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Luciano Fabro: art as thought

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Luciano Fabro is one of those artist-writers who express their thoughts not only in plastic form but also and always verbally with the written text performing an ancillary, even, at times, an explanatory role. This is something Fabro is obliged to do because whatever our scepticism about the word or indeed its very significance, he is a master. The texts are there! It is possible for us to confront and relate to them in order to discover hints about the meaning of his sculptures.

We have texts, simply written, since they are essentially notes for his lectures, at the Brera Academy, collected under the title *Arte torna arte*, intended, he says, to document «current developments in thinking about art». In an equally direct and irreverent fashion (since they transcend any defensive detachment, any of the aura that surrounds art) his essays entitled *Regole d'arte* point out the difficulties that the student, burdened as he is with expectations, will encounter along the road towards art. «All new thoughts derive from dialogue», begins Fabro in these lectures and this statement may be taken as a parable of his own artistic production. In the first place, we are presented with a concrete discussion about the conditions of artistic creation that is more than merely «doing art». The dialogue between Luciano and Agnese about the Self-portrait turns out to be a laborious and painful advance towards an artistic drama that must slowly detach itself both from the idea of self-realization based on confession and from the error of believing that a personal style will «just happen». «Art is not something that belongs to you or what seems most familiar», objects Fabro to the young beginner who ingenuously explains his portrait by saying «it just comes out that way!».

Art is something more than self-expression or spontaneous gesture. The artist embodies more than his own Ego. His quality is identified when he makes successful claim to validity and when he reaches *specific artistic messages*: «I speak about quality, about ultimate truth, truth that only art can express». Fabro, the author of *Attaccapanni* is also Fabro the sculptor, a man with a bent for the verbal who recognizes the specific responsibilities of art. Having set his sights high, he is consistent in preventing his artistic messages «slipping» into metaphonema: no alibi, no «explanation» that might decline into pretext or simple gesture.

An intellectual himself with a desire for social commitment that sets him at odds with the many forms of artistic arrogance. He is profoundly sceptical about the excessive chit-chat that surrounds art. It is precisely this which provides him with further evidence of the necessity of art and enables him in a subtle analysis of that scepticism to criticize the poverty of any explanatory discourse about art and its functions. «So, all mechanical thought, all scientific thought has adopted the habit of always needing to show how far it has got. To such people, showing how far they have got is showing the utility of their work. However, the power to utilize thought, to make thought useful makes non-utilitarian thought unusable».

Here the concepts, of utility, exploitability, and even, indirectly, immediacy, «comprehensibility», when selected in order to satisfy reductionist expectations are in the dock. Against these apparently

inevitable categories, against the entire, well-established ceremonial of the art market, Fabro sets a strategy based on guaranteeing maximum independence for such mechanisms.

Fabro believes in the work of art as «thought», as intellectual performance in the widest sense, a process consisting of *fabrica* and *ratiocinatio* to evoke a major theoretical position. This is precisely why he recognizes the falsity of bartering the work of art for the simple «idea». The work of art should never replace the process of thought or act as its substrate. On the contrary, it should incorporate the intellectual confrontation that is expressed through the artistic medium. From this stand-point, Fabro goes on to contrast his own critical conception with the various positions of Concept Art and, in particular, Minimal Art. And now, as in the exhibition «Bilderstreit» (Image controversy), the different positions appear to be in irreparable conflict, now when Donald Judd can dismiss the painting of Baselitz simply as bad art, is just the time for a serious examination of the differentiations developed by Fabro. The risk we run in judging a work of art simply as the «corollary» of an idea, therefore replicating and multiplying, has been demonstrated exhaustively by the minimalists.

All too often we find a preponderance of formalistic aspects and an official complaint has long been raised against the more justified (and now outdated) foundation of the movement. Fabro employs similar arguments in his criticisms of those followers of the trend whose art is often anchored to nothing more than fashion (since it is only seen now in what happens to be fashionable). «It has lost nobility», comments Fabro sceptically on this development. Nevertheless, Fabro once again clarifies his divergence from the views of another major art figure. He will not hide behind any personal style that might act as a trademark in order to protect himself from the danger of strain or wear. On the contrary, he persists in pointing out the need to find a flexible artistic response within an intimate experience that is constantly changing. It is not the world that should recognize itself in artistic symbols but the artist who should react to reality.

We may find a paradox here. These days there is no longer anything radical about excessive oddity in artistic language. Maybe when it first appears, such art still makes headlines but great care is taken to domesticate it at regular intervals. It enters the museums, is reproduced and commented on in books, thus becoming «accultured» to the point where nobody, or at least no one «familiar with art» can reject it. The external signs of the avant-garde have worn away. These days, the old humanist posture, which is not designed to scandalize (that too having become an art form) but which presents its spiritual content in a slightly disconcerting fashion in the form of art, in a situation subject to continuous change, has become radical. The role of permanent irritant now belongs much more obviously to our world itself that has already surrendered to rigid formulae. In this context, the roots of Fabro's art lie further in the past than many are inclined to remember, as far back as the Milanese concretists, Fontana or Manzoni. He evokes such links when he repeatedly warns us against the danger of confusing the statement and the thought, a trap Concept Art falls into all too often. Fabro, in contrast, is a humanist precisely because he refuses the compromise with reductionist formulae and indeed demands for himself the all-encompassing relationship of art. This is the difference between his geometries and those of Minimal Art and at this level Fabro's *Euclide* is richer in tension and also greater art than some of Judd's geometrical sculptures.

