

Carla Della Beffa, article for Bordi, 2021, English version



On the edge of the instant

I love to write about light and shadows on the eve of summer's solstice. Since I was a grown-up I have been celebrating the change of season and light in different ways, lighting a candle, making a toast to the sky, rereading a poem. And thinking about it, writing of it because some artist friends invited me to, is a great way.

The change of season is a border, a limit, an edge: on the other side something changes. I have always been surprised by the fact that on the day when summer starts, the light begins to dim: the summit is the beginning of the end.

I remember the sunrays that entered my room as a child, when I had to take a nap and instead of sleeping I watched the grey oblique line of suspended dust, light on one side, darkness on the other.

Later, I studied what Renaissance artists called *Teoria delle ombre*, which helped them to draw realistic shadows and volumes. Light and shadows give shape to every form. They also can transform an object and make it seem totally different. Just let your imagination run, let it win against logic and what you know is really there, and you can invent worlds.

A sunset can dig a hole into a tree trunk or a mountaintop, a shadow can change the geometry of an angle. Those metamorphoses last but an instant: if I don't see them, if I don't take pictures right then, they are lost forever.

Pure photo-graphy of the luminous moment.

Even if I came back the next day, in the same place and at the same hour (which is impossible) it won't be the same, because light is like water in a river, it flows, always different.

I myself am a bit different, every day.

Besides, all daylight comes from the same Sun, even though it can multiply and refract and reflect and divides itself in different wavelengths; but shadows are many, one for each object caressed by the light, and that's very important for what I see.

On a more theoretical level, I am less interested in the border between light and shadow, their obvious interacting, and in light's ability to reveal hidden shapes. I pay much more attention to light's constant change. In that sense, being on the edge of the instant is like a walk on the crest of a mountain dropping on both sides: I have to be careful at every step.

For years I have known and noticed the surprising movements of light but they became the theme of a more specific, clearer research during the confinement due to the pandemic: stuck at home, or walking in the law-restricted field around it, I could meet the luminous phantoms entering from my windows and *for a moment* skimming the wall, the shadow that *in that moment* draws new shapes on the same old pavement. Always aware of details, I now learned to catch the edge, the fleeting line between diffused, reflected, direct light and shadows, the movement – gradual and yet so fast – from a state to the other.

In the city, light has no rules: cars parked under my window push their reflections up to the ceiling; direct rays design the railings on the floor in parallel, oblique lines; a not-so-random ray hits something reflecting and deflecting it, a gutter or a pipe, enters a window and plays pool between walls and furniture. Light goes where it wants, finds every pimple and asperity, discovers all tricks, plays with tricks of its own.

In a round square nearby, some summer evenings, the sunset seems to come from all sides, up, down, left, right. Impossible to photograph, it can only be told.

Henri Cartier-Bresson¹ looked for the moment's tension, the perfect instant between people, places and gestures; I like a smaller game, more modest and discreet: to catch the light that is there, follow it while there is time.

The border – edge, margin, perimeter, limit, trim – between light and shadow is open and fast, outside me. Trying to understand it is an exercise of attention and awareness, a meditation on time and change. I need to be ready to catch the instant, and it's not always possible: it depends on the hour, on the clouds, on the inner harmony at that moment. (The relationship mind/body/perception is yet another border: always impossible to know, both for individual and science, always labelled with never-explained, centuries-old words referring to simplified definitions, as Siri Hustvedt² says.)

But when it works, it's ecstasy. Very short, just some instants, but a perfect instant that leaves a trace is a great gift, and I love it.

¹ Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Le Grand Jeu*, curated by Sylvie Aubenas, Javier Cercas, Annie Leibovitz, François Pinault, Wim Wenders (Palazzo Grassi: Venezia 2020)

² Siri Hustvedt, *The Delusions of Certainty*, in *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women* (London: Sceptre 2017)

