

DI SALVO E DELLA PITTURA
Bob Nickas

Forty years have passed since Salvo composed *Della Pittura*, an essay on painting presented in book form, a publication modest in size but far-reaching in its inquiry and ambition. After all that time it remains relevant, equally if not more so today. As times and tastes change, certain styles of painting are in and out of favor, and painting itself comes into contention, as it has in the past, while dominant today. To debate the activity of picture-making, which represents Art with a capital A, the basic questions surrounding the creative act are inevitably raised, never meant to be definitively resolved. Art and its discourse encompass an ongoing, parallel investigation. Doesn't one make a work of art to understand what's been done? Doesn't one write about art to the same end? Conceived in 1980, written over the course of about two years' time, the completed manuscript for *Della Pittura* is dated May 1982. When copies were at last in hand, it would be 1986. By then, much had changed for an artist who had made what was, for others, a surprising departure, but for him may have signaled an arrival, and, with expectation, more to follow. There had been major changes in the art world since Salvo's debut in 1970. It was larger, for one thing, less doctrinaire, open to art in diverse forms, particularly those previously dismissed. Salvo's work was no longer as controversial, debated as it once was, having prefigured a return to painting, followed by successive returns since the 1980s, and with his practice securely established. He had made a fairly swift transition in the early to mid-1970s from conceptual, language-oriented pieces and photo-based works to painting, with his subjects drawn from art history, mythology, archaeology. These works likely appeared perverse, confounding at that time. At first gently rendered with great finesse, as if history was a faint trace of itself, then more casually defined, the artist embracing an intentional awkwardness which would be gradually refined toward the highly stylized forms and chromatics immediately recognizable as his own, Salvo found his way forward.

Between 1969 and 1973, Salvo announced himself with his name inscribed in marble, painted, printed, and illuminated in neon, in photographs with his face superimposed on those of figures both recognizable and everyday, and as his own photographic subject, creating parts to perform. From the late 1970s onward, a work by Salvo would register and be "signed" on the level of the image alone, always painted. In retrospect, following the artist's path from idea-based works, alternately serious and mischievous, to those traditionally pictorial and accumulating in profusion, we can identify a position that was iconoclastic from the start, from beginning to end. Not only can connections be made between works that outwardly appear irreconcilable, and despite having been made decades apart, but in looking back we understand that this artist's concerns and motives are manifest within a particular triangulation: cerebral, visual, literary. What writers and readers have in common with painters is that they think in terms of images. Otherwise there is little chance for the characters and the scenes to come to life in the mind's eye. What the reader imagines may differ from what the writer intended. What the painter imagines is fully evident. In these parallels, we ask, when an artist shifts from word to image, as relatively few have done, is there a discontinuity? This is not necessarily true for Salvo. His other triangulation, and key to understanding how conceptualism had not been left behind, is that we see with the eyes, the mind, and memory. In *Della Pittura*, he asks, "When you dream and see the face of your friend—clear, precise in its characteristics—with what do you see, with your eyes?" [45] The mind processes what has been seen, with memory as its filter. Salvo's picture-making, and surely all that came before, was "towards consciousness and its expression." [185]

Resonant, unexpected associations appear throughout Salvo's *corpus di opere*, which is how it should be understood, in its entirety, as a body of work. In the monograph, *Il peccato di desiderare* (The sin of desiring), 2000, the reproductions are sequenced without regard for consecutive dates, but rather in terms of what may otherwise be revealed when the supposed logic of chronological order is denied. Associations can at times be made formally, as well as regarding major themes—life and death and memory—and suggestively by way of Salvo's allegories in this respect. The recent exhibition "Autoritratto come Salvo," presented at MACRO in Rome over 2021–22, included works chosen from all periods and installed, as if pieces in a puzzle, in one room. Divergent examples spanning the years 1969 to 2015—inscribed marble tablets, photoworks, bookworks, text pieces, and paintings—were placed in close proximity, forcing the issue, as it were. (Additionally, there were works by artists who admire and have drawn inspiration from the artist, among them Jonathan Monk, Nicolas Party, Nicola Pecoraro and Ramona Ponzini, hung in and around those of Salvo.) Considering the confrontations between Salvo's earlier, subsequent and later periods, we may conclude that all of his work is conceptual, not simply what was made between those few, heady years at the onset of what would prove to be a long career. This was an artist who looked back, conversely, to propel himself forward.

