

Sometimes in clouds you can pick out likenesses of animals, objects, even the profile of a face; they are surprises you encounter now and then, looking into the landscape.

...

I would like my work on the Italian landscape to seem a bit like these mutable drawings, lacking a precise cartography, without compass points, more about the perception of a place than about its cataloging or description, like some sentimental geography in which the itineraries are not marked and precise, but obey the strange confusions of seeing.

Luigi Ghirri

An ex-voto is like a thread that connects the earthly to the supernatural through faith in the divine's ability to accomplish something impossible or desired. Usually it is offered by return of a particular grace, like a healing. An ex-voto can take many forms: an object, an act, a donation of money. Sister Maricar

Santa Rita da Cascia is the patron saint of 'lost causes.' At the Sacred Rock of Roccaporena, the village where Rita was born in Umbria, Italy, we met a young devotee who had journeyed from London. She had made a vow, on faith of the saint's intercession in her sickness, to make a pilgrimage to this place each year: "I don't really meet the saint when I look for her," she said, "but I do when I come here, because I know that her spirit is in the rock."

At Rita's childhood home, names and messages are carved into the soot blackened wall, appearing like negatives, testifying to each pilgrim's attendance. In an adjacent room, Rita's life-story is illustrated by stills from Antonio Leonviola's film 'Rita of Cascia'; released in 1943, starring Elena Zareschi and Ugo Sasso.

Sister Maricar, from the Santuario di Santa Rita da Cascia, which is responsible for the upkeep of the sanctuary of the saint, went on to relate her story: Rita married young and suffered under the arm of her abusive and unfaithful husband, until he was murdered. She was considered a model wife and mother, calming her husband's temper and, on his death, dissuading her sons from seeking vengeance. Rita outlived her sons and entered the convent in Cascia, a small town near her home.

At the end of her life of impressive devotion, sick and bedridden, in mid-winter, Rita asked her cousin to bring a rose from the garden of her family home. Miraculously, amongst the snow, she found one. Now, around that rose garden in Roccaporena, scores of scarves, photographs and folded notes, tucked into cracks in the rock, express the hopes and desires of the faithful.

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In the convent in Cascia the nuns carry out a range of domestic duties: for example, gardening, cooking and beekeeping. Governed by these affairs, and their schedule of prayer and devotion, time takes on an abstract, cyclical quality. By way of example, in an ante-room to the convent's library, there is an incomplete puzzle which will depict the face of Pope Francis. A year after our first visit to the convent we returned and the puzzle remained incomplete, or had been started again. With some irony, the puzzle depicts their 'puzzlemaker' (or at least his proxy); as Georges Perec says, "...despite appearances, puzzling is not a solitary game: every move the puzzler makes, the puzzlemaker has made before; every piece the puzzler picks up, and picks up again, and studies and strokes, every combination he tries, and tries a second time, every blunder and every insight, each hope and each discouragement have all been designed, calculated, and decided by the other."

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The October 2016 earthquake in Italy measured 6.6 on the richter scale and its epicentre was less than twenty kilometres from Cascia. The town was saved from the severe devastation suffered by settlements nearby, but the nuns, for their safety, were forced to leave the convent temporarily. They showed us the structural damage caused to the buildings as well as broken artefacts – amongst them a wooden statue of the Virgin Mary and child.

An earlier earthquake in the region, in 1979, led to an unexpected discovery at the convent. Another pilgrim, the French conceptual artist, Yves Klein, made half a dozen journeys to Cascia, in his short life, and he left several ex-votos. The saint's following was widespread in his native Nice. In 1961, having opened his retrospective exhibition at the Krefeld Museum in Germany, Klein made his way to Italy. On his way, he probably stopped in Assisi to see the Giotto frescoes, amongst which, in the lower basilica, are several blue monochromes. When he arrived in Cascia he gave the nuns a transparent perspex casket, measuring 21 x 14 x 3.2 cm, in which were three compartments containing, respectively, pigment for International Klein Blue (the colour he had invented to express the divine), pink pigment 'monopink' and gold foil 'monogold'. Klein's ex-voto was entirely forgotten until, after the 1979 earthquake, conservators came to the basilica and told the nuns they would need an amount of expensive gold foil to carry out their work. The nuns presented the Klein casket to the conservators, who immediately recognized its provenance.

