

GIOTTO; OR, BEAUTY IN SPACE

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1. The most recent dating proposed for the two cycles is circa 1288–92 for that of Assisi, and circa 1303–5 for that of Padua. The chronology is, of course, debated. Particularly the date of the frescoes in Assisi is the subject of an immense literature. In 2003, however, Donal Cooper and Janet Robson published a document that supports dating the frescoes to 1288–92 (as had already been proposed by Peter Murray in 1953 and Luciano Bellosi in 1985), thereby setting aside many of the difficulties that the date suggested by Vasari (1296) created in attributing the Assisi paintings to Giotto. This chronology leaves more than ten years between the two cycles, and consequently makes their undeniable stylistic differences easier to explain.

2. The frescoes of the *Stories of St Francis* in Assisi, attributed very early on to Giotto by Riccobaldo Ferrarese (1312), Lorenzo

Giotto Is Giotto

I assume Giotto is the painter that all of his immediate and indirect followers believed he was: the one who painted the *Stories of St Francis* in the Upper Church in Assisi and the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua.¹ I do not think that everything reported by contemporary and Renaissance sources is correct, yet it is very difficult to imagine that this narrative could contain a mistake as colossal as the one supposed by the historians who refuse to admit that Giotto is responsible for the frescoes of the Upper Church.² The master of the *Stories of St Francis* is Giotto, otherwise the entire history of Italian painting is just a hoax. Italian painters (and Italian architects, too) remained loyal to Giotto's "project of painting" for at least two centuries. For this entire period, Italian painters unanimously accepted Giotto as the starting point of their work in terms of technique, ethics, social role, relationship to the other arts and the overall cultural ambition of painting. Cristoforo Landino put it simply and clearly: "From the knowledge of Giotto, as if from the Trojan horse, came admirable painters."³ According to all of the Italian painters after Giotto, the paradigm shift that separated mediaeval and Renaissance painting occurred in Assisi, and I do not think we have serious reason to think they were wrong. In general, there can be no unconscious paradigm shifts. If a paradigm shift happens, then it is because it is *recognized as such* by those who came after it and accepted it: Vikings did not "discover" America, Giotto transformed mediaeval painting.

Giotto Paints Gestures

Giotto painted facts. This was immediately clear to his contemporaries. Filippo Villani wrote that the figures in Giotto's paintings perform

actions "with such precision that they actually seem to be talking, crying, rejoicing".⁴

This observation needs to be considered in its proper context.

First of all, to paint "facts" means to capture human actions in a fixed instant – because, of course, painting movements is simply impossible: in painting, "you cannot paint even the shaking of the head we use in the West for 'no'".⁵

Secondly, Giotto had to paint facts that in most cases do not follow what we, broadly speaking, call the "laws of nature". Giotto had to paint mostly sacred history,⁶ so prophetic dreams, miracles, apparitions, resurrections, ascensions. These "facts" are, for the most part, not *facts* at all; they are not part of "reality" as we consider it, or even as Giotto's contemporaries considered it. More than anything, these "facts" are a *suspension* of reality. So, Giotto painted facts that happened, and *happened in reality*, even though they *happened in reality as a suspension of reality*.

Third, the facts painted by Giotto are ones known to everybody. Giotto's clients as well as his audience knew – of course, to various degrees – the stories of Isaac, Joachim, the Virgin Mary, Christ and St Francis. Giotto's paintings are certainly part of a narration (in Assisi there is even text below the paintings that explains the stories⁷), but the informative content of these paintings is non-existent. Giotto's paintings do not communicate any new information; rather, they just repeat what is already known. The presupposition of all of this art is that everyone already knows everything.

Giotto painted facts: the visual configuration of instants when actions obtain a special degree of evidence and become visible as *gestures*. Giotto painted the particular clarity of the emergence of a *gesture*, the moment when it becomes detached from its context and thus evident – the instant of the dazzling coincidence of event and "truth". This appearance of facts *as gestures* corresponds to a sort of motionless rupture, a moment of crystallization in which an event naturally assumes a ritualized appearance, thereby allowing the event to be both new and recognizable within a predefined code. A *gesture*, in fact, is simultaneously an action, the sign of that action and the promise of its memory. It is this disconnecting fixity of gestures that corresponds to the fixity of a painted instant. For Giotto, this fixity was not a pre-established one as it was in Byzantine painting and still was in the works of 13th-century Tuscan masters; rather, it somehow included

Chiberti (ca. 1455) and Giorgio Vasari (1550), have been considered to be painted by "non-Giotto" by innumerable art historians, including Carl Friedrich von Rumohr (1827), Friedrich Rintelen (1912), Richard Offner (1939), Millard Meiss (1960), Bruno Zanardi and Federico Zeri (1997). For a careful reconstruction of the "Giotto/not Giotto" debate, see Luciano Bellosi's *La pecora di Giotto* (Milan: Abscondita, 2015), particularly pages 47–94 and the afterword by Roberto Bartolini, which integrates the debate with the most recent contributions.

3. "Dalla disciplina di Giotto come da caval troiano uscirono mirabili pictori"; Cristoforo Landino, *Comento sopra la comedia di Danthe Alighieri poeta fiorentino* (Florence, 1481), in Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), translated as *Pittura ed esperienze sociali nell'Italia del Quattrocento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1972), 148.

4. "Ita liniamentis nature conveniunt, ut vivere et aerem spirare contuentibus videantur, exemplares etiam actus gestusque conficere adeo proprie, ut loqui, flere, letari, at alia agere" (Filippo Villani, *De origine civitatis Florentiae et eiusdem famosissimorum civibus* [1381–82], ed. C. C. Galletti [Florence, 1847], as cited in Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971], translated as

Giotto e gli umanisti [Milan: Jaca Books, 1994], 112).

5. E. H. Gombrich, "Ritualized Gesture and Expression in Art", *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 251/772 (1955), 395.

6. None of Giotto's secular painting (such as the frescoes in the Palazzo della Ragione in Padua, the *Commune rubato* in the Palazzo del Podestà in Florence and the *Uomini illustri* in Naples) has survived.

7. These texts are based on St Bonaventure of Bagnoregio's *Legenda Maior* and have been partially lost. They are transcribed in their entirety in an anonymous 16th-century manuscript and are now available in the historical-iconographic commentaries on the different frescoes written by Chiara Frugoni and appearing in Bruno Zanardi, *Il cantiere di Giotto* (Milan: Electa, 1996).

8. Hubert Damisch, "Figuration et representation: Le problème de l'apparition", *Annales: Économies, sociétés, civilisations* 26/3 (1971), 674.