THE ARTIST'S VOICE

In returning to "archaic" means of representation, to paint, to the brush and a canvas set upon an easel, allowing himself to do so when painting was considered a dead end in the early 1970s, Salvo would give permission to others who followed, or rather, deny that it was ever required. (*Permesso*, one says, in order to slip through the crowd, to find more space for oneself, and keep moving.) In art, Salvo may have wondered, does permission descend from a higher authority, or does one allow oneself to do what is necessary, by any means, to do as you please? Shouldn't the artist follow an inner compass, with all the inevitable detours, actually taking them, open to what may be discovered along the way? Is it only "the new" which can lay claim to being exploratory? Following a period of upheaval, wasn't Salvo's return to painting also rebellious, perhaps more so? Wasn't he taking a bigger risk in a time of risk, a moment he may have foreseen as soon to pass? (Paul Maenz, the German gallerist who represented Salvo for twenty years, who stood by him the longest, recalled, "What a scandal it was to paint a picture at the start of the '70s.") Surely Salvo was aware that anything once radical inevitably becomes accepted, conventional, or its own endgame. His return to painting, which for others who followed may be thought of as a return of the repressed, preceded all the neos of the 1980s—Neo-Expressionism, Neo-Surrealism, Neo-Conceptualism, Neo-Geo, Neo-Pop—along with the idea, where painting was concerned, of "The Last Picture Show." To what extent were these *neos* actually new? All the revivals of post-time, weren't they fictions of a sort? An expedient means of marketing that connected immediately with art history? Salvo had not forgotten that art is foundational: form, expression, imagination, ideas, geometry, and perspective in terms of, in our time a reflection on popular culture, its products and artifacts in a pervasive image world. Little wonder that Salvo's essay proceeds from a statement in the form of a question: "Even in art, are the foundations unfounded?" [1] Then as now, the essay's relevance rests on the fact that those basic questions surrounding the medium continue to be raised, for and against. We find ourselves asking, "how does painting compete with other representations? Those more recognizable? Does it even need to? Doesn't it offer something otherwise unseen? The world through another set of eyes, looking in another direction (often inward)? Behind us, before us, to the future, to the past?" (Salvo's work also preceded the appropriate

strategies of the 1980s.) One point is clear: painting, particularly as it's true for few other mediums, is always in a sense already against itself. Painting doesn't particularly need its antagonists as they, adversarially, need the art form which has always stood for Art, and rumors of its death to the contrary, may never be deposed. Salvo, having come of age in the late 1960s, a time of great upheaval, politically, socially, and culturally, when all authority was to be questioned, an artist whose foundational ideas were reinforced by his love of art history and literature, image and word equally read as acts of inscription—knew this all along. As we read the essay now, silently to ourselves, his voice echoes audibly.

Della Pittura (*On Painting*), identified by its artist/author as *Imitazione di Wittgenstein* (*In the Style of Wittgenstein*), has been referred to as a manifesto, acknowledging it as a public declaration, and which we relate more to movements, even as they are often authored by individuals; Futurism (Marinetti), Dada (Tzara), Surrealism (those of Goll and Breton), and Situationism (Debord). Salvo's essay may be thought of as a treatise, emerging as it did from conversations between friends, in the proximity where differences of opinion can be as propulsive as agreement, subsequently refined by inner dialogue: private reflection made public. Or was Salvo a one-man movement? This would certainly align with the formidable sense of self by which he was guided and in his articulation. The internal conversation of *Della Pittura* unfolds over 238 numbered entries, and although the number has no particular significance, itemizing is an important aspect in this artist's work. Manifestos, as those cited above would indicate, are generally considered to be a thing of the past, as this would have been true in 1986 when *Della Pittura* was first published. In this we see that Salvo is an artist for whom the past was very much present, in terms of art history, for which he had an abiding affinity, and with respect to personal memory, from which none of us can extract ourselves, or only uneasily. Many of Salvo's entries echo with an aphoristic quality, addressing aesthetics, logic, values, and observation—it was, after all, Wittgenstein who advised "Don't think, but look"—all appropriate to a philosopher Salvo considered "the clearest mind of the first half of the 20th century." Even in his probing and the doubts raised, Salvo believed that certain truths are self-evident, and the essay at times serves as a line, or many lines, of defense on the part of someone who, having taken a decisive turn, bewildered many on the artistic scene in which he had first established himself.

In considering artists who made unexpected departures, there are any number of compelling figures: Picasso's turn from Cubism to Neo-Classicism in 1918, as if a radical experiment had inexplicably been suspended; de Chirico's shift from *pittura metafisica* to a classical mode some regarded as pastiche, which he announced in his article, "The Return of Craftsmanship," in 1919, and for which the Surrealists turned their backs on him; Malevich's reengagement with the figure in the late 1920s, later regarded as less a repudiation of Suprematism than a hybrid form of what had initially led to it; Philip Guston's abandoning of abstraction in 1968 for a cartoon-like representation, for which the Abstract Expressionists abandoned him—"We thought you were one of us," they said in condemnation as they walked out of his opening in 1970, a show that received withering reviews and put his reputation at risk; Jo Baer's renouncing of Minimal art for figurative painting by way of her unequivocal declaration, "I am no longer an abstract artist," published in 1983. These artists found themselves to various degrees at an impasse, one that primarily arose internally. But all of them would remain painters, committed to the medium. None had left another means for paint and canvas, or left the paint brush behind for other implements, or for none. (As Lawrence Weiner observed: "The work need not be built.") What Salvo has

in common with these artists is that his change of direction was an imperative. He knew that he needed to change direction. He had heard and listened to himself, it made sense to him, or he made sense of the path his work took as he went along. He had not made an abrupt break. The canvases produced between 1973 and 1976, the San Giorgio and map paintings prominently, can now be seen as a bridge leading to what followed, even if the *capricci* and *rovine* that Salvo went on to paint suggested he may have been entertaining his whims, or that painting itself was a matter of ruins, a culture built upon them and institutionalized. (One of the critical landmarks on postmodernity, Douglas Crimp's *On The Museum's Ruins*, published in 1993, includes a chapter, "The End of Painting.") Salvo's return to the medium would signal for him a starting anew, a way forward in a moment when painting was seen as retrograde. In building and crossing that "bridge," he also constructed a way back, and with it our ability to find continuity. We have a longer view today, one that could not be taken in the 1970s or even in subsequent decades, a bigger picture, and not only for this artist. Today, when we no longer have movements and decades, when there is little or no proscription for what can or can't be done, Salvo's work may be considered clearly, in its entirety, in its overlaps and correspondences, in its repetitions and returns. The passage of time has seen to that, as Salvo may have suspected it would.

