



Adriano Eccel and his Codice Duval

by Angela Madesani

In a working note Italo Svevo wrote that often the whole production of a writer's career revolves around one single work. In his own case, Svevo was referring to: "*La coscienza di Zeno*", his true life's work. It seems to me that the same can be argued for the art of Adriano Eccel. For this reserved artist, living and working far away from the center of the

establishment, one single work represents as well the heart around which his aesthetic quest has revolved and still revolves. I am talking about *Il codice Duval*, a work – whose completion kept Eccel busy for six years – now exhibited in its integrity.

The subtitle of the sequence is *Immagini private dall'archivio di un museo immaginario* ("private images from the archive of an imaginary museum"). Carol Duval is Eccel's alter ego, a fictional character with a constructed biography of his own. An elderly photographer of French origin, Duval has been working for many years in an American art museum; as an archivist, he supervises the photography section. There is a clear connection here to Adriano Eccel's own personal history, and with his profession as archivist. Just like Eccel, in his free time Duval delves into his true passion, photography: he prints negatives reproducing the originals owned by the museum. Thus, in his pictures he creates full-fledged visual tales, that may be interpreted at several levels: autobiographical, art-historical, anthropological, and sociological.

With his daily, painstaking commitment, he gives life to a sort of code of the soul, in which a touching in-depth reelaboration of personal memories is transformed into collective memory.

The first of the twenty-one photos in *Il codice Duval* refers to the Polaroid process. It is the only one where a portrait appears; the portrait is Eccel's own, come to sight during the processing of the image. The entire work is made in Polaroid. A homage to the technique can be detected as a red thread running through all the photos, almost a forewarning of its demise, a requiem to an object who played a crucial role in photographic artistic experimentalism. The Polaroid process is cited – through explanatory notes and advertising – in its very essence. Therefore we have references to photography's fundamental themes: the nude, nature, animals, as well as a clear reference to human history: Adam and Eve, alone on the face of the Earth, taking photos of each other. Our

progenitors are shown in their nudity, as in Masaccio, without the banal tricks of a moralistic outlook wishing them fully dressed. Adam's picture, though, also contains his skeleton: the only existential certainty.

In different guises, death makes a frequent appearance in Eccel's work, as a dominant thought we are unescapably bound to face on a daily basis.

Each photo contains a series of elements capable of evoking atmospheres and situations, sometimes clearly interpretable, sometimes strictly personal. The coloring as well, with the use of sepia tones, alludes to an earlier time¹. Or, better, to a time that cannot be frozen or situated, that simply is not the time of the viewer. Witnessing time. After all, analogic photography is an index, a trace of the real.

More than one photo presents a sequence of images, a way of capturing motion. Not by chance, Eccel often alludes to the work of Eadweard Muybridge², the great 19th century English photographer of movement. Muybridge's sequences show images of animals or people caught in movement, and were made by using numerous cameras triggered one after the other. In this way, among other things, Muybridge discovered many aspects of animal physiology, especially of horses. What is fascinating is the visual precariousness associated with these pictures: dirty, full of marks, scotch-taped together. Eccel succeeds in evoking Muybridge's somewhat mysterious strength (a jealous husband, Muybridge murdered his wife). It is the taste of a world, a Zeitgeist, remade into photographic time.

Eccel is fascinated by Muybridge's notion of "transit," a building block in a sort of "pre-cinema" which points to the Magic Lantern of Ingmar Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander*, as well as to Wim Wenders's *The Brothers Skladanowsky*. Duval-Eccel is an alchemist of images, working day after day in too loud a solitude, as Hrabal would say.

In the photo entitled *L'anima di Muybridge* ["Muybridge's Soul"] the face of a dead woman represents death in its grotesque, disturbing aspects. One of the woman's eyes is open, and the other is closed and swollen.

