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The Ambition of Images to Life

Frank Fehrenbach
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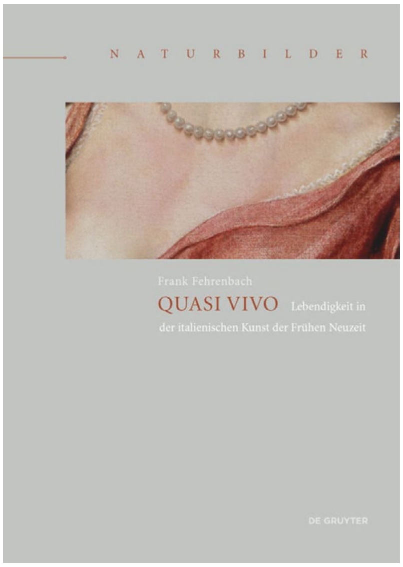

NATURBILDER
Frank Fehrenbach
QUASI VIVO Lebendigkeit in der italienischen Kunst der Frühen Neuzeit
DE GRUYTER

In his famous “Proposte per una critica d’arte,” which appeared as a programmatic essay in the first volume of the journal *Paragone*, Roberto Longhi makes a distinction between good and bad critics. On the one hand, texts by “good critics” adhere to the visual language of the images they discuss, animated by a sensibility where words pursue style, as in some pages by Giorgio Vasari. On the other hand, many pages have been written without standing in front of works of art, such as Giovan Pietro Bellori’s *Lives*. For Longhi, some sources are worth reading, while others provide no information about the creation of images. In such texts, words do not weave themselves into compelling dialogue with artistic practice. Rather, words generate themselves for their own sake instead of agonistically confronting the specificity of the work of art. One of the most widespread tropes in similar texts is the description of an image that appears to be alive, such that the material shaped by the artist is almost an organism that only lacks breath. Phrased differently, it is a *topos* so ubiquitous that it seems empty of any meaning, nothing more than a generic praise. Frank Fehrenbach’s ambitious study *Quasi Vivo: Lebendigkeit in der italienischen Kunst der Frühen Neuzeit* dispels such an opinion. Over the course of nearly six hundred pages – divided into an introduction, fifteen chapters, and an epilogue – he meticulously demonstrates how similar tropes of ‘vivification’ or ‘liveliness’ deeply affected both the production and the reception of images in the early modern period.

Art Criticism and Artistic Production

Compared to crucial contributions on the agency of images such as those by David Freedberg and Horst Bredekamp, which engage with examples taken from vast chronological and geographical contexts, Fehrenbach limits himself to the Italian Renaissance. In *Quasi Vivo* the reader thus encounters a deeply contextual approach to animated images. Rather than celebrating the ‘power of images’ as an intrinsic quality of these objects, Fehrenbach aims instead at reconstructing ubiquitous patterns of thought that invited Renaissance artists and viewers to perceive the image in a constant oscillation between art and life. *Quasi Vivo* offers a historical analysis of the semantic ramification of the vocabulary of liveliness (*Vivacità*): The book maps the different ways images are defined as ‘lively’ in the *Kunstliteratur* produced in Italy between 1300 and 1750.

With this focus on rhetoric, Fehrenbach joins a number of prominent studies that have drawn attention to specific keywords in *Kunstliteratur*, such as

Nicola Suthor's investigation of the term *bravura*. Suthor demonstrates how a certain combative idiom that arose around the painterly brushstroke in Baroque art inflected the practice of painting in the period. Like Suthor's exploration, *Quasi Vivo* is not just a study of a single word (*Vivacità*), but rather aims at understanding how a literary trope allows us to retrieve a historically specific experiential model to engage with works of art and what images meant to those who created them and to their original audience. Nearly every chapter of the book is characterized by a dual focus on texts (all of them presented in German translation, and often with the original in the footnotes) and an interest in the ways in which certain discussions in art criticism shed light on specific mechanisms of artistic production. Fehrenbach invites us to look closely at images, to linger in those details that are often considered insignificant. Despite the fact that the author approaches a topic as vast as the *topos* of liveliness in early modern Italian art, Fehrenbach rejects generalisms. For instance, he invites us to look at the striations in marble, to pay attention to the surfaces of sculpture, and to trace the interplay between figuration and material. *Quasi Vivo* is a book centered on a literary trope, but it is not merely a philological investigation into words. On the contrary, Fehrenbach's book is punctuated by refined visual analyses. This text demonstrates the author's exceptional familiarity with Renaissance art theory and his intimate knowledge of the objects themselves; the way in which in each chapter Fehrenbach moves between texts and images is admirable.