THE HAND OF THE ARTIST, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE MIND

Do the needs of artists change in any way significantly from one period to another, from one century to the next? This is a question that answers itself. Basic needs remain the same, and despite whatever form a work may take, removing from the equation the pressure of external demands. Artists need to make their work, want it to be seen, and to receive a response. Although there are seemingly indifferent artists, a form no doubt of self-protection, the simple equation "love my work/love me," is at the heart of any creative person's emotionality. Here we note Salvo's early marble, *Amare me* (To love me), 1971, with which, despite the appearance of a cool conceptualism, he admits to his own vulnerability. Artists who are more than mere producers create what they themselves want to see, what they require in order to continue an ongoing inquiry, or simply to remain engaged. There is such a thing as art for art's sake, even if most artists would prefer being able to support themselves from what they do. An artist, as we see in the example of a Morandi, often needs the least reason to do something else. This is a truth that persists across time and always will. In *Della Pittura*, Salvo asks rhetorically, "As long as the model can be seen in a new way, as long as the definition is not completed, why should one interrupt the research?" [37] For his part, Wittgenstein declared, "Philosophy is not a theory but an activity." We can easily imagine Salvo insisting with a simple transposition that *Painting is not a theory but an activity*. Although he may have never spoken these words exactly, he articulated them from one canvas to another, reciprocally over five fruitful decades. It seems unlikely that Salvo thought of desiring, in relation to the pursuit of his art, to be in any way a transgression. We may wonder, "was he obsessed"? Obsessions tend to be viewed negatively, as unhealthy preoccupation. In creative endeavors, however, they can have positive value. Who would be drawn to the opposite, to indifference, whether studied or sincere? No one accuses scientists who run their experiments over and over again to be obsessed. Tests must be conducted under various circumstances to see how the results may be affected, and are run repeatedly in order to avoid jumping to conclusions. The variables of an experiment may not have been allowed to play out, and if one's research has been concluded prematurely, what then is left to be done? Scientists, like artists, will at times take a leap of faith from the outset, to give their speculation momentum. In an early work, *Salvo e Boetti*

come i sette savi che scrutano il moto degli astri (Salvo and Boetti like the seven wise men who are looking at the motion of the stars), 1969, Salvo pictures a time past, perhaps that of Galileo, when the earth was believed to be at the center of the universe, a belief disproved, to the advancement of scientific knowledge on one hand, but on the other to the detriment of the astronomer. Salvo, in the company of his close artist friend, presents the artist at the center of his own universe: the artist as observatory. Imagine this work hung to the left of the celestial painting, *Notte stellata* (Starry night), 1979, two works made ten years apart, although one that might have anticipated the other.

Salvo, with his name embedded in the green, white and red bands of the Tricolore, between 1971 and '73, a period when contemporary art was becoming increasingly international, identifies himself undeniably as an Italian artist, a fact asserted in those works in the form of maps and lists composed with the names of philosophers, poets, and painters. The inscribed marble, *40 nomi* (40 names), 1971, veined as if with bloodlines, includes notables from Aristotle and Leonardo to Poe and Che Guevara. Salvo mapped the country and his native Sicily by way of formidable figures, among whom he was a sure to include himself. Not surprisingly, many have referred to his work as narcissistic, a remark repeated so endlessly that it cannot go unmentioned, if only as a means to being dispelled. Every curator and critic who signs their name to an essay or a show takes credit for what they have published and presented, for the work of the artist, to occupy a position, once established, in which they may speak for and explain others, alive or no longer. At best this is a defense; at worst an act of ventriloquism. In the past, any number of critics and curators have laid claim to defining a movement, whether real or invented, named it, decided to whom membership would be granted, or not, or who was to be expelled for their sins. Salvo, in his iconoclasm, may embody an old saying: "I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member." (This is the only comic form of Marxism.) In these works, in every instance, Salvo's name appears at the end of the list, in the bottom right corner of a map, which is where, traditionally, we expect to find an artist's signature. The "club" to which Salvo wanted to belong, and it is the one every artist of any ambition wants to join, is that of art history. There is little doubt that the accusation of narcissism routinely leveled against Salvo comes from one of his earliest declarative works: *Io sono il migliore* (I am the best), 1970. Many artists believe they are, but do they announce it with a work of art, and from the very start? They keep it to themselves, and not only, since some may hide it behind claims of false modesty. Of this Salvo cannot be accused.