Thanks to the Duval ploy, Eccel gives strength to the images. The birth of the character, as often happens, was almost an accident: but then the whole work developed in that direction. From a stress on the history of photography the sequence touches the contemporary experience of the Twin Towers (*New York La tragedia 1 e 2*), whose fall marked and still marks the history of our times. An intermediate stage is the Moon landing, presenting archival images.

Another presence in the work is the "alphabet" of Étienne Jules Marey³. Eccel hints at a sort of code, in which a hand reaches out to stop time, to stop events. One photo is dedicated to Marey's "circus", showing a juggler's feet and the shape of a large tree. Is it the tree of life? Who knows? Perhaps it would be wrong to reveal everything.

¹ During his work, Eccel deliberately aged the Polaroid material. This is the most purely experimental part of the work, and it is hard to predict how long the material support is going to last.

² Eadweard Muybridge (Kingston upon Thames, 9 April 1830 – Kingston upon Thames, 8 May 1904) was an English photographer who mostly lived in America.

³ Étienne Jules Marey (Beaune, 5 March 1830 – Paris, May 1904) was a French inventor and, among other things, a precursor of cinema.

Eccel says that one picture – *L'uomo di luce*, synthesizes the entire work. Once again, it addresses Muybridge. A man is running on a *tapis roulant*, thus triggering the mechanism of the film-advance lever – represented in a technical sketch – which allows the passage of electricity and lights up the lamp: a direct reference to cinematography. It is a metaphor for life, for our existence, starting with Eccel's own life. In the photo *Lettere da una dialisi*, Eccels include his own personal testimony, his vicissitudes in sickness. Analogously, *Il sasso nell' acquario* is a clear reference to the loneliness of the human condition.

The influence of Boltanski can be detected in the picture entitled *Gli oggetti del Signor Wilson*. It is the story of a man sentenced to death. The picture presents the objects remained after his passing: little things belonging to personal memory. Every one of us, in death, abandons all objects – little things as well as important things. Traces, objects of memory, allusions. This is also a political reference, opposing the idea that allegedly civilized country still suffer the pain of a useless cruelty such as the death penalty .

Death has a political meaning in *Il pilota 631-66121* as well, showing a kamikaze pilot, a man who takes his own life in the service of an idea. Dying for an idea is always heroic, but it does not automatically justify that idea, even if we admit that the definition of just or unjust lies within the limits of a human being.

Eccel confronts contemporary themes which are part of our everyday life, such as the communication of events in television (*Tavole precognitive*) or the ambiguity of information (*Il telecronista e le notizie*).

Il codice Duval, as already said, is the crucial moment in Eccel's quest, the moment of full expressive and poetic maturity. It is an important work, and the starting point for his new endeavors, where a reflection on similar themes is tangible.

One feature of his work – through images not intended as documents of the real – is always a reflection on the surrounding world from a both personal and a social-political point of view. Thus, the 2004-2005 series entitled *Lo specchio immaginario* proposes a vision in perfect, yet precarious, balance between outside and inside, obviously building on a personal experience of the world. The picture entitled *Il gatto* shows the spiritual journey triggered by sickness. The third photo, the synthesis, shows a surgeon's hands, holding an image with two cats, one of which is blind.

In *Il cielo dipinto* we can find a reference to the difference between appearance and truth. It hints at the myth of Plato's cave, which touches on the blindness of ideologies, with a distinct allusion to the Red Brigades, a still mysterious moment in Italian history.

In this phase of contemporary art, where short-lived gimmicks seem to triumph, Eccel's work – requiring a long scrutiny and meditation – is in direct opposition to artistic "trendiness." There are larger issues, in fact, that go beyond current trends. There is depth in his art, focused as it is on archetypes, on the meaning and precariousness of existence: there is no need to place it within a "group."

Adriano Eccel's work, whose culmination so far is *Il codice Duval*, raises linguistic, technical, methodological and of course poetic issues. Therefore, it offers an intense, sincere point of view to the many questions of our time – questions that remain unanswered and make room for further, deeper reflections.