Quasi Vivo is the result of Fehrenbach's sustained reflection on the life of images over the last twenty years, since his first publications on this subject date back to 2003. Several individual chapters have previously appeared as essays, either in English or German, which have been revised and translated by the author for this book. Despite their miscellaneous nature, the various chapters are consistent in terms of content, and the author distributed the chapters roughly chronologically. Nevertheless, Fehrenbach does not aim to construct a narrative of progress: indeed there is no real chronological development. Instead, the individual chapters function as analyses of paradigmatic cases of early modern liveliness. The book also cuts across such periodizations as Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque: Fehrenbach highlights how a remarkably large amount of images produced from roughly 1300 to 1750 are driven by similar ambition. The first section of the book is arranged into three diptychs of chapters: the first two are devoted to funerary sculpture, followed by two others focusing on anatomical images, and two in which the author analyzes color. Other chapters discuss liveliness in Vasari, the representation of coins in the art of Titian and Jacopo Tintoretto, and erotic images.

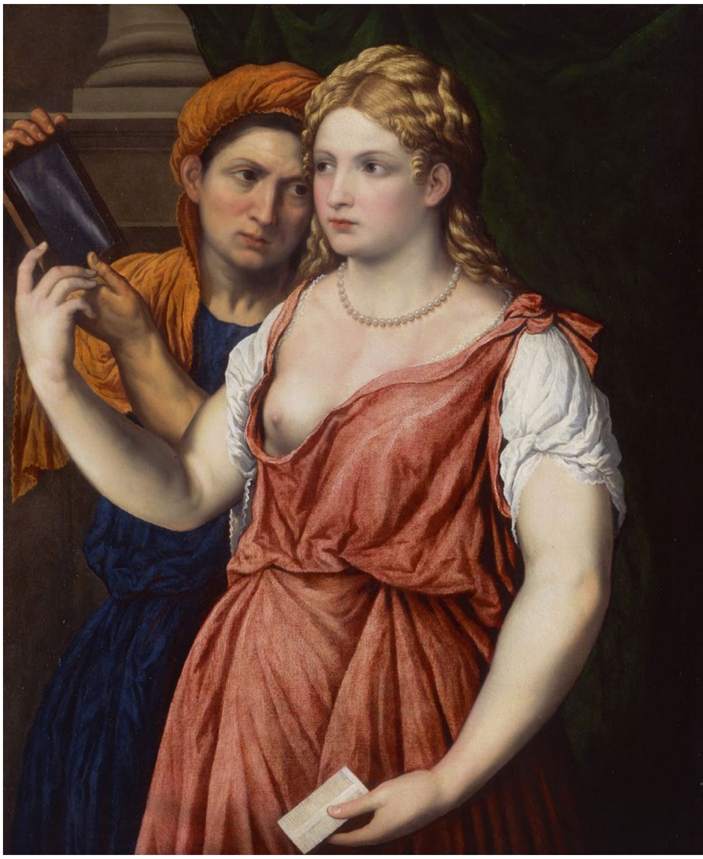
Fehrenbach has collected a vast and nonuniform repertoire of objects in crafting this book. Indeed, the works of art discussed in each chapter are different in terms of technique, material, and quality. Because of this structure, the book ends up being quite challenging to navigate, but the readers are gratified by the effort that *Quasi Vivo* requires, and they also slowly begin to pick up on cross-references between different chapters. For those who have the patience to wade through Fehrenbach's massive book, liveliness becomes visible in the light entering Roman Baroque chapels, in the cut flowers in Still Lifes or in Leonardo's anatomical drawings. One may at first remain skeptical that all these artworks relate to *Vivacità*, but Fehrenbach reminds the reader of how pervasive this *topos* was in art literature.