In this life we arrive when we do, according to coordinates entirely beyond our control. Mere mortals, we are all subject to the vagaries of chance and biology. Artists arrive when they do, and not before. How to account for those deemed ahead of their time? Is this genius? The term is not bestowed very much any more. Genius, particularly in art, is a thing of the past, residing within art history, which may have come to an end in our time. Have we noticed? Of course, not everyone can be born in time for an age of enlightenment, or of rebellion. Being born is a roll of the dice, never to be abolished. Too early, too late? Some artists appear on the scene with a slight delay, as was the case for Salvo. He entered the world in 1947, a postwar child, living in Turin from the age of nine, and presenting his first exhibition in 1970. In Alighiero Boetti's *Manifesto* (Poster) from 1967, the artist who would share a studio with Salvo when he began his career, all of the names we associate with Arte Povera are listed, among them Paolini, Fabro, Zorio, Pistoletto, Kounellis, Pascali, Merz, and Boetti's own. Salvo's name does not appear because he had yet to make his entrance

on the stage that was Turin in that heightened moment, upon which the various actors would perform. Within three years of Boetti's *Manifesto*, one written in names only, Salvo would exhibit one of his most important, if not the most important, of the funerary marble works with which he first made his name, by its very inscription, setting it in stone, albeit with ambiguous contradiction, *Salvo è vivo/Salvo è morto* (Salvo is alive/Salvo is dead), 1970. This is the full title, but the inscription only reads: "Salvo è vivo." With this work, the artist simultaneously announces his existence and his demise, though in no way morbidly, and in the present tense. This serves to acknowledge that every artist, should their work survive, lives on, achieves immortality. When Salvo died in 2015, his original intention for this work was made known, an instruction given more than thirty years prior, meant to serve as a concise and direct epitaph. The marble was to be turned and hung so an inscription on the back would be publicly revealed for the first time: "Salvo è morto." Just as easily as it had been turned around, so too could it be reversed on the occasion of any subsequent presentation, to declare: "Salvo è vivo"—in essence, life after death.

THE BOOK IN OUR HANDS

As an artist who was well aware of his forbearers—Giotto, Giorgione, Titian, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, Caravaggio—Salvo felt he had something to prove, to others as much as to himself. Here we note his marble, *Respirare il padre* (Breathing the father), 1972. We can imagine that time of his arrival on the artistic scene, when very few picked up a paintbrush, a time of revolt socially, politically and culturally, as a moment in which there were artists who may have believed they had nothing to prove. Of course, more reflective artists, those who question themselves, even those who exude confidence, are never far from doubt. Salvo's most infamous declaration must have registered as a direct affront to certain sensibilities, and yet in turning it around another reading is raised. Had he wondered: Am I the best? In English, a "salvo" is defined as the simultaneous firing of artillery and guns, often announcing that a battle has begun, with one side taking the lead. From this, an "opening salvo" designates, in debate, the initial provocation in an argument put forward. *Io sono il migliore* bears being considered in this respect: Salvo's opening salvo. We should also keep in mind that it was not as easy for an Italian artist as it would have been for an American to stake a claim within the realm of contemporary art in that time and place, and with American art having been promoted in Europe since the early '60s (symbolically crowned with Rauschenberg's being awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 1964). Visitors to this part of the world understand, and palpably so, that in Italy the presence of the past is alive, the ground beneath one's feet.

The American artist Cy Twombly, for example, after moving to Rome in the late 1950s, occupying a studio with a view of the Colosseum, soon felt the pull of history and mythology, and went on to produce paintings which referred to Apollo, Galatea, Hyperion, Orpheus, Venus, and the emperor Aurelius Commodus. To be surrounded by the presence of the past, in this we grasp how uneasy it can be for artists to inhabit an environment that, despite modern conveniences, is a perpetual museum. The fact of the advanced art of the late '60s in Italy being rooted to nature, to the landscape, to the countryside of farms, mountains and the sea, to trees, plants, minerals and stone, fruits and vegetables, horses and birds, to elemental and material actuality, fire and ice, to classicism and its fragments, metaphysics and alchemy, meant that the present and the past were also entwined emotionally. Salvo would go on to paint the world in which he lived and breathed, that of the everyday, recognizable to all, as it came to bear upon his private world and within the flow

of memory. Long before taking up the ruins of Greek and Roman temples as a subject on canvas, Salvo created a romantic image in 1972, misty, and sepia-toned, *Autroritratto tra le rovine* (Self-portrait among the ruins). In the late 1920s, de Chirico, for whom Italy, its architecture, archaeology and mythology provided key subjects for his work, made paintings of gladiators. Salvo, a half century later, painted *Gladiatori* (Gladiators), 1978. These works of theirs would have appeared anachronistic, then as now, and yet today driving through the center of Rome it's almost impossible not to pass the Colosseum and the Forum. Antiquity and modern life. Worlds collide. Clearly, there were other "opening salvos" for this artist at various points in his career, not only at its onset. In many ways, de Chirico was a model for him, as well as for de Chirico's distancing himself from the Futurists and the Surrealists, and for following his own path? We are reminded of that question from *Della Pittura*: "As long as the model can be seen in a new way, as long as the definition is not completed, why should one interrupt the research?" [37]. (To which we might add: "or one's independence?") Salvo's immersion in books, those doors to other realms, also sent him into and outside himself, to other points in time, distant, kept alive, a library of the mind. Salvo was not painting the past, but the past as it persisted and is persistent.

Della Pittura has to be considered as a work of Salvo's unto itself and rightly so. In this it is not unrelated to those publications by the language- and photo-based conceptual artists with whom he was associated at the start of his career. By way of these books the artist's work was made more widely available; affordable, portable, and in this sense democratic. To have, for example, a pocket-sized collection of pieces by Robert Barry or Lawrence Weiner in the early 1970s was to be in proximity with their work, to their ideas and imaginations, potentially expanding one's own. One needn't have been a person of great means to get close to and engage with this art. Simply having these books was, in a sense, to collect their work. To have a copy of *Della Pittura*, which has no illustrations, giving primacy to the essay itself, is certainly not the same as owning a marble, a photo piece, or a painting of Salvo's. What we are brought into proximity with is Salvo's mind and his voice. We have this in the books of Barry and Weiner as well, and we may take these encounters with us wherever we go. While Salvo's essay is on the subject of painting, the ideas may be applied to all he has done. In composing his treatise he had not forgotten where he had been, where he was, how he arrived there, the path taken and his purposeful detours. The essay was on and toward painting. Where Salvo is concerned, and as for the purpose of the essay before us now, the dialogue from that time continues, bringing him into the present. To read is to hear voices. To write is to hear the voice in one's head. Artists live on in their works, and also through their words.