9. In Giotto's paintings it is always evident where the viewer is meant to look first. His images are always incredibly essential in their construction. Especially in Assisi, Giotto left no ambiguities in this regard;

an implicit movement, a tension that was immediately frozen and captured in the immobility of the image. Giotto did not resort to a ready-made alphabet of conventional signs; on the contrary, he reimagined gestures each time in a different fashion. The gestures that appear in the *Stories of St Francis* are indeed both known and new, both established and surprising, both intelligible and incredible. Giotto's realism is a *realism of the background*. It involves only the context in which the gesture happens, not the gesture itself, which remains highly disconcerting. Giotto painted gestures *in the moment of their appearance*, just as they become detached from their context and start to express something new. Realism helps locate in reality the appearance of that which escapes and suspends the flow of reality. In later Renaissance painting (as well as in mature Byzantine painting), gestures and attitudes correspond to one another as parts of a harmonious whole; in Giotto gestures are not necessarily accompanied by the corresponding attitudes. Gestures remain exposed in their enigmatic appearance – with no predefined interpretation. Gestures in Giotto's painting are rough, edgy, problematic, unpredictable and somehow even irresponsible.

The construction of Giotto's images always pursues a double agenda: on the one hand, Giotto opted for a natural, almost prosaic, description of the events he depicted, but on the other hand, he opted for a formalized – icastic – appearance for the gesture that had to emerge from the picture. If in pre-Giottesque painting every part of the painting was fixed in ritualized rigidity, in Giotto's work things certainly become more ordinary and natural, but *not entirely ordinary and natural*. The *gestures* appear as improbable as they were. In the *Renunciation of Worldly Goods*, the spontaneous behaviours of the other figures serve to frame and emphasize the ritualized fixity of Francis's gesture. What becomes evident in Giotto's composition is the unlikelihood of what the saint is doing.

Giotto painted gestures: "Les figures que l'art de Giotto met en jeu ne sauraient être dissociées de l'action ou elles sont engagées".⁸ A consequence of this concentration on gestures is that the centre of his paintings was no longer the figures – essence, souls, faces – but the gestures – appearance, movements, hands.⁹ In the *Stories of St Francis*, heads are of course necessary (every human body ought to have a head), but they are not necessarily significant.¹⁰ Faces are often indistinguishable. Even the face of St Francis himself is not painted

in a particularly consistent way across the different scenes.¹¹ Hands, in contrast, are always relevant, or else they are easily made to disappear into the monks' brown habits. Hands often appear isolated in the middle of large portions of sky (see the *Renunciation of Worldly Goods*, the *Dream of the Palace*, the *Expulsion of the Devils from Arezzo* and the *Ecstasy of St Francis*, for instance). Even when they do not appear in the cloudless blue of the sky, it is not difficult to single out the main hand in each picture (e.g., the left hand of St Francis hidden behind the fold of the mantle in *St Francis Giving His Mantle to a Poor Man*, the right hand of the saint holding up the Lateran church in the *Dream of Innocent III*, the blessing right hand of Pope Honorius in the *Confirmation of the Franciscan Rule*, or the left hand of the Soldan in *St Francis Preaching before the Soldan*). Hands will never be as important in European art again until Robert Bresson's *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* (1956) and *Pickpocket* (1959).¹² And as in Bresson's movies, the protagonists in the *Stories of St Francis* do not act. Gestures do not manifest themselves through the moods foreshadowed by the faces: gestures are rendered as tangibly as material things, as heavy as wheat, as polished as iron. In creating the overall effect of Giotto's painting, nothing is more dangerous than expressionism; nothing destroys its dramatic efficacy as much as the appearance of an interior world; nothing erases depth as much as the abandonment of the surface.

Giotto's emphasis on hands is more evident in Assisi than it is in Padua. From the striking, univocal clarity of the instants painted in the *Stories of St Francis*, his work in Padua evolved towards more nuanced configurations of gestures. Giotto never loses interest in hands – on the contrary, the orchestration of gestures becomes more complex, as in the sequence of hands aligned in the *Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple* (which, in the end, is not so different from John Baldessari's *Six Situations with Guns Aligned* of 1976). The sequence unfolds from left to right, moving from the hand blessing the young man inside the temple to the hand pushing the back and the one pulling Joachim's mantle to, finally, the hands of the saint protecting the lamb refused for the sacrifice. Hands define the tone of the encounter of Joachim and Anne in the *Meeting at the Golden Gate* with the calm, ample hug of Joachim and the incredible intimacy of the gesture of Anne's left hand, which caresses the beard of her tired old husband. Hands are aligned and progressively extend, in a Muybridge-like fashion, towards the priest in the *Bringing of the Rods to the Temple*. In the *Massacre of the Innocents*, the hand of Herod emerges from its floppy sleeve to

all of his efforts are directed at the production of a readily readable, univocal image. The construction is so linear, in fact, that the focal point of the image always coincides with the place where more work is invested. The amazing drawings of the frescoes' *giornate* by Zanardi document this concentration of attention with a delicacy of their own.

10. From my very quick and rough calculations (which I carried out using only reproductions), in the 28 paintings (each measuring ca. 230 x 270 cm) comprising the *Stories of St. Francis* there are more than 400 faces and about 300 hands (so, an average of about 15 faces and 10 hands per painting; in the *Stories of St. Francis* there is an average 2/3 of a hand per figure). Of course, there are far more figures (and, not surprisingly, also more hands and heads) on the left wall (around 300 heads versus about 100 on the right wall, the one that – according to all historians who accept Giotto as the "author" of these frescoes – was more directly overseen by him). In the Scrovegni Chapel, the number of hands per person dramatically increases, in parallel to an overall reduction in population of the images, something that is also motivated by the smaller size of the paintings in the Scrovegni Chapel (200 x 185 cm). In the 38 paintings of the chapel (excluding the *Last Judgement* and *God sends Gabriel to the*

Virgin), there are about 420 heads and 400 hands (so, an average of 11 heads and 10 hands per picture, just short of a hand per figure). I wonder if someone already made this absurd calculation. (I also wonder how we ought to consider heads and hands of angels, and of the devil? The devil has at least one hand, in *Judas's Betrayal*).

11. According to Zanardi, all of the four different *patrones* (waxed-paper silhouettes of faces used to realize the line drawing that guides the execution of the frescoes) used in the Upper Church were indifferently employed to realize St Francis's face as well as those of others. The inconsistency of the representation of St Francis is probably just the consequence of the collaboration of the different painters comprising the team. At any rate, the final result shows that the problem was not considered relevant enough to be avoided or resolved. See Zanardi, *Il cantiere di Giotto*.

12. Hands are certainly extremely important in the work of Leonardo and then in that of Raphael and then – even more – in Caravaggio's, but even in these cases hands are never more important than heads. See André Chastel, *Il gesto nell'arte* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2010).