Procreation, Liveliness, Energy

In recent decades, numerous contributions have appeared that explore the manifold agency of images in the early modern period, thus moving in decisive opposition to the idea that the Renaissance constituted the triumph of what Hans Belting defined as the "age of art." Fehrenbach contributes with great originality to this dense historiography by not devoting his attention to the widespread rhetorical models inherited from the ancient tradition. Take, for example, *energeia* and *evidentia*, structures that invite the spectators to immerse themselves in illusion to such an extent that reality and artifice are confused. Scholars like Valeska von Rosen, Guido Reuter and Caroline van Eck have explored these terms and the links between the early modern definition of imaginative faculties and the experience of art. Instead, Fehrenbach invites us to interrogate images as objects that are in the process of coming to life, highlighting the link between art and biology as well as the similarity between the emergence of life from ostensibly inert matter and the creative process of shaping matter into images of the human body and nature.

After all, even the human body is an assemblage of matter that came to life through mechanisms that were the focus of scholarly debates and conversations during the Renaissance. In this regard, Fehrenbach's project intersects with that of Ulrich Pfisterer, who, in *Kunst-Geburten: Kreativität, Erotik, Körper in der Frühen Neuzeit*, carefully revealed the many implications of the paradigm of the artist as 'procreator' that dominated the discourse on art in the Renaissance. In the book, Pfisterer mapped the close link between the act of producing images and the generation of life. Similarly, Fehrenbach's approach to *Vivacità* is characterized by the seriousness with which the author lingers on the claims that certain images are alive. For Fehrenbach, this nexus of art and life occurs not via superficial comparison, but from something fundamental. For example, Fehrenbach discusses passages from both *Kunstliteratur* and artistic practice in the light of Aristotelian biology and zoology, as well as its reception in the thought of the early modern period, offering an innovative way to interpret the connection between the scientific discourse and art-making.

As indicated by its title, Fehrenbach argues throughout the book that many early modern images are "almost alive," that is, perceived by the beholder as in the process of coming to life. The vocabulary that Fehrenbach develops in his introduction, and to which he continually returns, to describe the qualities that define the images he discusses in the book, includes terms such as latency, oscillation, and emergence (*Latenz*, *Oszillation*, *Emergenz*): a conceptual constellation of contradictions and transformations, that in the end never achieves its goal to be alive. Indeed, the emphasis on the term *quasi* constitutes probably the most important contribution of Fehrenbach to the ongoing debate on the living image. Furthermore, what makes the art of the Italian Renaissance appealing to Fehrenbach is not only its ambition to life, but also how this *topos* is intentionally explored by artists. Fehrenbach consciously distances himself from the idea of meta-art, i. e. that the artist reflects on the mechanisms of the making in the moment of producing images, which Victor Stoichita, among others, has analyzed. Instead, Fehrenbach selects a corpus of objects that, in his reading, attest directly to the liminal space they occupy between art and life, and their ambition to become living and breathing beings.

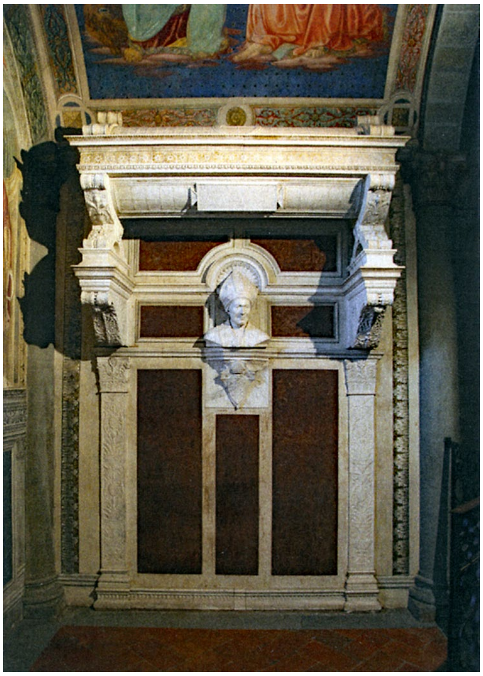


| Fig. 1 | Paris Bordone, Young Lady at the Mirror with the Maid, ca. 1535–40. Oil on Canvas, 87 × 72 cm. Hamburg, Kunsthalle, Inv. Nr. HK-5736. © Hamburger Kunsthalle | bpk Photo: Elke Walford↗

