

From: *Luciano Fabro*, curated by J. Gachnang, R. Fuchs, C. Mundici, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 28 June - 17 September 1989), Fabbri, Milano 1989, pp. 179-182.

## ***For Luciano Fabro***

### **Daniel Soutif**

During the modern period the work of art has formulated itself as an experience at the limits. The ultimate limits of painting, sculpture, and lastly the limits of art itself, such was the natural territory of the modernist avant-garde movements. Restricted by this narrow plot of ground, and in a state of continuous flux, works of art can be evaluated as such principally on the grounds that they fall equivocally within a period of time which itself is contained in a historically linear unit. As both a break in and at the same time a continuation of tradition, a work of art was never produced in the first instance as a definitive solution, but rather it was conceived as a problem, as an open question to be discussed. While numerous works have been transposed from this problematic formula to a definitive one - in other words, in practice, they have become the basis for new problems -, this change is due to history itself since it alone has the power to establish them as new formulae of art; such a convalidation has the effect of extending the limits of art even further. And so on and so forth.

When Luciano Fabro started to work in the early Sixties, this process, which had begun soon after Manet, showed little sign of wear and tear. Thus, the art of the masters whom Fabro himself acknowledged - namely, Fontana, Manzoni, etc. - was derived, to all effects, from a similar mechanism. What is more, the movement - *Arte povera* - with which Fabro's name and works were regularly associated after 1967, was itself not exempt from being inserted in an historical context, without which art could not be understood except as an endlessly repeated verification of the temporary limits, which were then destined to be superseded when confronted with an authentically new work.

From the very first, the paradox of Fabro's work lay - and it still does - in the fact that it remains modern despite his refusal to reduce his works analytically according to a modernist, or problematic formula. In other words, although his work is an offshoot of modernity - principally because it does not fall into the traditional categories of fine arts, painting, sculpture, etc. -, it does not present problems, but rather, one might say, solutions; however, this term is in itself only partially satisfactory since it derives from that very field of modernist semantics which by definition Fabro's art attempts to avoid, although by right it is a part.

In fact, Fabro's works can never be taken as a simple verification. On the other hand, his art immediately presents itself as a formal production which, as such, is significant. Thus, the value of his art cannot be assessed in theoretical terms, but truly and exclusively in sensorial ones. However, even if it cannot be reduced to this alone, an understanding of his works necessarily requires previous experience of his mode of perception, for the precise reason that the value of his works is not the result of the combination of the limitation of the concept of art together with the interrogation which is correlated to this limitation. Having been inserted solely by historical necessity, one could put forward the definition, seen in the light of this interrogation, that his work chooses not to become immobilized in this historical context, but, instead, reproduces itself there in

a very positive fashion. By doing so, it becomes at the same time both an extension of modernity and an event which intersects modernity.

In this way, his works act as a memory of the time which predates modernity, that is to say the time when the production of forms of art was not concerned with respecting the limits of their own definition. If one were to reassume this ambivalence using other references, it would be sufficient to say that when standing in front of any one of Fabro's canvases, an observer is virtually obliged to think in the same terms of parallelism of Bernini or Duchamp, or of Pontormo or Fontana, and so forth. However, this memory does not at all represent that which is now called post-modern, above all if, as is often the case, this term is used to depict the ease, which is nowadays notoriously commonplace, with which ready-made solutions are looked for in the past which the realization, or presumed realization, of modernity would authorize to be refused in a present devoid of all its historicity.

Moreover, there was no trace of post-modernity, when Fabro produced his first works. Yet the latter - if one thinks of *Tabo da mettere tra i fiori*, *Raccordo anulare*, *Buco* (1963), *Tondo e rettangolo*, or of *Ruota* (1964) - occupy a very original position in relation to the art of that period. Although evidently forming part of some of the geometrical debates of that period, these works nonetheless proposed a sensorial experience of a completely different nature. Irrespective of what Fabro himself might declare<sup>1</sup>, this experience consists of a formal invention, which was doubtless reduced to a minimum, but which was sufficient to separate these objects from a rigorously geometric, or as it was then defined, optic art. Although easily distinguished, the forms which Fabro used are separated from any other form of geometrie rhetoric, by a gap which is so obvious that the observer is obliged to recognize them not as an analytical reduction, but as a formal positive production.

In other words, these works, in spite of their exemplary simplicity, do not allow any other interpretation except one which is rigidly intellectual. Their vitality lies in their diversity, which is perceptual rather than conceptual. Therefore Fabro was quite right when he declared that his work offered «an interpretation which was independent of those intellectual habits which intervene as soon as one mentions the word artistic production», before he added that, «what one must interpret are the objects, not one's own thoughts»<sup>2</sup>. From the moment of their production,- these works formed part of modernity, but for several reasons they could not be traced back to that context. Nonetheless, they did not pre-empt the post-modern movement, and nor did the works *Piedi* or *Spirato* which, some time later, allowed Fabro to re-evaluate and re-use marble, a difficult material with traditional connotations, in his art. On the other hand, it still needs to be pointed out here that, even today, the clearest concepts of the phenomenon which is known as post-modernism are limited to linking a contracted definition of modernity with a hypothesis - which is not necessarily exact - according to which the definition of a period of history is *ipso facto* equivalent to leaving that period, or, a hypothesis which is even more dangerous, to setting aside history altogether. In other words, if modernity had a more or less readily identifiable programme - modernism -, post-modernity would appear not to have one at all, unless one takes into consideration the hiatus between the continuation of the modern project, strengthened by the awareness of its own existence, and the pure and simple regression to a generalized use of quotation.