The fact that Fabro endows the work of art with the force of thought, his belief that art possesses such a potential is also humanist. Furthermore, the fact is that he is not satisfied to sustain this position only occasionally (as if to puzzle the critics) but pursues it concretely in all his works. Theory and practice come together in a superlative mix in which the resulting work of art remains the single decisive aspiration. Anyone who has seen Fabro crating his works knows how practical the process is. This is exemplified in the celebrated controversy over the Milan Cathedral. In response to the criticisms by Martino Bassi, Pellegrino Tibaldi was called before the Cathedral

Building Committee and made the following statement: the architect may be the best surveyor in the world but that is not enough. What really matters is that dozens and dozens of things have passed through his hands, that he has spent time on a variety of projects, that he has not only worked with his own hands, but is also skilled in carrying out projects... Experience is accumulated by sounding out the specificity of every work. And here too we might remember a chapter in European spiritual history: in his *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain*, Leibniz has Philalète and Théophile consider the relationship between abstract ideas and their concrete correspondents. How can we recognize and create new «*espèces*» according to various external or internal criteria, what prerequisites are needed for us to distinguish at linguistic level between «*montre*» and «*horloge*». Despite all such uncertainties, it remains clear that we have to distinguish between «*différences spécifiques civiles*» and mere «*définitions nominales*».

Why then should it not be precisely here that we identify the specific truth of art! In actual fact, Fabro believes in the truth of art beyond any mere attribution to the nominal or the categorical. As long as art is aware of this specific function, as long as its significance remains unquestioned, art is «*inevitable*». Aware of this, Fabro carefully watches over the necessary link with our senses to prevent his art taking on negative connotations, before it is classified and filed away.

These remarks reflect on certain of Fabro's philosophical predilections. He likes Vico who, if compared with the classification-oriented excesses of the later encyclopaedists, is still fairly close to the myth. In a talk about Prometheus, he comes out against the «*collapse of the myth*». He also expresses his confidence, as a humanist, in the rational possibilities of communication: «*It is always him (Prometheus) who brings us back from the incommensurable (the divinity) to the measurable (nature)*».

If we bear these remarks in mind, we can take a look at some of Fabro's works. *Prometeo* is an installation - if we are to follow the «*nominalistic definition*» of this artistic convention - set up by Fabro in Milan in 1986: collimators form a network, join stakes that rest on marble plinths and whose metal tips - deprived of their functions - are turned upwards; and above swings a bag of cement. In this reductive way we are able to describe something that is still a long way from being grasped. There emerges, so to speak, a «*theme*», in the mobile treatment of which we recognize artistic thought.

Collimators, protractors and grid, space circumscribed by these instruments, and finally vision geometrically circled, as we have seen in Dürer's perspective apparatus and in that *Struments* that Egnatio Danti has drawn on the basis of a sketch by Vignola: these are the external data from which Fabro distils his artistic messages. Depending on how these geometrically uncontrolled elements, these freely fluctuating elements, stand in relationship to this background we therefore have *Ebe*, *Bach* or *Shiller* and the specific message is revealed over and above the known elements that make up the image. Thus was *Euclide* born too, conceived in 1984 for the Milan Triennial «*The reconstruction of the city*»: a double frame that defines the visual field (in terms of perspective as well), the double vertical that precisely separates and subdivides the tilted plane which - in the style of the *Umbræ æquinociales* - detaches itself from the rectangular structure and finally the fluctuating line that disobeys that «*law*», both suppressing and confirming order as its fluctuation holds the remaining structure open. Fabro remains close to myth: his *Euclide* could hardly be less «*Pythagorean*» and the following example makes it clear how he manages to side-step over-hasty categorization. After being withdrawn from the architecture exhibition, *Euclide* with modifications reappeared in 1985 as *Paolo Uccello* among the lush greenery of Geneva's Municipal Park. At that time any stroller along the lakeside road could cast an occasional glance at the geometrical structure set in the luxuriant verdure. Is this perhaps, since one's thoughts naturally turn to the *Chiostrò verde*, the geometric order that *Paolo Uccello* imposes on nature?

Is this the remembered promise of Prometheus?

There is a great deal more to be said, not all of it relevant to my present theme. In any case, what I have said should be enough to make it clear that Fabro is not just a «universalist» suspicious of the «minimal». He is wrestling with cubes and geometry in order to free himself of this «platonic» theme in an eternally repeated process. It is true that since *Squadra and Croce* (1965-66) he has primarily been concerned with geometry, yet every time he radically transforms it, going far beyond mere «variations» and rescues it from the immeasurable in order to restore it to art. However close the links between *Euclide* and *Paolo Uccello* they are worlds apart as must be clear to anyone prepared to examine and understand the thinking of Luciano Fabro.