13. This maximum distance reappears also in the only architectural design by

command the slaughter – in a diagonal arrangement that recalls the *Renunciation of Worldly Goods* – and points to the murderous hand grabbing the foot of the boy clinging to his mother. Through all of these scenes and in many others, the dialectic of the hands becomes more refined: a gap emerges between one hand and the next in order to expand the scene and slow down its pace. Distances are slightly exaggerated; gestures are slightly prolonged. The maximum possible distance between figures that still allows the action to unfold is maintained.¹³ In the *Raising of Lazarus*, almost all the staffage figures in the painting appear between the gesture of Christ and Lazarus's body while in the *Arrest of Christ*, Judas is not yet touching Christ with his lips, for the kiss has yet to occur: the reproach in Christ's eyes is about something that could still be avoided. And in *Christ Carrying the Cross*, the soldier with the club does not touch Jesus: the length of the walk to Calvary increases, the ascension is slower and longer.

Giotto's painting revolution implied a devastating *pars destruens*. Giotto obtained a new freedom by clarifying what painting is *not* about: painting does not instruct, nor inform, nor explain. Painting just exposes *paintable relations*: it fixes an instant, a temporary constellation of human figures in a certain visual relationship to one another.

Giotto's *Copernican revolution* was based on a relatively dry and down-to-earth redefinition of the goals of painting. Giotto's "project of painting" was not a cultural project *translated* into painting; it was a project that was thought directly *through* painting, and only after it had been painted did it become a cultural option with fundamental consequences not only for painting and architecture, but also for the idea of space – meaning the idea of coexistence – of an entire society. The amazing ambition of Giotto's art was based on incredibly unambitious foundations. In this respect, the story of the sheep is true.¹⁴ Giotto was a poor and illiterate kid, and at the beginning of his career he just painted. He would later become a wealthy businessman and, to a certain extent, also an intellectual, but in Assisi he just painted the walls. His approach to painting was strictly professional, and his paintings were produced first of all by getting rid of didactic and apologetic preoccupations and reducing painting to pure painting. Compared to Cimabue, Giotto radically de-intellectualized his work. The stronger effect of Giotto's painting was actually produced by reducing the drama, by escaping any pathetic tone, by avoiding metaphors and psychological interpretations.¹⁵ Giotto erased from

painting anything that would not appear in the instant that can be painted – anything before or after, anything invisible, anything that cannot be visually perceived. Giotto "radically returned painting . . . from textuality to representation".¹⁶

Giotto reduced the image to a *unity of time* of a specific, *painterly* nature and expelled any narrative from the painting, leaving just one single moment expressed by the entirety of the picture.¹⁷ By painting gestures in their immediate, mute presence, by remaining strictly loyal to the immobility of painting, Giotto escaped the rhetorical paradigm to which the "orators" (the mediaeval ones, but also the Renaissance ones yet to come) would have liked to subject all of the figurative arts. For Giotto, painting was an explicit intellectual problem beyond the preoccupations of the "orators"¹⁸; for Giotto, the cultural legitimacy of painting was based exactly on the three main faults identified by Guarino da Verona: that painting shows only the appearance of things, so it has no moral quality; that painting shows the quality of the painter more than that of the subject; and that painting is experienced in a fraction of the time it takes to absorb a book.¹⁹ Giotto did not try to found the cultural legitimacy of painting on its potential similarity to literature. For Giotto, painting was no *poema tacitum*.²⁰

Gestures Take Place in Space

Gestures have a tension, a direction. They link one human being to another, or many others, or to nearby objects. Gestures define a subject acting and an object experiencing the consequences of that action, and sometimes they highlight the tools allowing that action to take place. Gestures take place in space.²¹

Giotto painted gestures. And in order to make space for gestures to happen, Giotto had to produce distance between figures. Giotto cleansed the surface of his paintings of all sorts of encumbering trash. This is why in his paintings – compared to those of his contemporaries – there is less gold, less decoration, fewer people and more sky, way more sky.

Giotto needed to define a frame for his paintings, to decide what had to be left out. It might seem obvious, but it really wasn't before Giotto, and in fact, if *things* are what one paints, then this is not really an issue: the things within the painting *are* the painting. The painting is the list of the painted things. Things are either in or out, as in a basket or an Excel sheet. There is no outside to remove. It is only when *gestures* are painted, when gestures are singled out from the continuum

Giotto that is still possible to observe. The Campanile of Santa Maria del Fiore is indeed detached from the body of the church, leaving an unexpected giottesque gap in the fabric of the city. Of course, there are also urban and tectonic reasons for the position of the campanile, but Giotto was probably not displeased by the fact that the tower had to be detached from the church. For the history of the campanile, see Marvin Trachtenberg, *The Campanile of Florence Cathedral: Giotto's Tower* (New York: New York University Press, 1971).

14. The story, as reported for the first time in Chiberti's *Commentaries* and then as the subject of innumerable biopics and merchandising, is that Cimabue, on his way to Bologna, saw a child drawing a sheep on a rock while guarding his flock. Cimabue was so impressed with the boy that he asked his father to allow him to take the young Giotto on as an apprentice in his workshop. For a passionate defense of the authenticity of Chiberti's story, see Bellosi, *La pecora di Giotto*.

15. Roger Fry, "Giotto", in idem, *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1920), 87–116, esp. 90–93.

16. Giovanni Previtali, *Giotto e la sua bottega* (Milan: Fabbri, 1974), 65.

17. The attribution to the young

Ciotto of the *Stories of Isaac* developed by Serena Romano in her recent book is fascinating, but it must be noted that the “overcoming of the intrinsic limit of the medium of painting, i.e., immobility” in order to “include the time element in the representation” of the *Isaac Stories*, as Romano has already noticed, cannot be found in the *Stories of St Francis*. See Serena Romano, *La O di Ciotto* (Milan: Electa, 2008), esp. 77–89, 109–13.

18. It is no surprise that the orators did not mention Giotto; actually, it is more surprising that Baxandall is so surprised by this. The “orators” disliked Giotto because Giotto disliked *them*. Of course the “orators” felt more at ease with Pisanello and Benozzo Cozzoli. See Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*.

19. Ibid.

20. The logic of Giotto's painting is visual. In his work, there are no anecdotes, little jokes or gossip that require erudite explanation. In neither version of *St Francis before the Soldan* is there ever one concession to a bit of “local colour”; the exotic court of the Soldan is painted without any interest in a little Orientalist adventure – Giotto had something different in mind; in the Bardi Chapel, for instance, he rendered the most solid and most mineral fire ever painted.

of space, that it becomes necessary to define human gesture's sphere of influence, the space in which gesture manifests. Indeed, space is not just the space in which gestures happen, but also the one in which they become recognizable. Giotto needed to frame his pictures, and this brought a few new possibilities with it.²² One of these – maybe the most evident – was to cut stuff out of the painting. The ass of the mule in the *Miracle of the Spring* in Assisi, and later the ass of the ass and the ass of the ox in the *Nativity* and the asses of the camels (?) in the *Adoration of the Kings* in Padua, are probably the first pieces of things in the foreground that were deliberately cut out of a picture in the history of mediaeval painting.²³ These cuts remove pieces of static elements of the composition – these animals are not moving in and out of the scene in the manner of the ass in the *Flight into Egypt* or the one in the *Entry into Jerusalem* – so the excisions cannot be explained as a narrative device. These painted animals are chopped simply because they do not entirely belong to the sphere in which the painted gestures become visible. They are the guinea pigs of an experiment on space.²⁴

Gestures need a scene, and in Giotto's painting this scene is almost always man-made: gestures take place in the city.²⁵ Architecture becomes a device for attributing clarity to actions, a technology for turning *actions* into *gestures* and for framing the unexpected without exhausting it, merely ensuring that it can be remembered once it has occurred.