ACTS OF INSCRIPTION / AN ART OF MEMORY

[Note: in the entries that follow, Salvo's own statements, questions and observations from *Della Pittura* are presented in italics, followed with their numerical listing in the book, rather than the page number, in brackets.]

1. In 1969, Gian Enzo Sperone, one of the most adventurous gallerists in Italy, who had brought American Pop and Conceptual art to the country, who was showing the work of the Arte Povera artists in Turin, received a letter¹ from Salvo which said, in part:

1 See Salvo, *Letter to Gian Enzo Sperone along the lines of the letter by Leonardo to Ludovico il Moro, infra* 531.

[...] *Now that I have examined and adequately considered the experiments of all those who consider themselves masters and creators of military machines, and having seen that the inventions and operations of these implements are in no way out of the ordinary, I shall attempt to explain myself to you, revealing my secrets and then offering them for your pleasure and at any time at your convenience.*

[...]

In peacetime, I think that I can perform as well as anyone else in architecture designing public and private buildings and transporting water from place to place, etc. What is more, I will create works of sculpture and painting which will bear comparison to any others. What is more, I shall be able to paint your portrait, which will reflect immortal glory and eternally honor your memory.

And if any of the things mentioned above should seem impossible to anyone, I believe I am perfectly ready to demonstrate my claims in any situation of your choice concerning that position for which I most humbly recommend myself.

What was Sperone to make of this? An approach from a young artist unlike any he had ever before encountered, boastful in tone, written in a courtly language from another time. He must have found it bewildering, while it also aroused his curiosity. (Military machines? The Vietnam was ongoing in that moment. But transporting water from place to place? What could that mean? Aqueducts? And secrets to be revealed?) Did Sperone realize this was, in fact, a letter Leonardo da Vinci had written to Ludovico Sforza circa 1483? Sforza, the Duke of Milan, known as the “arbiter of Italy,” would become Leonardo’s patron and commission him to create *The Last Supper*. In Salvo’s wily appropriation of the letter, was a parallel being made to the gallerist? Was Salvo, like da Vinci before him, applying for work? Both, as we know, proved successful. Salvo would eventually be offered to show with Sperone, and presented an exhibition there the following year. The letter, Salvo’s “opening salvo,” was an early, compelling instance of his reaching back in time to propel himself forward, as he would in his return to painting. It was also the first occasion in which he would take on the part of a historical figure, as an actor assumes the role for a movie or a play, reflecting Salvo’s playful nature, taken seriously.

The foundation is common, the expression cannot be. [227]

(It is worth noting that Salvo’s letter is included in one of the “bibles” of Conceptual art, Lucy R. Lippard’s anthology, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, which was published in 1973.)

2. Which are the acts of inscription? The marble works, the “gravestones,” memorials with which this artist first established himself, *Salvo è vivo/Salvo è morto*, 1970, most prominently; the re-writing of books, in which he substituted his own name for that of the main protagonist, among them *Treasure Island* and *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*; a letter copied after almost five hundred years? Salvo’s own “purloined letter” plays off of the message delivered by Edgar Allen Poe’s short story: things are not always what they seem. And the painted maps? Can we consider them as acts of inscription, those to which the lists of illustrious figures conclude with Salvo’s own name, “most humbly” inscribed? His works referred to as *d’après*, made after those of artists whom he revered, are acts of re-inscription. The conceptual works of Salvo are clearly understood as undertaken within this activity, and the act of inscription applies to his paintings on canvas as well. Painting is of course

a visual language, and before us we have an artist who believed that a painting was similar to a sentence, though not necessarily composed in the mind in logical or spoken order—but these observations are written and enumerated now?—but an articulation, especially once in print, that is meant to last. What has been imprinted may be taken as fact.

It isn’t written in the sand, but carved in granite. [236]

3. Salvo’s marble inscribed with the single word, *Idiota*, 1970–72, dating from the time of painting’s supposed demise, invokes the well-known saying, “As dumb as a painter,” attributed to one of the key conceptualists, also a former practitioner of the medium, Marcel Duchamp, who remarked: *Bête comme un peintre*.

Thinking is the terminus. Here, the facts and images come together; from here the facts and images depart. [68]

A painting is a terminus: it is an arrival (for the one who has done it) and a departure (for the one who views it.) [85]

4. For Salvo, thinking and painting were entwined.

But is the expression not a representation? [122]

5. What is an art of memory? This is not a trick question. It answers itself. This is true for all art, whatever form it may take, and no matter how forgotten or rediscovered. What has been brought back piles up upon itself. Memory is a matter of accumulation, a fear of loss, paradoxically its recall. Ideas and images always precede the realization of artworks. Every image an after-image. The artist as medium. What artists aim to do in presenting anything already known, to us and to themselves, is to render it as it was never before, the familiar de-familiarized, made strange, idealized. This is a particular property of painting, even for *trompe-l’œil* and photo-realism, which appear uncanny in their own peculiar ways. Isn’t all painting in some sense unreal? Even a monochrome—the memory of all painting. Consider a 1968 work by Paolini, a small piece of plain canvas, slightly yellowed at the edges, a mere 3,8 × 4,6 centimeters, which turns out to represent, life-size to the original work, “the span of the temple’s doorway painted by Raphael in *The Marriage of the Virgin*, 1504.” Every painting, we come to see, is a portal. Things uncovered again, the past replenishing the present, are after-images for a future that has yet to arrive, and may never. Some of this pertains to art history, some to art and its markets. All speculation is for better and for worse.

