



L'exil du cygne, 1984

Portfolio with a phototype and a text by Germano Celant
50 x 80 cm
Edition of 500 in Arabic numerals
Fratelli Alinari, Florence

The oval cut out at the left of the image transforms the view of Lake Nemi into a painter's palette, recalling the thumb hole. Outlined on the lake-palette is the drawing of a swan reflected in the water, its beak grasped by the reclining figure of Narcissus, taken from the painting *Écho et Narcisse* (1627-28) by Nicolas Poussin.

The silence (or void) dominating the image suggests the "exile" of perceivable signs, evoked through the homophony between the French terms "signe" (sign) and "cygne" (swan). Hence, the artist wonders: "Swan transformed into a sign, or a sign that remains a swan?"

The multiple meanings are further enriched by the reference, in the title, to the famous final verse of Stéphane Mallarmé's sonnet *Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui...* (1887), in which the swan, the ideal symbol of the poetic flight of the imagination, acknowledges its exile or condition as a bird shipwrecked in a frozen lake, condemned to motionlessness and impotence, thereby figuratively expressing the inadequacy of language with respect to the dimension of the Absolute.



Bibliographical references

Impressions graphiques. L'opera grafica 1967-1992 di Giulio Paolini (Turin: Marco Noire Editore, 1992), cat. no. 44.

Entry by Bettina Della Casa