the image of Italy to someone who wants to imagine it in this very way.

A stereotype.

It is the specter of something which is not there anymore (supposing that it has ever been there) but that survives in the conscious desire of not ever being possibly truly experienced.

The scholar Yi-Fu Tuan says “The study of space, from the humanistic perspective, is thus the study of a people’s spatial feelings and ideas in the stream of experience. Experience is the totality of means by which we come to know the world: we know the world through sensation (feeling), perception, and conception.”⁴

*“Buongiorno Italia,
Gli spaghetti al dente e un partigiano come presidente con l’autoradio
sempre nella mano destra e un canarino sopra la finestra.”*
*(“Good morning Italy,
Spaghetti al dente and a Partisan as President,*

with the car radio in your right hand and a canary above your window.”)

The music, composed mainly in minor scales, combines well with the acoustics of Eastern Europe. “Once a Russian journalist told me that I compose songs in minor scales and that this melancholic way of writing songs is exactly how they would write songs in any part of Russia.”⁵

Hence, Toto Cutugno has recreated Italy (or the idea of Italy which he likes to imagine). Imagined things, if told well, are always more compelling than direct experience. Melancholia again stems from an image which is not there, something which is missing and which can only be evoked in its absence, because a convincing fantasy should never contradict that which people want to be told.

The Italy of Cutugno is an imaginary place where *“Young Italians are still romantic. Serenade to those who have separated and to children who are alone and a little lost who fall asleep late with mother TV. Serenade to the rulers, if they sang we would get further, to the pensioners, one more year and one more dime. Serenade to the black cats, to old artists and to waiters, to those who see love along the way.”*

The situations evoked by his texts are perfect sceneries for low-cost films in regions which perhaps don’t exist anymore, and which may have never existed. They are hypothetical strongholds which have survived simply because someone (non Italian) dreams them up, and therefore sees them.

You listen to a song while you roughly interpret its lyrics. Filling in the

gaps and transforming as desired that which you don’t understand. That’s probably an affection of the memory to a non-existent landscape which resists and insists, as in one of the last sentences of the film *Eloge de l’amour* (2001), by Jean-Luc Godard:

“I am thinking of something
In fact, I’m thinking of something else
You can only think about something
If you think of something else
(For instance)
I see a landscape that is new to me
But it’s new to me because
I mentally compare it to another landscape
An older one, one that I knew”

Giovanni Giaretta

⁴ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and place: humanistic perspective* 1977 - U of Minnesota Press

⁵ From an interview with Toto Cutugno by Fabio Fazio, *Che tempo che fa*, 13 April 2013



Toto Cutugno performing a song on the Italian Television