A nothing (white canvas, not as matter but as the absence of a painting that can come to be). I am the intermediary. [217]

6. Some paintings of Salvo’s, despite their realism, may be thought of as dreamlike. We all dream, night after night, although few if any dreams are recalled in detail. There is a correspondence to what is observed in waking life and recalled in repose, as well to what is observed in daytime and either recorded or forgotten. The awake-dream, a day-dream. Vivid memory requires vivid color. Soft edges require sharper definition. All painting is “the morning after.” The time elapsed... hours, years, centuries. Dreaming is a form of

traveling. True as well for our immersions, near and far—in art history, in the pages of a book, in the life of the imagination, in other cultures and climates.

One night (a miracle!), I am transported to a faraway planet; here I have a certain time to observe, to have experiences. Then I return, I wake up and tell everyone what happened to me, that there is a planet like this and this etc. No matter how rich my description, is there anyone that will believe me? [238]

7. An art of memory. This describes all of Salvo's paintings, especially those made after traveling, and he traveled widely, beyond mainland Europe to Iceland, Thailand, China, Nepal and Tibet, to Egypt, Ethiopia, Oman, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates. To the Canary Islands, in the Atlantic, closer to Africa, to the Moroccan coast, than to Spain, in its possession. Salvo, once again in his studio, seated before his canvas on an easel, would return to them, to the lingering impressions of color and light at various times of day, to the temperature within them, to intoxicating scents and perfumed air, the sounds heard from minarets and in a cemetery, its silence, birds, cicadas, waves, in the clarity of the cold and in waves of heat. Isn't a mirage also seen? Does recall, its power and its elusiveness, a tide going in and out, begin to explain Salvo's return to certain motifs over and again? But an artist, as we have noted, often looks for the least reason to go on. We might advise: take an image, do something to it. Do something else to it, do it again. Always different, always the same. Repetition is its own subject.

In how many ways can a rose be painted? [39]

8. Once Salvo began to paint in 1973, the world of color and light, and between them luminosity, opened up to him. Previously, his palette, if it can be said that he had one, was confined to that of the Tricolore. The *S. Martino e il povero* (St. Martin and the poor) of 1973 is ethereal, with delicate tones, faint delineation. The San Giorgios of the following years are robust and bright. Color in the one from 1974–75 is modulated between shades of only four colors: blue, pink, mauve, and gray, except for the saint's face and the white of the dragon's eye. Not only is the saint balanced on the beast's back, but the painting's composition and tonal contrasts are a matter of deft equilibrium. With the text/map works he made between 1975–77, whose surfaces have a muted, rubbed quality evocative of old printed documents, Salvo introduces earthy chromatics: the ground of the painting and the ground that is the artist's sense of place. The aspect of light in these paintings is subdued, a light which has faded color over time. The *Rovine* and related works are rendered, for the most part, in naturalistic color, but *Cavalieri medievali tra le rovine* (Medieval riders among the ruins), 1977, has a yellow sky and stylized cloud forms tinted pink and pale purple—the beginning of Salvo's free relation to color, a sign of what was to come. From the late 1970s he paints scenes at night which are suffused with blue, near-monochrome, as if blue was the frequency, a tone he could hear. In his winter nocturnes especially, color registers as a low temperature, vivid nonetheless. Color would be advanced across the 1980s with playful complexity (the multi-hued optical "light cones" that animate the vanishing perspective of streetlights in an untitled painting of 1980–81), subtlety (the pastel palettes of the decade's mid-years), and candied chromatics (as has critics have taken note, Salvo's paint seeming to have been mixed with sugar). Color and light merge incandescently in his painting, *Alba* (Dawn), 1989, the sun appearing on the horizon to illuminate the ruins of a temple by the sea with glowing intensity.

Light is a subject in Salvo's work across decades, at all times of the day and night (his nocturnes are almost always moonlit), whether an atmospheric phenomenon occurs (lightning), or an everyday presence, though seemingly out of time (the many candle paintings), and he finds it even in the dim, mysterious recesses of a church (*Interni con funzioni straordinarie* [Interiors with extraordinary functions]). Notably, his candles are often seen in relation to books, which were so important to his life, as if one reads by candlelight because we are in the past, not our own time, and in this light, in these scenes, each book is an illuminated manuscript written/painted by Salvo. The last of these paintings, of a solitary candle, was made by the artist near the end of his life. It is a small canvas, about the size of a modest book, which he titled *Stanno i giorni futuri...* (There are the future days...), 2015. May Salvo's book and candle paintings be thought of as self-portraits?

Here it could be said: "It depends on the intensity of your belief: if you could see the 'beauty' as clearly as you see the colors, you would be able to think that others are blind in front of that element."