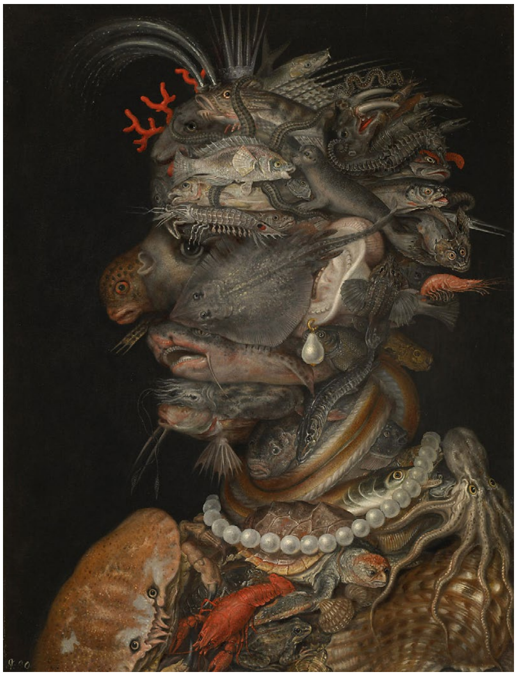
Various Visual Topoi and Strategies

For Fehrenbach, liveliness is “ein paradigmatischer visueller Topos” (a paradigmatic visual topos; 2). By “visual topos,” the author means that the notion of *Vivacità* is not exclusively a rhetorical strategy that operates at the level of the word, but has also been deliberately integrated in the works of art. In the early modern period, artists developed recurring visual strategies, which Fehrenbach identifies as elements that lead the viewer to perceive the animation of the image. For instance, in the book’s cover, we encounter the detail of the neckline in the canvas *Young Lady at the Mirror with the Maid*, painted by the Venetian artist Paris Bordone around 1540. **| Fig. 1 |** Fehrenbach focuses his attention on the presence of brighter shades of red in the depiction of the female figure’s skin, which the author reads as an element that the painter inserts to invite the viewer to perceive the coming to life of the figure. Fehrenbach reads this choice in light of the literary trope of the animation of the image that goes back as far as to the Ovidian retelling of the myth of Pygmalion, where the poet recounts among the other transformations on the statue’s body also the change in the color of her skin, from white to red. A small detail such as the shade of red in the woman’s skin constitutes an element that, for Fehrenbach, invites the viewer to perceive the image as captured in the very moment of transformation. Other *visual topoi* that Fehrenbach identifies include the bodies of the deceased represented in the monumental tombs constructed during the Italian Renaissance (which he analyzes as figures trapped between life and death) **| Fig. 2 |** and the reflection of light in the pupils (a detail to be understood both as an internal and an external glow). **| Fig. 3 |**

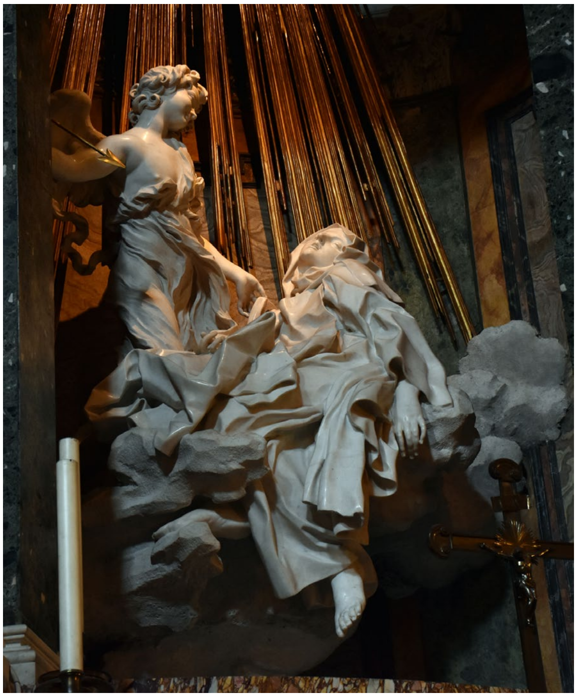
In *Quasi Vivo*, Fehrenbach gives ample space to how a conscious confrontation with the *topos* of *Vivacità* operates in the practice of prominent artists. For instance, two chapters are devoted to the art of Michelangelo and Gian Lorenzo Bernini. These chapters fol-