By observing architecture in Giotto's paintings, it is easy to recognize that the painted buildings entirely lack realism. Houses are only slightly bigger than people and their rooms are barely inhabitable – the buildings look like dollhouses.²⁶ And yet what is *real*, more than *realistic*, is the relationship between the human figures and the spaces they inhabit. Rooms are small but entirely capable of performing the specific tasks assigned to them. These “mimic boxes”²⁷ are incredibly claustrophobic, literally pushed up against the bodies of the protagonists as if to force the performance of the gestures for which those “buildings” have been “designed”. The “temple” in the *Presentation in the Temple* in Santa Maria in Trastevere by Pietro Cavallini is just a symbol, and the “temple” in the *Presentation in the Temple* in Santa Croce by Taddeo Gaddi is a pile of architectural elements multiplied without any real sense of scale or space while Giotto's “house” of St Anne in Padua, though tiny, is perfectly sufficient for producing the spatial relations that are necessary for the actions that were meant to



Giotto, *Il Presepe di Creccio*, Basilica superiore di San Francesco d' Assisi, Assisi.
From: Jaroslav Pesina, *Tektonicky prostor a architektura u Giotto*, Prague: Akademie, 1945

21. Gestures, of course, take place in space *and* time.

22. For instance, it was then possible to paint objects and people seen from behind – as in the *Apparition at Arles*, the *Death and Apparition of St Francis* and the *Verification of the Stigmata* – and to paint planes hiding spaces that lay beyond them, as in *The Crib at Greccio*.

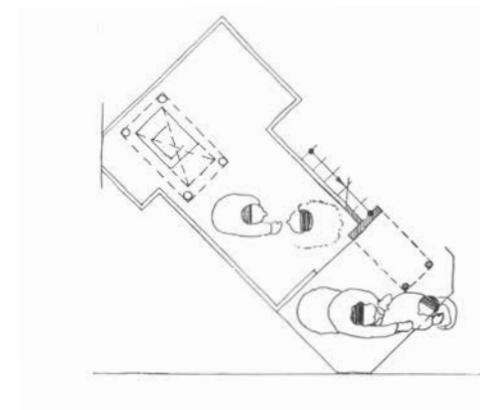
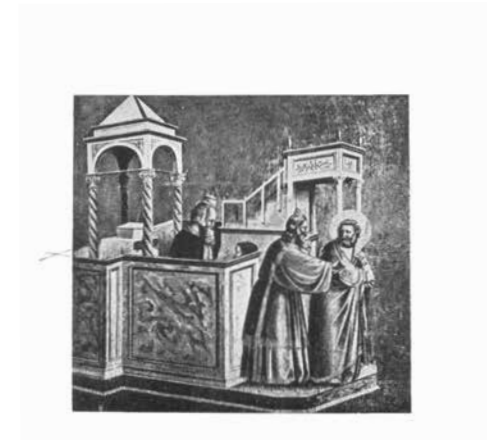
23. Reader, beware: I have no idea about mediaeval painting, and I really do not know if this is the case.

24. While the heads of the sculpted horses squeezed in at the corners of the pediments of the Parthenon are the extreme expression of an art of pure presence, the missing ass of the painted mule in Assisi is the proof of an art in which absence is as relevant as presence. Nietzsche might have enjoyed spending some time on these Greek/Christian equine meditations (and in general, he should have paid more attention to horses).

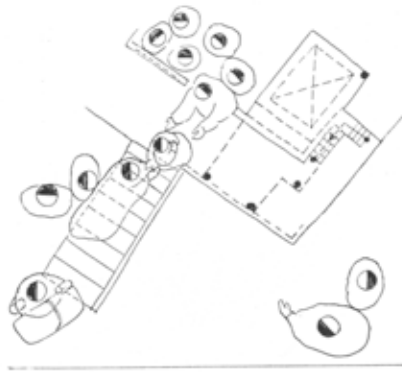
25. Of the 28 scenes in the *Stories of St Francis*, 24 take place in an “urban” context. In the Scrovegni Chapel, 25 scenes of the 38 (again excluding the *Last Judgement* and *God Sends Gabriel to the Virgin*) take place in an “urban” context. We should probably be prepared for a lot of vegan re-writing of the history of art, but for

take place within it. This incredibly tense relationship between space and bodies, this violent canning of bodies in architecture, is a feature of Giotto’s work alone, for this tightness will immediately disappear after him: already in Giotto’s disciples there is more “architectural realism” (with all of the problems of scale that never occur in Giotto) and far less of a relationship between architecture and bodies.

For Giotto, architecture meant the definition of the spatial conditions that would allow the main gestures of the different stories to take place. At first sight, the “temple” in the *Expulsion of Joachim* and in the *Presentation of the Virgin* in Padua looks totally wrong. The relationship of scale between the human figures and the – supposedly colossal – building is entirely unreal, and to a certain extent even grotesque. But this did not really matter to Giotto; what mattered to him was the relationship that the painted temple established with the painted gestures. This use of “buildings” in paintings implies a very precise idea of architecture. The “temple” of the *Expulsion* and *Presentation* is just a summary of the spatial conditions that allow all of the actions related to the “temple” to be performed. The “temple” is the building that allows the priests to preach (so it has a pulpit), that allows the priests to expel the reprobate (so it has a wall separating an interior from an exterior) and that allows the young Virgin to be presented to God (so it has a staircase²⁸ and a tribune). The “temple” is nothing but the collection of the elements necessary to the occurrence of the different spatial conditions required for the performance of the episodes of the story: a wall, a staircase and a pulpit, all resting on a pedestal that keeps these diverse elements together.²⁹ For Giotto, architecture is precisely this: a technique to produce conditions for the appearance of gestures. This idea of architecture also implies a precise idea of architectural beauty. In fact, if the subject of painting is gestures, and if the scope of painting is to paint something that *happens*, then in Giotto’s painting, beauty *happens*, too. The sudden appearance of beauty means that Giotto’s painted space is not prepared for gestures to happen, that gestures are not staged. Gestures *happen on a stage*, but they are not *staged*. Architecture defines the gestures that are possible and yet it does not control their eventual appearance. The city flows parallel to life. In Giotto’s painting gestures appear in a special coincidence of human figures and architectural emptiness. The laws of the accumulation of painted people and the laws of the organization of painted space do not seem to coincide. In the work of Giotto there is no pre-established harmony of space and gestures (such as the one