But can the vision of "beauty" be "clear" like the empirical experience of colors? Is it said: "I see that it is beautiful" or "I think that it is beautiful?" [26]

Wait a minute! Isn't seeing tied to believing, to remembering, to knowing?

When I look at the sun (aslant) I don't believe that I have a vision defect common to other men; I don't believe that there is a strong yellow (?) point in my field of vision. No, I know that it's a star, I believe that it is immense in comparison to the dimensions of the earth, that it is one hundred fifty million kilometers away, I hope that tomorrow it will be back, etc. etc. [48]

9. The term "an art of memory" also applies to Salvo's conceptual work. *12 autoritratti* (12 self-portraits), 1969, featuring the artist's face superimposed over those of a factory worker, a pilot, a soldier, a ballet dancer, a revolutionary, and so on—heroes and villains alike—foregrounds the artist as a protagonist, although not always the central character. In this work Salvo raises notions of self-conception, self-perception, and reinvention, suggesting as it does that we see ourselves mirrored in others, in other roles, and are all implicated in history. The body we inhabit is our own. The mind is to be occupied, to have a life of its own. Notions of self begin at an early age. Do we remember what we thought we would be one day—a dancer, a soldier, a pilot? (*When I grow up, I want to be a revolutionary*. Has any child ever been able to articulate that desire? Not even Che. It is, as we know, an entirely other form of becoming, a destiny subsequently discovered.) Salvo, as is the case for many, even more than we might guess, knew he would be an artist when he grew up, and it came true.

Michelangelo Pistoletto's mirror works accomplish this *seeing in others* overtly, immediately catching the viewer in the act of looking. Salvo, for his part, or parts played, has built in a delay, an after-image of recognition. And of course any number of visitors to a museum where *12 autoritratti* is shown may not be aware, in spite of the reference in the title, that it is Salvo who has infiltrated every picture, and overtaken these bodies. To whose self and to whose memory do we refer? To the artist's, to the viewer's? Of course, it's to both.

When Salvo proclaims *Io sono il migliore* (1970), is his the only voice to be heard? The marble hangs on the gallery wall and is read, silently spoken, by the viewer who hears in the auditorium of one's head: *I am the best*.

Your memory, generally, works like history: you know a great amount about some painters (and all the rest) of your own century, about the past century a bit less, of the one before that even less and so on. The farther back you go, the fewer names (and all the rest) you find.

If you consider all this incorrectly, you would run the risk of overrating your epoch (the one in which you live.) [179]

10. As to accumulation, we witness across Salvo's body of work, a multitude of moons, clouds, columns, temples in ruin, churches and their interiors, minarets, landscapes, townscapes, street lights, train stations, trams at night, nocturnes, snowy scenes, books, candles, and still lifes, and we conclude that all painting, even action painting, is life held in suspension. The snow on a canvas never melts. Night only turns to day in a painting that follows.

It takes many winters to eliminate winter. [11]

11. In this artist's paintings, his inventorying is in many instances accountable: 2 prunes, 3 columns, 5 books, 23 Sicilians, 24 lemons, 30 Italian painters, 48 poets, 80 Italian painters in red, and so on. Here we are reminded of the photographic artist books of Ed Ruscha, among them: *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass*, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, *Thirtyfour Parking Lots*, and *A Few Palm Trees* (Salvo painted more than a few palm trees). In a 1989 painting, Salvo balances seven books one on top of another, *L'artificio era chiaro ma il rispetto ci impediva di contestarlo* (The artifice was clear but respect prevented us from contesting it). Doesn't he refer indirectly to painting with this title, to the suspension of disbelief that all art expects? Those painted books will never collapse unless painted as fallen to the ground. The same is true of a leaning tower: *Torre di Pisa*, 1980.

In repetition within art, one also acknowledges that time is inextricably linked to subject matter. Salvo painted similar scenes over the course of decades. How do we account for this? Do we have to? Don't the paintings, one after another, answer the question? Clearly, he found something new in each subsequent painting, otherwise he wouldn't have made them. A restless nature wouldn't have allowed for that. Only the belief that there was more to be discovered. Think of archaeologists amid the ruins of antiquity, digging for more of the story as told through the objects unearthed. After many bowls and amphorae and mosaic tiles have been found, does anyone say, "Well, we have enough." That never happens. Think also of an artist who was important to Salvo: Morandi. The many canvases he painted of bottles evidence an ongoing pursuit. The bottles themselves were repeated in various configurations. As to the element of time, look to their fuzzy edges. This is not imprecise technique. Morandi allowed dust to accumulate on the bottles in his studio, and his housekeeper was warned never to dust them. Morandi painted exactly what he saw, and painting, his activity of observation, in addition to time, was his subject. Once Salvo began to repeat scenes, devoting his energies to revisiting them over and over again, we understand that painting itself was his subject.

Can two identical objects exist? Mustn't they also occupy the same space-time? But then there would only be one object. [112]

12. Art as a matter of accounting, beyond an enumeration of what is, and was, in the world—an impossibility—is a story told with regard to how it appears and how it feels, as well as of our very being in the world: the artist as witness, the viewer looking over the

artist's shoulder. The artist On Kawara, who is best known for paintings that record the date on which they were painted, is paradigmatic in relation to Conceptual art. Yet all his earliest Date paintings have subtitles that refer to where he was, where he went, what he read, who he met, and, antithetical to Conceptualism, how he felt, and his own human vulnerability—the sort of information this artist wouldn't otherwise reveal. The paintings are an accounting, a calendar on canvas one day at a time. But they are also personal, diaristic and emotional. The subtitle for the painting made on July 25, 1966: *I make love to the days*.