Underneath these three compartments is a fourth, running the width of the casket, containing three gold ingots

of different sizes, resting on a bed of blue pigment. The ingots were from Klein's 'edition' of ten "Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility". The artwork involved Klein transferring to a collector an imagined zone of space impregnated with his artistic presence, in exchange for a specified weight of gold. The collector was given a receipt, but if he wanted the zone to become intrinsically his own and be a part of him, he had to burn the receipt and the gold was thrown irretrievably away. If the collector kept the receipt, then only part of the gold was thrown away and Klein kept the rest. On three occasions the receipts were not burnt. The ingots in Klein's ex-voto are from those transactions.

In a central compartment, tied with very fine thread, were seven sheets of paper on which Klein hand-wrote a hymn of thanksgiving to Santa Rita and prayers for protection. His requests were both specific, "May my Krefeld exhibition be the greatest success of the century and be recognized by all", and sweeping, "...that I may continually and regularly discover ever new and lovelier things in art... Please let everything that comes out of me be Beautiful. Amen Y.K."

Klein's work is often remembered as art world spectacle – he used the bodies of naked models to imprint his IKB blue onto canvases, served blue cocktails at his famous exhibition *The Void*, and appeared on a popular, satirical television show. In Cascia, by contrast, we see Klein at his most intimate and sincere. His monetary exchanges for the zones of pictorial sensibility were conceptually astute comments on art's relationship to commerce, and heavily ideological. By offering up his own portions of gold to Santa Rita, perhaps he felt he was purifying that gesture, re-mystifying the work – his artistic presence combining with the saint's own zone of spirituality.

I think it is justifiable in this regard to speak of an alchemy of painting, developing out of the paint material in the tension of each instant. It gives rise to a sense of immersion in a space greater than infinity. The blue is the invisible becoming visible. Yves Klein

The nuns also received a blue monochrome from Klein, dedicated to Santa Rita. For a number of years, not knowing anything about the artist, they used the monochrome as a backdrop to their nativity scene. Sister Maria Rosa Bernardinis told us, "I think Yves Klein would be happy to know that his Blue was used as the sky for our nativity. Blue for him was the divinity, it recalled something heavenly." Klein believed his artworks were threshold items – capable of pinning the natural world to the transcendental. His ex-voto's manifested this connection on a deeply personal level.

Even Klein's void – this nothingness of blue – seems definitely something, grounded in sensation. John Berger, in an epistolary conversation with his friend the film-maker John Christie, describes Klein's blue as, "a paranoid colour... it affords no peace – it nags." In response, Christie describes the monochromes as "...objects not windows...", he continues, "they feel as though if you fell into them you would be trapped and unable to breath, choked and suffocated by the powdery pigment. It makes my mouth go dry thinking about the possibility." Perhaps this is what makes Klein's void, his blue, so attractive – that stickiness, a kind of magnetism, which proposes a thread between the physical world and the immaterial, like an ex-voto.

When we first saw Klein's ex-voto, through the slatted opening of the offertory desk, our instinct was to reach out and touch it. Just beforehand, we had seen a ritual laying on of hands in the basilica – a nun stood behind bars in the shrine of Santa Rita and held out a staff which pilgrims reverently touched, receiving rose petals by return. Today, we often only remember the first half of the popular saying 'Seeing is believing', which concludes, 'but feeling's the truth.' Vision is less intimate, even objectifying, and gullible: Touch, by comparison (which is given less chance in our industrialized, technological Western societies) is solid and reassuring.

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Two zested lemons lie on a slab of marble next to an apron: like still-life painting, they demand careful attention and their silence gives us freedom to apply our own thoughts and feelings.

A painted hand releases a book which falls to the floor. Next to it, a series of parchments are stored in vitrines and perhaps the nuns are praying. Slowly, a sub-aqueous atmosphere takes over. From womb-like darkness we look outside to the trees: Sister Maria Roasa tells us, "Yes, you can begin with nature, it can help the spirit; but man has to walk an inward path – from outside, he has to enter himself. Along this path, slowly, external things, even the most beautiful things, lose their meaning."

In Tarkovsky's film *Nostalghia*, in the Chiesa di Santa Maria in Vittorini, not far from Cascia, we find his protagonist in a state of delirium, railing against Western materialism.

Now the church is silent, apart from the spring which quietly announces itself on the water's surface, across the three screens.

Text by Guy Robertson, written with Julie Born Schwartz for her exhibition 'Ex-voto' at the Festival di Spoleto, 2018, a Mahler & LeWitt Studios project sponsored by The Goldstone Family Foundation.
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