Giotto, cacciata di Gioacchino dal Tempio Cappella degli Scrovegni, Padova.
From: Jaroslav Pesina, *Tektonický prostor a architektura u Giotto*, Prague: Akademie, 1945



Giotto, Presentazione di Maria al tempio, Cappella Scrovegni, Padova.
From: Jaroslav Pesina, *Tektonický prostor a architektura u Giotto*, Prague: Akademie, 1945

we might suspect rules the world that hosts Perugino's or Raphael's *Marriage of the Virgin*). The painted moments are special circumstances in which this highly unpredictable and brief equilibrium of painted people and painted space lets the painted gesture appear. Emptiness, as a suspension of the occupation of space, and gestures, as a suspension of the flow of time, happen. They do not necessarily coincide, but they both appear as a break in the order of things. The gap between the two groups of buildings that defines the empty centre of the scene of the *Renunciation of Worldly Goods* in Assisi produces the suspension of the scene (the renunciation of the worldly goods as a renunciation of the continuum of history and as a renunciation of the continuity of space). In the Bardi Chapel, the same scene is represented before an entirely different architectural scene. The saint – in the same position as in Assisi – stands in front of a cubic palazzo, placed at a 30-degree angle to the observer. The scene develops on the windowless first level of the palazzo. The position of the figures with respect to the building is entirely casual; the building does not organize their placement. The building is just in space, as are the figures. Life happens before the rocky shores of the city and does not need to follow a pre-established pattern. Space and life flow independently of one another, meeting only at the moment of a gesture's apparition. In the late work of Giotto, this complete randomness reaches incredible highs, as in the *Raising of Drusiana* in the Peruzzi Chapel, where the terse fractal geometry of the city walls unfolds independently of the scene in front of it, coinciding only in the overlapping of the concave pause of the bare folded wall and Drusiana's (now lost) gesture of gratitude.

If gestures happen *in space*, and beauty happens *as a gesture*, then beauty also happens *in space*. In Giotto's paintings, beauty appears in the relationship between the different figures, in the pointing of the hands in relation to the directions of the gazes, in the positioning of the feet with respect to the surfaces of the walls defining the space in which the feet move, in the emergence of faces behind planes unfolding into depth. Beauty is a disposition of figures in space, a moment of visual harmony of humans and their (artificial) environment. Beauty appears not just in the action, but also in the relationship of the action with its setting, in the evidence of the action as something that can be clearly remembered.

If beauty in painting is made of painted *gestures* in painted *space*, then architecture – within the space defined through this kind of

all of the unbelievable over evaluation of the few goats and bushes in his paintings, Giotto actually shows very little interest in nature. In *St Francis Preaching to the Birds* in Assisi, in contradiction to the very explicit account of the event written by St Bonaventure, the birds do not even touch Francis. Giotto sounds disinterested in the idea of people mingling with birds, and the saint looks more like a bored kid from the countryside feeding the chickens (most likely an experience Giotto knew first-hand). St Francis's famed "ecological" perspective on the world is entirely absent from Giotto's oeuvre, and praising Giotto as a precursor of an ecological sensibility, as Tacita Dean has recently done (*Buon Fresco* [London: Mack, 2016]), is sheer nonsense.

26. The kneeling St Anne is five-ninths the height of her "house", so if she were standing, she would be seven-ninths the height. If we imagine St Anne being 1.65 metres tall, then the internal ceiling of her room is at a height of around 2.10 metres. The "house" is not really spacious, but the saint – unlike Zeus at Olympia – can still move inside it.

27. Roberto Longhi, "Giotto spazioso", in idem, *Da Cimabue a Morandi* (Milan: Mondadori, 1973), 72.

28. This stair will keep on growing through the Renaissance up until the

unbelievable examples in the work of Cima da Conegliano and Jacopo Tintoretto.

29. The pedestal repeats that of the “offices” of the Doctors in the *Vault of the Doctors of the Church* in the Upper Church in Assisi.

30. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, rev. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 26.

31. It can also be said, in its turn, that since Brunelleschi, Renaissance painting has been understood *architecturally*. Yet the “architectural” paradigm shift of around 1400 should nonetheless be seen as a consequence of the “painterly” paradigm shift of around 1300.

32. John White, “Giotto’s Use of Architecture in the *Expulsion of Joachim* and the *Entry into Jerusalem* in Padua”, *Burlington Magazine* 115/94 (1973), 439.

33. According to White, in the *Expulsion of Joachim* and the *Presentation in the Temple* Giotto re-uses fragments from San Clemente (although any similar Cosmatesque altar could have served Giotto equally well). See White, “Giotto’s Use of Architecture”, 440.

34. John White, *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space* (London: Faber, 1972), esp. 67–69.

painting – becomes an art that finds its entire scope in the definition of the relationship between gestures and space, regardless of tectonics, symbols and “functions”. This idea of beauty in space would remain at the centre of the research carried out by the architects of the Italian Renaissance. They would seek beauty in such things as the distance that separates two people along a series of arches, the progressive deepening of shadow under a barrel vault, the reflection of a face (or of a sword) on a polished marble panel, the fragmented shadow that a raised arm casts on a plastered wall cut by a cornice. More than in science or in nature, Giotto and the architects who came after him sought beauty in human gestures, in the relationship between spaces and human gestures. Colonnades, walls, doors – they all seem to request a response. And this response is once again a gesture: “Remember the impression made by good architecture, that it expresses a thought. One would like to respond to it too with a gesture.”³⁰

Giotto’s definition of painting implies a definition of architecture as well. In this respect, the idea that beauty manifests itself in space is a postulate of Italian Renaissance *painting*, not of Italian Renaissance *architecture*. It is a new paradigm of painting that produces a new idea of architecture.

Since Giotto, architecture has been understood as *painterly*.³¹ This definition of architecture has the curious consequence that since the relationship between gestures and space can be investigated in its entirety only in painting (indeed, architecture limits itself to the definition of space, exerting no control over gestures), a complete description of space is possible *only in painting*. Painting defines the totality of the relationship between bodies and space while architecture defines only one side of this (only the building, the object). According to this point of view, painting describes a *real* relationship between gestures and space whereas architecture merely predisposes the conditions for a *potential* relationship. Architecture waits for gestures to happen. It might seem counterintuitive, but painting is *real* while architecture is only *possible*. This is also the reason why, from Giotto onwards, the most radical investigations of space take place in painting (and this is also why attempts to include a sense of possibility in painting, as in the work of Piero della Francesca or Bramantino, all somehow seem to be longing for the silent openness of architecture).