| Fig. 2 | Mino da Fiesole, Tomb of Bishop Leonardo Salutati, before 1466. Fiesole, Duomo San Romolo. Photo: Francesca Borgo. Fehrenbach 2020, p. 54



| Fig. 3 | Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Water, 1566. Oil/Wood, 66,5 × 50,5 cm. Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie. © KHM-Museumsverband↗



| Fig. 4 | Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Rapture of St. Teresa of Avila, 1647–51. Rome, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Cappella Cornaro. Wikimedia↗

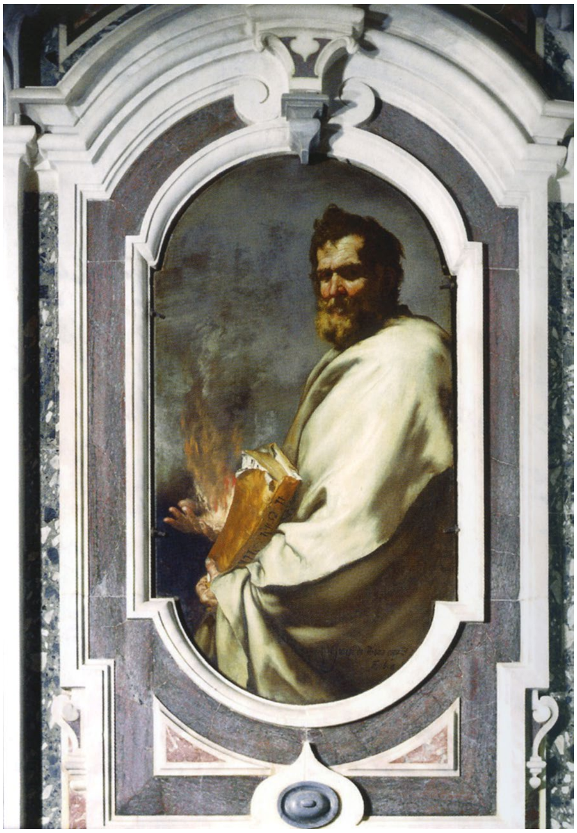
low similar strategies: after focusing on the tropes of liveliness that dominate the earliest sources around these artists, Fehrenbach moves on to read their work in the light of how their creativity has been discussed in these texts. In the chapter "Michelangelos Ungeborene" Fehrenbach offers a new reading of the *non-finito* in the art of the Florentine sculptor: he invites us to consider the figures trapped inside marble as embryos. Fehrenbach pays attention to the bodily parts that develop first in the embryo according to contemporaneous sources and how this medical knowledge around the generation of life finds compiling comparison to Michelangelo's artistic praxis: for example, he never fully sculpted the eyes of his unfinished works. Michelangelo's *non-finito* has often been connected to dualistic thinking, where his unfinished sculptures could be read as the result of the material inability to fully contain the artist's ideas. In Fehrenbach's reading, instead, the bodies trapped within these marbles are defined by potentiality rather than lack, and the viewer is invited to engage with them as figures in a constant state of development.

