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The knight's move: a chart of life

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When I made up my mind to work in the house where there was a new-born child, I wanted to give space and the meaning of things a genealogical dimension. After Chernobyl all this sounds nonsense. The genetic mutation destroys any humanistic will. Only gods know the reason behind madness. Once more Lawrence Sterne's scribble becomes my chart of life.

Luciano Fabro, 1986.

Luciano Fabro has always been difficult to characterize. There is an awkward quality about his work which confounds expectations even among those who carry an image of his work with them. Each piece seems to have sprung fully-formed from the head of Athena, and at the same time to be working against the grain of an easy assimilation. They have the lapidary quality of metaphor. Recent years have given an opportunity to see these qualities at work, as Fabro makes a series of major museum exhibitions in Edinburgh, Paris, Villeurbanne, and Bruxelles, after some years in which he has made very distinctive contributions to large survey exhibitions, often with works for open-air situations. The most important of these were the works presented at «Sonsbeek 86» and «Chambres d'amis», the sculpture exhibition in Parc Lullin, Geneva, the Biennale de Paris in 1985, and the canopy above the entrance steps to Documenta 7 in 1982.

What seems most immediately engaging about Fabro's work as a whole since 1963 is a fluency with which he is able, for instance, to exhibit a relatively simple large stone oval work *La doppia faccia del cielo*, 1986, which deals with weight, suspension, the contrast between stone and the metal cables strung like thread to hold it in the air, and the spiritual implications of the title, and then, soon after, like a magician, to cut into complex shapes a sheet of cloth (*C'est la vie*, 1986), which becomes a sculpture for a child to play with. As it turns out, this work (which is referred to in the quotation from Fabro at the head of this piece) has a counterpart in *Prometeo*, 1986, which was shown first in Milan. Again it looks quite unlike any previous work by Fabro, though its surveying devices and geometrical formation direct attention to the Promethean powers possessed by mankind in the nuclear age.

How can these three works, shown within the space of a single year be from the hand of the same artist? The due is Lawrence Sterne, whose purposefully meandering line is reproduced in Fabro's book of texts *Attaccapanni* (Torino 1978). The freedom to surprise has been retained, although I think it is now becoming possible to trace the persistence of Fabro's remarkable meshing of spatial (sculptural) and moral (social) examples.

He seems to operate along the lines of Victor Sklovskij's principle of the «knight's move», One step forward, one step diagonally sideways, left or right: for the Russian formalist intellectuals the flexibility of this tactical manoeuvre in the game of chess was a useful corrective to a strictly Hegelian principle of the inevitability of historical progress. To see Fabro's work in this light would

be to acknowledge its unpredictability, surprise and attack. There is nothing systematic about it, through there is certainly a remarkable consistency of interests over a sustained period now over 20 years. He does not accentuate the given properties of each exhibiting opportunity: rather he reinterprets its ordering principles by analyzing its constituent parts.

In Edinburgh, at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Fabro entitled his exhibition «Landscapes», as he had earlier called some museum exhibitions, a title which held some resonance for him (as «Sehnsucht» in Essen). It is therefore as well to begin with the meaning this word has in the context. When he first visited the gallery to see the space, Fabro and I quite quickly agreed a list of works which would give both a precise and dynamic use of the physical conditions, but also a retrospective character to the exhibition, in so far as this was possible in two large rooms. This aspect was considered necessary as Fabro's work had scarcely been seen in Britain, save for two important works at the Hayward Gallery in London the previous spring.

A very long *Arcobaleno* along one wall, facing *L'occhio di Dio*, 1969, on the other wall, enclosed between them three works suspended on cables from the ceiling - *Efeso*, 1986, a slab of Carrara marble cut into the schematic shape of a mouth, a small gilded bronze *Italia* hung by its ankle, and the 3 metre square open cube of *Euclide*, 1984, with its metal rods crossing like the hairs in a gunsight. Although various combinations and relationships of these works were tried out during the installation, in the end they remained very close to Fabro's original conception.

In the upper space, we agreed to bring together a group of *Italie*, the prototype shape and form which Fabro has now been reworking in different materials since 1968. At this point the idea of «Landscape» began to form, a cliché which would serve to unite the two rooms and to give a character to the exhibition, which would have particular ramifications in Scotland, which is always romantically associated with depopulated landscape. The gallery space is diametrically opposed to this idea, being a converted warehouse in the centre of the city by the central railway station. But it will already be clear that Fabro's own manipulation of words and spaces plays on these expectations, only to confound them. His landscape inextricably binds together ideology and geology, representation and materials. His *Italie* are templates whose recurrent use can express a symbolic nationality and personal identity for Fabro through its outline resemblance to a dismembered body.

Parts of the body are a constant feature of many other works of his, most powerfully in *Iconografie*, 1975. Lips, eyes, feet, mouths, stand in for humanity just as clichés, as figures of speech, stand in for a whole chain of communicative gestures and phrases which have lost their meaning. It is a task which Fabro has taken on himself, to restore meaning and vitality to the *anomie* of the present by concentrating on significant details.

The sting in the tail of the exhibition was the final piece Fabro proposed for the upper gallery. It was a reconstruction of his work *Concetto spaziale d'après Watteau*, which he first made as an installation for the Biennale de Paris in the early 1970s. This consists of a standard frame tent, large enough to stand within, inside which is hung a painting, in this case a landscape by the Scottish artist John Campbell Mitchell (1862-1922), borrowed for the occasion. It could be seen enclosed in a side compartment of the tent with the awning drawn back like drapery in a rococo interior.

The whole installation neatly inverts the traditional perspectives of nature and culture, inside and outside. But I think it also acts as a kind of cryptic self-portrait of the artist, made up of elements which are not brought into the world from his studio but found on site and set to a new use. It is a direct and compelling work which is clear at one level to any viewer, though it alludes to conventions in art in order to turn them inside out. Not only the artificiality of Watteau's *Fêtes champêtres* is invoked, but the «window on the world» which is often seen from a monk's cell in early Renaissance paintings. In this work the gallery itself becomes the cell within which the artist

works, and the glimpse of the world outside is already the creation of another painter. There is a strong feeling of empathy for the artist working en plein air, carrying the tools of the trade and peering out from the protection of the tent in inclement weather. The curious thing about the work, given its anomalous position with regard to Fabro's other works, apart from his habitats, is how close the constructive methods are to Fabro's normal ways of working: the hollow tubular frame slots together into cruciform shapes, the brightly coloured canvas is draped over the skeleton and drawn back to reveal the interior, and it is secured to the floor with the simplest of fixings. Even the mesh windows seem closely linked to the perforated wire mesh of different gauges used by Fabro in recent sculptures.

Luciano Fabro is now an exemplary artist, no longer ploughing an apparently eccentric Shandean meandering path, but in his writing and teaching as well as the directness and versatility of his works, a vital component in the European culture of today. The path he set himself many years ago is becoming visible, both clearer and more complex than before.