Giotto’s painted stages for the performance of gestures are *architectural* not only because they employ architecture, but also because they

are *composed architecturally*, from recombined fragments of reality. Giotto rarely makes use of fragments of precise buildings. Although John White states that “no actual portraits of a particular building or part of a building have been found” in his study of Giotto’s use of architecture in the Scrovegni Chapel,³² it is not impossible to recognize fragments of real buildings in the *Stories of St Francis* in Assisi (the so-called Temple of Minerva in Assisi in the *Homage of a Simple Man*, the Trajan column (kind of) and the Septizonium (maybe) in the *Liberation of the Heretic*, the Basilica of Maxentius in the *Pentecost*) and in the Peruzzi Chapel in Florence (the Torre delle Milizie in the *Feast of Herod*). In just a few of these cases the choice of buildings implies a geographical reference (Assisi for the *Homage of a Simple Man* and Rome for the *Liberation of the Heretic*); in the other paintings, the architectural fragments are taken just as pieces to be reassembled to produce a scene. The Basilica of Maxentius is dramatically reduced in scale and given a curiously Gothic touch in order to transform it into the ceiling of a room, and the Torre delle Milizie is simply placed against the other halls of Herod’s mansion in order to evoke a royal palace (Giotto certainly did not mean that Herod’s feast took place in Rome). Giotto did not look for erudite architectural quotes. He picked architectural fragments, usually quite generic ones, and reassembled them so that they could perform in space without communicating any particular meaning in and of themselves.³³ This does not mean that the architectural bits he re-employed were stripped bare of meaning by having been incorporated into painting; it simply means that they were not painted *as signs*. In a similar way, Pier Paolo Pasolini defined the castle of Corinth in his *Medea* (1970) by filming the internal scenes along the wall of the cemetery of Pisa and the external ones around the citadel of Aleppo. His filmic montage re-uses pieces of reality that have not been chosen as symbols but rather employed to produce a spatial condition, even if these fragments have not been deprived of the meaning(s) they might carry with them. The architectural setting already includes an echo that is ready to multiply the gestures that play out – in paint or on film – before them into a multitude of possible associations.

Gestures Take Place in Public Space

Gestures happen *between* people, in a space they share.

Interactions that can be painted *happen in space*. For Giotto, the category of all paintable human interactions is space.

35. In a remarkably similar fashion, Bernard Berenson fills the chapter supposedly dedicated to Giotto in his *Florentine Painters* with a brief general theory of painting, one which, by the way, leaves Giotto’s painting almost entirely unaddressed. See Berenson, *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (London: Phaidon, 1952), esp. 39–46.

36. Concerning the explicit rejection of perspective in Chinese painting, White quotes the opinion of Shen Kua on Li Ch’eng, as reported in Benjamin March, “Linear Perspective in Chinese Painting”, *Eastern Art* 3 (1939), 121: “Whenever he put kiosques, pagodas, or other buildings, on the mountains of his landscapes (he), painted them with cocked up eaves, so that the spectator looked upwards and saw the inner part; because, he said, the point of view was below the object, just as a man standing beneath a pagoda sees above him the rafters of the eaves. This reasoning is faulty. For in landscape there is a method of looking at big things as if they were small. If people looked at imitation hills in the same way that they look at real hills, that is looking from the base to the summit, it would only be possible to see one range at a time, and not range behind range; neither would the ravines and valleys in the mountains be visible. Similarly you ought not to see the middle court of a house, nor what is going on in the back premises . . . ; under

such condition no picture could possibly be painted.”

37.

Giotto certainly looked at Arnolfo's work and at Roman sculpture, but not because of any specific interest in sculpture; he did so because Arnolfo was possibly the most interesting artist of his time and because Roman sculpture was the only form of classical art that was still reasonably available in Italy in the 13th century. Giotto did not explore any other form of art beyond painting until very, very late in his career, when he accepted a few commissions as an architect. If Giotto had been so interested in sculpture, why would he – by far the most famous and sought-after painter in Europe – not have tried his hand at sculpture (even just indirectly, through some apprentice in his workshop with a bit of talent for it)? The most logical hypothesis is that Giotto never tried to make sculpture because he was simply not interested in sculpture per se.

38.

Previtali, *Giotto e la sua bottega*, 65.

39.

Except in the *Stories of Isaac*, and this is another trace of a significant difference between the *Stories of Isaac* and the *Stories of St Francis*.

40.

The same is true of the bedroom of Innocent III in Assisi, the synagogue in the *Christ among the Doctors*, the house in the *Last Supper*, the court of *Christ*

In *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space*, at the end of the chapter on the Scrovegni Chapel, John White abruptly switches to “Islamic and Chinese painting”.³⁴ It is quite an unexpected shift, for up until this point, the book is entirely dedicated to Western art. Yet Giotto's *spatial turn* implies an entire set of values that must be addressed from a more general point of view.³⁵ Giotto painted space, and although since his work this has been a relatively obvious task for a long stretch of the history of Western painting, space is actually not an obvious subject for painting. Indeed, “Islamic and Chinese painting” paid little attention to the experience and the understanding of an artificial, explicitly man-made environment. In them, space is never experienced, nor is it ever explicitly *produced*.³⁶ Space does not expose the immediate evidence of the violence implicit in its political construction. In Giotto's work, in contrast – and for the first time – painted people are brought together to share the political construction of the painted city. Here the constrictive power exercised over humans by large artificial objects such as buildings is taken as a paintable phenomenon, and so it is also taken as a possible field of action. The city, as immediate spatial experience, seems to be the starting point of a figurative investigation that is both a phenomenology and a political construct. The manner in which the human figure positions itself in space is not forever fixed, but rather the subject of a possible transformation. Space becomes the means of a search for the form of an entire *form of life*. The presupposition of this painting is that it corresponds to a precise form of life, one that is, a priori, plural, and one that unfolds in a space that is, again a priori, public.

Space, for Giotto, is not just the space in which each single figure nestles, as it pretty much is in the cases of ancient art and any sculptural approach to painting³⁷ (Michelangelo's, for instance). Space is *shared*. Space is a *recipient* in which figures are immersed and that exists outside of them. Giotto was pretty anti-Aristotelian for his day: for him, the void existed and humans were living within it. At the same time, the void was not given. Giotto still belonged to a figurative tradition in which all of the groups in a composition have their own light and their own space. In Giotto's work – unlike in Renaissance painting, where this problem would already be solved – a shared space needed to be conquered painting by painting. In each fresco, the different groups of figures had to be brought together into the same space. Coexistence had to be imposed upon these rude and reluctant figures. In Giotto's

painting there is at the same time a sense of compression,³⁸ as if a force were pushing the different groups to bring them together in the same tight scene, and a movement of expansion that seems to originate from the emptiness that corresponds to the very centre of this whirlpool of pressure. It is exactly in this compressed space that the emptiness gestures need in order to take place is found. The unbearable pressure somehow produces an extraordinary relief.

