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*Michelangelo and Allography:
Expanded Authorship in Renaissance Artwork*

In the spring of 1521 an unfinished version of Michelangelo's *Risen Christ*, now in Santa Maria sopra Minerva, reached Rome via sea. Despite the pressure of the sculpture's patron, Metello Vari—who sent to Buonarroti at least 25 letters regarding this commission—the artist refused to travel with his own work, and instead remained in Florence to attend to his duties as the architect of the Medicean complex of San Lorenzo. Because of the high risk of being damaged during the transportation, what was sent to Rome was just a statue in the rough: a *bozzza* still lacking the final touches that, once in Rome, would have been finished by the younger collaborator Pietro Urbano. However, Urbano failed these expectations and poorly completed the unfinished *Risen Christ*. His intervention was so unsatisfying that the painter Sebastiano del Piombo felt compelled to write to Michelangelo a worried letter about the result of Urbano's efforts:

everything he worked has been mangled, especially the right foot, so that you can clearly see that the toes are snipped. He has shortened the fingers, especially in the

hand holding the cross, which is the right one, and Frizzi said that it's like if they were worked by those who make donuts: they don't look like they were made in marble, but instead in dough, for how stunted they are [...]. You can clearly see that he worked the beard in a way that my child would have demonstrated more skill, since it seems like he has worked with a blunt knife to cut that beard—*but it will be easily repaired* [...]. I think something bad will happen to him [Urbano], since I heard that he gambles and wants every prostitute for himself, and hangs around in Rome like a nymph in velvet shoes, and he has many debts.¹

We know that Michelangelo was profoundly frustrated by this news, and that he offered to create an entirely new version of the statue for Vari, but the latter declined. Because of this, Buonarroti determined that the *Risen Christ* would instead be reworked by another assistant, Francesco Frizzi. This time the results greatly satisfied both the artist and the patron. Frizzi skillfully reworked Urbano's objectionable details on the statue, and turned the initial failure into one of the most celebrated of Buonarroti's executions, appreciated by his contemporaries for the elegance and the realism of its anatomy.

Delightfully described in Michelangelo's correspondence, the episode of the *Risen Christ* reveals to what extent an artwork like sculpture, traditionally associated with the hand of the artist and

¹ Sebastiano del Piombo to Michelangelo Buonarroti, September 6, 1521: «tutto quello ha lavorato ha storpiato ogni cossa, maxime ha scortato el piede drito, che si vede manifestamente ne le ditte che lui l'ha mozze; ancora ha scorte le ditte de le mane, maxime quela che tiene la croce, che è la drita, che'l Frizzi dice che par che li habi lavorato colloro che fano le zanbele: non par lavorate de marmo, par li habi lavorato colloro che lavorino de pasta, tanto sonno stentate [...]. Si vede manifestamente che l'ha lavorato ne la barba che'l mio putto credo haveria havuto più descretion, ché par habi lavorato con un cortel che non habi punta a filar quella barba —, ma facilmente se li potrà remediar [...] et credo certamente li capiterà [male], perché io ho inteso che lui iocha et de putane le vol tutte, et fa la ninpha con le scarpe de veluto per Roma et diè dar de molti baiochi». My translation from *Il carteggio di Michelangelo*, eds. G. Poggi, P. Barocchi, R. Ristori, Florence 1967, II: 313-314. Italics added.

seen as the most direct product of his invention, could in fact be the result of a mediated process, interpreted by different actors. This view of creation also relates to other kinds of early modern artifacts, and questions the traditional definitions of autography. It also expands our perception of authorship, thus revealing the tension between the artist's individuality and the process of production. In a chapter titled «Art and Authenticity», of his 1968 *Languages of Art*, Nelson Goodman addresses the problem of forgery and reproduction, and formulates a compelling definition of autography:

Let us speak of a work of art as autographic if and only if (*iff*) the distinction between original and forgery of it is significant; or better, if and only if even the most exact duplication of it does not thereby count as genuine. If a work of art is autographic, we may also call that art autographic. Thus painting is autographic, music non autographic, or allographic.²

The category of allography has rarely been applied to mechanical arts, despite Goodman's comparison of music with drama, and architecture. The common denominator among these artistic expressions is their dependence upon a system of notation: with music that would be the score; with drama, script; and with architecture, blueprints. This assures the «sameness of spelling» which is essential to the authenticity of the final product.³ Therefore, «an art seems to be allographic just insofar as it is amenable to notation», and such «amenability to notation depends upon a precedent practice that develops only if works of the art in question are

² N. GOODMAN, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, Indianapolis 1968: 113.

³ *Ibid.*: 115-16

commonly either ephemeral or not producible by one person».⁴ As in the case of Michelangelo's *Risen Christ*, and of so many other examples from that period, allography encapsulates the collective nature of their creation and provides better articulated definition of the role of the author. This also pushes us to reconstruct the modes of control on the work's compliance to individual artistic intentions. With that stated, the reliance on a conventional system of signs, in order to allow correct execution, remains as the only condition to define art as distinctively allographic.

As a methodological introduction to my research, this paper looks at the following issues: the application of allography (as opposed to autography) to mechanical arts; the material characteristics of Michelangelo's corpus of drawings; the specificities of sculpted relief, an intermediate genre between sculpture and architecture; and the dynamics of artistic collaboration on the first building site directed by Buonarroti, i.e. the *chantier* of San Lorenzo in Florence. It is precisely on this monument—and more exactly on details from the New Sacristy—that I have applied these considerations, in order to test the critical potential of such an approach.

The corpus of drawings by Michelangelo and his circle could undergo a substantial reconsideration when examined with a process-based approach that investigates the materiality of these objects and their relationship with the artistic practice. This is especially true for those drawings hidden in the neglected categories of copies and derivations, as well as those with uncertain attributions. In this way, such sheets can actually gain new relevance if collocated with

⁴ Ibid.: 120.

more precision into the temporal development of the artworks' execution. That is, in the very mechanism of allographic work. For such reasons, my research mainly addresses those sheets forgotten by historiography, like the many drawings classified under such labels as «the school of Michelangelo» or «after Michelangelo».

Because of its rich documentation, Michelangelo's exceptional case can illuminate an entire tradition of collective artworks, in which the definition of authorship is blurred and evasive, needing better definition, that could arrive through a description of the relationship between major form-makers and their collaborators. Buonarroti's realizations as entrepreneur, from the building site of San Lorenzo to the heroic construction of St. Peter's in Rome, are just extraordinarily visible episodes of a long history of artistic collaboration, which includes the great cycles of frescoes of Western art such as the most monumental products of sculptural workshops. In all of these cases, but especially with Michelangelo's untiring need for control, we can observe how the artist's intentionality expands beyond the perimeter of autography, inevitably investing with his personality every step of the process of production.