The chapter on Bernini opens with a focus on the importance of fire in the artist's early biographies, and ultimately Fehrenbach offers a new interpretation of the role of light in Bernini's famous chapels. Once again, the author moves away from a dualistic approach, in which light is understood as immaterial. Fehrenbach, drawing on contemporaneous discussion, sees light in a long tradition as a medium, one that Bernini is using to call his sculpture into life: "Das tote Material der Skulpturen antwortet auf die virtus des wirklichen Lichts und scheint dabei zum Leben zu erwachen" (The dead material of the sculptures responds to the virtus of the real light and seems to come to life in the process; 458). In such spaces as the Cappella Cornaro, what the viewer is ultimately encountering, therefore, is the moment of animation of sculpture through light. | Fig. 4 | Fehrenbach in these two chapters offers a new understanding of how some of the protagonists of Italian art think about their creativity and their process of shaping matter into almost alive bodies. Fehrenbach pushes us to imagine figures such as Michelangelo and Bernini taking seriously the *topos* of the *Vivacità* of the image, and elaborating visual strategies that emphasize their power to bring matter to life. The literary trope of liveliness informs the making of some of the most celebrated art produced during the early modern period on the Italian peninsula.

And what about the South?

Apart from analyzing texts by Marino, a poet born in Naples, and discussing some still lifes produced by the Neapolitan painter Giuseppe Recco, Fehrenbach in *Quasi Vivo* engages exclusively with objects created in the conventional geography of the Italian Renaissance: most of the works come from Florence, Rome and Venice. Stephen J. Campbell has recently drawn the attention of the Anglophone scholarship to the connection between the *Questione meridionale* (Southern question) and the study of Italian art, highlighting the difficulty of articulating an artistic history of southern Italy and integrating the art produced in a region like Sicily in the scholarly conversation. The stereotype that conceptualizes southern Italy in this period as retrograde and exclusively as a receptive space of artistic innovations taking place elsewhere has proven to be a recalcitrant phenomenon in the field. How different a picture might a text focused on *Vivacità* in Italian Renaissance Art present if its author engaged with the visual culture produced in the entire peninsula?

The South does in fact have an incredible potential to contribute to a conversation on the living image. For example, the history of Naples is defined both by the presence of the volcano Vesuvius, where the disruptive force of nature becomes immediately evident, and by the annual liquefaction of the blood of San Gennaro, the city's patron saint. Todd Olson has recently shown how Jusepe de Ribera's canvas in San Martino | Fig. 5 | arranged within a rich decoration made of stones can be read as bodies embedded within the geological eras that surround them. While Fehrenbach himself is attentive elsewhere to the city of Naples – he recently co-edited with Joris van Gastel a volume exploring the interconnections between art and nature in the city – to ask the author of a book as expansive as *Quasi Vivo* to include more material seems quite unreasonable. Yet I want to briefly point out how the core themes in *Quasi Vivo* could be afforded even more nuance when attending to objects often erased from the study of Italian Renaissance art, that is, beyond Northern and Central Italy urban centers.



| Fig. 5 | Jusepe de Ribera, Elijah, 1638. Oil/Canvas. Naples, Certosa di San Martino. Sacred Images and Normativity. Contested Forms in Early Modern Art, ed. by Chiara Franceschini, Turnhout 2021, p. 262

Quasi Vivo constitutes a powerful re-reading of Italian Renaissance art, in which the author focuses on how images, these assemblages of matter, are constantly perceived in the process of becoming alive. Fehrenbach's attention to matter, however, does not lead him to question non-human agency, as authors such as Jane Bennett have brought attention to. What Fehrenbach instead develops in the book is an affective approach to images insofar as they invite the subject to reflect not only on the boundaries between art and life, but also the boundaries between the material nature of the beholder's body and the inanimate matter that characterizes the material used by artists; in a phrase, to ponder on the distinctions between a body and a corpse.

Quasi Vivo is a book animated by a profound historicism driven by the ambition to recover lost patterns of experience. At the same time, because at its core lies something as profoundly human as the materiality of the body, the book has the capacity to bring the images produced in the past extremely close to the reader in the present: we share with its historical subjects the fact of having a mortal body. Throughout the book, Fehrenbach suggests that to fully understand the ambitions of Italian Renaissance art is necessarily to come to terms with the vulnerability of one's own body. One only hopes that *Quasi Vivo*'s heft and its challenging academic German will not limit the attention that this fascinating rewriting of Italian Renaissance art deserves.

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