In Giotto's painting, gestures always happen in public space. The atmosphere is never intimate.³⁹ Interiors are nonetheless exteriors, for rooms are entirely open on one side to expose what is taking place inside.

In the *Annunciation to St Anne*, only the angel has to address Anne through the little window, for everyone else can easily see her in the room through the larger open window. What we see is not a “sectioned building”; the “house” of St. Anne is simply open on one of its sides. The “house” is a finished building.⁴⁰ The edges of the walls and the lintel supporting the gable are all decorated with a frieze. What we see is not the product of a “drawing convention” that allows showing the interior of a closed box; rather, it is the plain description of a building entirely finished and open on one side.⁴¹ Giotto did not dare to enter St Anne's room in the manner Jan van Eyck did with that of the Pandolfinis. He did not dare to invade the private sphere. He remained outside, still in public space. In fact, it is the room that gets dragged into public space. The annunciation to St Anne was not a personal matter, and so Giotto felt legitimated in bringing the room into public space. The annunciation was a public event, and consequently it ought to happen in public space. Everything inside the room was consequently extracted from the private sphere. It seems that for Giotto publicity was a pre-condition of the event. Indeed, St Anne is already dressed for her rendezvous with the angel. Also the furniture in these interiors leaves very little space for personal effects. There are only *things that are not owned* in these spaces. The things inside Giotto's rooms are things without a personal history, things that do not suggest any particular affection for them on the part of their owners. St Anne has a bed with a striped blanket and a mosquito net, a portmanteau, a shelf with some sort of a container, a bellows and another unidentified object hanging from the wall. No puffy dogs, no jewellery, no mirrors. It looks like Hannes Meyer designed her house.

Painting space requires space.⁴² Giotto's frescoes are very large paintings, and their size is not a matter of chance. Human figures in the

before Caiaphas and the courtyard of the *Flagellation* in Padua, the bedroom and the registry office in the *Birth of St John the Baptist*, the banquet hall of the *Feast of Herod* in Santa Croce, etc.

41.

To my knowledge, the only exception to this manner of exposing internal spaces is the church in the *Prayer in St Damiano* in Assisi, whose interior is showed by cutting the walls away in an irregular fashion, but here Giotto was representing a building under construction. Even the (quite clumsy) architecture of the *Apparition at Arles* in Assisi shows a finished building seen from the outside as in the other cases. So, with few exceptions, the manner used by Giotto to open his spatial boxes up to the outside world is remarkably consistent. His contemporaries were far more clumsy. In Pietro Cavallini's *Joseph and the Wife of Potiphar* (lost, but recorded in a precise drawing realized for Cardinal Barberini in 1634, see Cod. Barb. Lat. 4406, fol. 56) in San Paolo fuori le Mura, the “room” of Potiphar's wife is delimited in different ways on the left and on the right sides. The decorated borders of the opening of St Anne's “house” also imply that Giotto organized his scenes by means of “architecture”, not “architectural representation”. Each element of the painting corresponds to a spatial “reality”. This decision not to use representational tricks forced Giotto to

deal with the constraints of architecture (not the structural ones, of course, but at least the visual ones) in the composition of his paintings. Giotto organizes his paintings by designing the buildings inside of them. In order to reach the desired depth, Giotto had to organize spatial sequences and devise series of openings on different scales, such as, for instance, the ones on the right-hand side of the *Feast of Herod* in the Peruzzi Chapel, where a small arch in the main room offers a view of the deepest part of the room where Salomé can be seen. Naturally, the difference between “painted architecture” and “devices of architectural representation” did not occur to Giotto in the very precise terms in which we today (thanks to Giotto) can formulate the issue.

42.

Of course, the small and incredibly spacious works of Pieter Jansz. Saenredam and Caspar David Friedrich, or even Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation*, prove this statement wrong (and slightly idiotic, like the Italian commercial from the 1980s in which a guy carrying a gigantic brush on a bike and creating an enormous traffic jam says to the traffic police: “I need to paint a large wall, so I need a large brush!”). At the same time, the size of a painting is often overlooked and easily becomes warped by photographic reproductions that erase any perception of its original scale.

Stories of St Francis and in the Scrovegni Chapel are very close to life size,⁴³ and the paintings extend over a surface that is larger than what can be embraced by a person. The size of these frescoes establishes a very precise dimensional relationship between the images and their viewers. Their surface entirely envelops the viewer: the viewer is trapped within the (public) space of the fresco. The frescoes push the viewers away because they can only be seen in their entirety from a certain distance.⁴⁴ Also, frescoes are normally executed above a base that puts the painted scene out of the viewer's physical reach. Frescoes thus prevent a viewing that is intimate and impose one that is public. This kind of art must be looked at from afar. This kind of art knows no privacy. Frescoes, as metres of painted surface slammed in the face of churchgoers, define a public condition for what is painted in them. Fresco, as a medium, gives painting a dry, frugal morality; fresco imposes a public notion of painting, one that, in turn, imposes a certain idea of space upon architecture.

Frescoes are public from the point of view of their production too. Frescoes require a precise design, and involve a complex division of labour among a large number of collaborators and a strict calculation of the work schedule. These conditions lead to an obviously shared type of authoriality. Frescoes are public not only in their religious and political goals, but also in the nature of their execution. In frescoes it is a plural subject that addresses a plural audience. Fresco is a technique possible only for an art that accepts being made for – and being responsible to – a public subject. So, frescoes are a medium for the exploration of space as “public space”. Here, truly, the medium is the message. Frescoes are so incredibly inapt at representing anything private that they become obsolete as soon as the political project that animates them disappears. All of a sudden, frescoes become too vast, too expensive, too risky, too impossible to sell, too matt and too low-res.

A Project of Political Art, a Project of Public Space

The lives of Dante (1265–1321) and Giotto (1267–1337) almost coincided. Although there is no documentation that the two knew one another, their affinity (beginning with the reference to Giotto in *Purgatory* and continuing with the supposed “portrait of Dante” in the Cappella del Podestà in the Bargello) has repeatedly been affirmed – or better, no one who has ever worked on either of the two men has been able to resist the topic. From the point of view of historical matters of fact, the problem simply cannot be solved.⁴⁵ What is sure is that Florentine,



Giotto, *Giovacchino cacciato dal tempio e fascia ornamentale*. Padova, Cappella Scrovegni. © 2016. Photo Scala, Firenze



Giotto, Presentazione di Maria al tempio e fascia ornamentale. Padova, Cappella Scrovegni.
© 2016. Photo Scala, Firenze

and then Italian, culture *after* Dante and Giotto desperately tried to establish a link between them. And yet, as has already been observed,⁴⁶ Dante and Giotto had very little in common. One was a conservative, aristocratic poet turned into a radicalized refugee after a short-lived political career, and the other was a smart, progressive craftsman of humble origins who ran the biggest artistic business of his time. Giotto was a mediaeval success story; Dante died in exile.