... are the emotional states of a painter transferable to his paintings? Or can they only determine the paintings? [118]

13. Paul Maenz once advertised his gallery with a statement made by Seth Siegel, the earliest dealer of the first generation of American conceptual artists. It proposed: *Art is to change what you expect of it*. Salvo changed what we expected of him. In this he fulfilled art's key promise to us and to itself.

To know is to be able to foresee. [186]

14. There are times when the artist we knew, or thought we knew, becomes someone else. Is this a matter of their becoming who they were all along? As Salvo declared, not necessarily for anyone's particular reassurance, "I am still Salvo the conceptualist just as before I was already Salvo the painter."

Is it definable, is it expressible? [178]

15. The "transitional" paintings of 1973–75, in which Salvo appears as St. Martin, by way of El Greco, and as St. George slaying the dragon, after works by Carpaccio and Raphael, notably, may be seen as allegorical for this artist's shift in allegiance (if that can even be asserted) from the conceptual realm, as well as from the milieu of Arte Povera (in which some artists only imperfectly fit), to painting. His 1973 version of El Greco's *St. Martin Shares His Cloak With a Beggar* is titled *S. Martino e il povero*. His *S. Giorgio* paintings—the largest 7 meters wide, a cinematic *tour de force*—may have a meaning that, if not hidden, is covertly suggestive. Salvo is, without doubt, Saint George. With this return to canvas, is the sword he has drawn a paintbrush? And the serpentine creature he had tamed to slay, who demands tribute to be paid, requiring sacrifice, what does the dragon represent? Does it stand for the demands imposed upon the artist? And once dispatched, is the artist free to do as he pleases?

De Chirico, an artist who also turned to the old masters, painted a St. George in 1940 that is very far from Paolo Uccello, Raphael, Rubens, and Gustave Moreau, not only in time but in its reversal of the composition and in its rendering. St. George, on horseback, and the dragon, are set off in the background, while the King's daughter, less a figure from mythology, a woman concurrent with the time the work was made, occupies the foreground, dominates the painting, barely concerned with the contest being waged on her behalf, for which her life hangs in the balance. This was, for all intents and purposes, a slender excuse for the artist to paint a nude, similar to those being made by Picabia at the time, kitsch to be sure, more physical than metaphysical, worthy of the cover of the Gillo Dorfles book, *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, published in 1968. In the reversal of the central figures, de Chirico's *San Giorgio* is also far from the subject as depicted by Salvo

more than thirty years later, focused on the legend's main actors exclusively, the saint and the dragon, the painter and his antagonist.

When Salvo participated in the exhibition "Projekt '74" in Cologne, he requested that *S. Martino e il povero*, after El Greco, be shown in the Wallraf-Richartz Museum, and in the context of his "ideal museum," for which he chose from their collection paintings by Cranach, Rembrandt, and Cézanne, one from each century, rather than exhibiting alongside his contemporaries in the Kunsthalle. When he told a museum guard that he had made the *S. Martino* painting, the man didn't believe him. Salvo had collapsed the space between what represented art history and what was contemporary. Proving, in effect, that a work *d'après* was able to hide in plain sight.

When you judge a painting, don't you imagine it next to other paintings, in a contest with other paintings? And doesn't it mean that these paintings, beside which you put the painting that you are judging, are outside the judgement? [18]

16. Is all art, as all criticism, a mode of autobiography? An early photo-work by Boetti, *Gemelli* (Twins), 1968, presents us with the artist doubled, standing alongside himself, the two Boettis dressed identically, holding hands. A year later, Salvo's photo-work, *Da zero a uno* (From zero to one), similarly represents the artist doubled. Seated cross-legged, the Salvo to the left looks down to his hands, held palms out and empty. The second Salvo, in the same position, also looking down, now has an apple, the forbidden fruit, cupped in the bowl of his hands. (Another book by Dorfles, *Artificio e natura*, published in Turin in 1968, has an apple on its cover, the forbidden fruit, very likely artificial.) Salvo was a Gemini, the astrological sign symbolized by the identical twins, Castor and Pollux. When Salvo painted his first scene of Greek ruins in 1975, he based it on a postcard from Agrigento, in his native Sicily not far from where he had been born, which shows, as the painted subtitle informs us, the *Tempio di Castore e Polluce*, the temple of Castor and Pollux. Thought of as an astrological/architectural self-portrait, the painting suggests that where we come from remains with us over the course of our lives. In this we are reminded of de Chirico's *The Archaeologists*, 1927, a painting whose figures contain temples, columns, arches: history as an embodiment, the cities, civilizations, built one on top of another, inside us.

Isn't Salvo's *corpo di lavoro* an autobiography in various chapters? Of philosophy, Wittgenstein wrote, it "is like trying to open a safe with a combination lock: each little adjustment of the dial seems to achieve nothing, only when everything is in place does the door open." The same may be said of painting. In Italian, the word "salvo" means "safe," but it does not identify the object, a *cassaforte*, rather "safe" in the sense of being saved. Artworks are an artist's valuables. Through artworks we trace their lives.

We would be wrong to say that Salvo became the protagonist of his own story, told in his own voice. And why? Because he always had been.