But one thing cannot be denied: Dante wrote about Giotto in *Purgatory* (XI, 94–96).⁴⁷ And this is important not so much because Dante mentioned Giotto, but because of the context in which he mentioned him. In the verses immediately after those referring to Giotto (XI, 97–99),⁴⁸ Dante spoke about himself: “la gloria della lingua” was destined for the same destiny to be enjoyed by the other arts. Beyond providing rather standard considerations on fame, here Dante established a link between different cultural practices, and he established it by talking about what was dearest to him: language. Dante recognized painting as a fundamental medium for the development of his project. He explicitly appropriated the figurative arts and enlisted them in the service of his own agenda. Even the military tone of the expression Dante used to describe the brief reign of Cimabue – “tener lo campo” (literally, hold one’s ground) – implies that a similar task would be assigned to the new star of painting, Giotto. Dante assigned Giotto a position to hold in a cultural battle. So, what is the cultural project in which Dante forcibly enrolls Giotto?

Gianfranco Contini has written that Dante was an “author of themes” more than an “author of theses”.⁴⁹ This means that Dante did not really propose a set of solutions (and if and when he did, these solutions tended to be quite naïve, as in the case of Henry VII) rather, he identified questions and singled out a vocabulary that he then imposed through his poem upon all Italian culture to come. The same thing happened with Giotto; he, too, was an “author of themes” more than an “author of theses”. And Giotto’s themes were the same as Dante’s: first of all, the nature, possibilities and limits of their respective disciplines of painting and poetry; and secondly, the potential to use the resources of these disciplines (space and language) as the foundation for a political project (one that comes down to an idea of painting and an idea of poetry).

For both Dante and Giotto, art was political. Yet the political nature of their art lies not in a *political message* – as if Dante were Bertolt Brecht, and Giotto were Diego Rivera – but in its *political manner*.

43. According to Zanardi, the average height of the figures in the *Stories of St Francis* is 121.7 centimetres on the right side of the basilica, 109.7 on the left and 121 on the entrance wall. See Bruno Zanardi, *Il cantiere di Giotto* (Milan: Electa, 1996). In the *Stories of St Francis*, the average dimensions of the scenes are circa 230 by 270 centimetres. In the Scrovegni Chapel, the average dimensions are 200 by 185, so the figures are probably smaller too.

44. White, *Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space*, 40.

45. Concerning the question of Giotto’s supposed portrait of Dante, the state of the debate today is no different from that described by Ernst Combrich in 1979 as “a question of Giotto’s portrait of Dante in a fresco hardly by Giotto where Dante could hardly have figured”. See E. H. Combrich, “Giotto’s Portrait of Dante”, *Burlington Magazine* 121/94 (1979), 471–83.

46. Previtali, *Giotto e la sua bottega*, 13.

47. “Credette Cimabue ne la pittura / tener lo campo, e ora ha Giotto il grido, / si che la fama di colui è scura” (Once Cimabue thought to hold the field / as painter; Giotto now is all the rage / dimming the lustre of the other’s fame).

48. "Cosi ha tolto l'uno a l'altro Guido/ la gloria de la lingua; e forse è nato/ chi l'uno e l'altro caccerà del nido" (So, one Guido takes from the other one / poetic glory; and, already born, / perhaps he is who'll drive both from fame's nest).

49. Gianfranco Contini, "Un esempio di poesia dantesca (Il canto XXVIII del *Paradiso*)", in idem, *Un'idea di Dante* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001), 198.

50. Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

51. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques* (Paris: Plon, 1955), trans. as *Tristes Tropiques* (New York: Criterion Books, 1961), 127; see also, of course, the interpretation of this fundamental passage in Aldo Rossi, *L'architettura della città* (Padua: Marsilio, 1966), trans. as *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1984).

52. This discussion must be seen in the context of Meinecke's fundamental distinction of *Staatsnation* and *Kulturnation*; see Friedrich Meinecke, "Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat" [1907], in idem, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5 (Munich: Hans Herzfeld, 1962).

And this political manner implies a commitment to a collective project that coincides with language and space, that coincides with the city. Space and language are the datum, the medium and the product of a political construction. Space and language are the tools of a political project addressed at and developed by a plural subject. The constraints of this subject – as well as the results of its efforts – are once again space and language. Dante's poetry and Giotto's painting are made for a plural subject to which the totality of language and the totality of space correspond. Nothing is left out of this radically universal construction that is not only addressed to a multitude, but also produced by a multitude (ideally in Dante's case and quite practically in Giotto's). Giotto's "realism" and Dante's "poetry of the earthly world"⁵⁰ are nothing but this omnivorous sense of the real. Whatever their political affiliations, Dante and Giotto agreed that both the place and the instrument of any given political project is the city. The city is the social product by definition, "la chose humaine par excellence".⁵¹

This project is even more radical than it seems, because Dante's and Giotto's terrifying ambition of creating a purely political, strictly collective, realist and universal art is not – or at least, not entirely – a project of the state.⁵² Dante was a political refugee, and Giotto, although a successful entrepreneur, was nonetheless a plebe who worked mainly for a mendicant order. This project of shared language and public space was proposed as an offering of shared language and as a quest for public space, not imposed. And to a certain extent, this project was an immediate failure (Dante wrote the entire *Comedy* as a refugee), so its eventual success had to be immediately pushed into a possible future. It was a political project devised with a complete lack of power (and also, to be fair, out of an undeniable obsession with power, at least in the case of Dante).

Dante and Giotto chose to understand art as a strictly public activity.

As much as this project was, without doubt, the product of precise historical conditions, it was also entirely unnecessary. The society in which Dante and Giotto lived was not a society without an explicit *private sphere*, as it could be argued was the case of certain archaic societies. Petrarch (who was just slightly younger than Dante and Giotto) did not share their attitude. Flemish painting, too, took a different path. It took Giotto and Dante's specific and not-at-all-obvious view on the world – and the ambition, stubbornness and intellectual violence they were ready to put to use – to try to impose (and with a

certain degree of success) a project such as this one upon the Italian culture of the centuries to come.

It is before the absolute privateness of contemporary art that the disconcerting radicalism of a project of beauty in language and space as a premise for a shared political construction becomes apparent. In comparison to contemporary art, which is never political, never addresses a plural subject, never imagines a collective project, never refuses the presuppositions of an individualistic – and inherently neo-liberal – anthropology and never laughs at romantic superstitions,⁵³ Dante's and Giotto's projects of public beauty appear as incredibly barbaric as they sound astonishingly promising.

53. Possibly the most honest and overall best manifestation of this art is a 1965 song by David Bowie called "I Can't Help Thinking about Me".