Therefore, Fabro's early works - but this is an observation which is even more true of the works which followed up until the present day -, are not reduced either to something which might cause an explosion or to anything which might awake the drowsy memory. No congruence of one or the other would be sufficient to account for this. Thus, standing in front of one of the *Piedi* or in front of one or other of the *Attaccapanni*, I am obliged to identify the work as being both modern, namely forming part of a movement in which art defines itself through auto-interrogation, and at the same time, classic, if this term can be used in a precise sense not to indicate a particular style but to refer

to that pre-modern past in which, although subordinate to this or that function, art did not live within its conceptual limits, but according to its formal productivity. Using these terms, one arrives at the understanding that the *Piedi*, like the *Attaccapanni*, re-evoke and at same time reject culture. When observing these works a knowledge of history is indispensable and, yet, this knowledge is rendered impotent by the simple fact of the discovery which these works impose. If, in effect, the experience proposed by the *Piedi* or by the *Attaccapanni* will probably not enlighten the perception of the viewer who is totally ignorant of the forms of painting or sculpture, and of the columns, the painted materials, etc., or who is ignorant of what the modern interrogation of these objects is, at the same time, such notions are, when needed, of no help since neither the *Piedi* nor the *Attaccapanni* can be attributed to this or that formula.

For example, the *Piedi* are not traditional sculptures, but neither are they merely a modernistic interrogation of sculpture. On the contrary, they are new forms which are audacious enough to install themselves both in the space and materiality of traditional sculpture and in that of its modernistic interrogation. This dual and contradictory adherence is not indicated by even a hiatus - such hiatuses, the hallmarks of composition, perhaps constitute, on the other hand, the anomalous symptom of that art which defines itself as post-modern. On the contrary, this dual adherence results in the non-connoted singularity of these completely novel objects. For the same reason, the *Attaccapanni* are neither paintings nor interrogations of the painting, but new forms whose principal virtue consists of the body and framework which they restore to natural light and colour. Without resorting to the least use of quotation, the *Attaccapanni* succeed in making the sensual requirements of classic painting relive in a way which no other modern or post-modern work has been able even to approximate, let alone achieve.

These characteristics make it plain that critical commentary must arrive at a confrontation with forms like the *Piedi* or the *Attaccapanni*. Splendid in their isolation, these works remain, irrespective of everything that can be said about them, outside the scope of discussion and, what is more, outside that of conceptual analysis. They present themselves, in the first place, as material forms whose positivity can only be confirmed through the present immanence of their perception.

Thus, in the case of the *Piedi*, one can use with good effect the majority of the usual analyses regarding modern sculpture - the Brancusian disappearance of the base, the equally Brancusian linear simplification, the criticisms levied against verticality, etc. - without however critically touching on, even to the slightest extent, the surprising adaptability of a material and of a form which is achieved in each of those fantastic objects. With equal legitimacy, one could attribute the delicacy of the sensual curves of these splendidly coloured marbles or of this brightly translucent glass to the direct current of a baroque which is conscious of itself and of its powers of seduction. One would be wrong, nonetheless, if one were to believe that by these affirmations one had found a more essentially definitive clause. If, from one point of view, the *Piedi* represent all that has been said - that is to say, sculptures which create a short-circuit between the figure and the base, which reduce the delineation to an ambiguous form, which is neither abstract nor figurative, which overturn verticality or, if one prefers, the other defining pendency of those objects which display precise evidence of a specifically baroque sensuality -, they are also, and *first and foremost*, something which is altogether different, something which cannot be defined since it concerns the material origin of a form, which is both sensible and senseless, and which, before its derivation, did not exist at all. Again, Fabro was perfectly right when, in a commentary on these extraordinary works, he used the term «revelation». «The plastic character, not the framework -, he wrote in 1981 - is the origin. It is the plastic character which leads to that revelation which is sculpture... Through this revelation we are introduced to the mysteries of the image as perceived through the material. These expressions lead directly to the word "metaphysics", a word which De Chirico always used

and never defined. If I want to use it to speak of art, and to make myself understood, I will be forced to define it. In my opinion, Metaphysics expresses the overwhelming power which physics always has in terms of materiality»<sup>3</sup>.

In fact, this is precisely the nature of the perceptual experience which the *Piedi* or any other of Fabro's works induce, including, without doubt, the *Attaccapanni* which, since they possess the same autonomy in their specific field - namely light, shade and colour, which are likewise physical realities - might provoke analogous critical commentary.

Whereas the very inventiveness of Fabro's art precludes those comments which always fall back on invoking the reference to the physical presence of the works, the diversity of his art tends, on the other hand, to confine it in a cul-de-sac of incoherent descriptions of groups of works which are extremely different to look at.

As a matter of fact, Fabro is not one of those artists - some of whom excel in this whereas others are merely astute old-hands at the trade - who mark all their works with one or more personal signs which are readily identifiable, or who otherwise ensure that the declension of such signs is elaborated into the work as a whole, thus turning them into veritable signatures. For Fabro, the signature does not count, or almost does not count, for the simple reason that the work has no worth whatsoever as a substitute for the artist himself, even when, as in the case of *Spirato* (1969-73) or of *Io* (1978), the work is modelled on his own body.

The work takes form according to its own inner logic and in this way it reveals, in successive stages, new strata in which each possesses a considerable degree of autonomy. This is true not only of the *Piedi* and of the *Attaccapanni*, but also of other nuclei of works, beginning with the most well known such as the *Italie*, which correspond, for example, with the *Habitat*, the *Gioielli* or the group of works collocated in the perspective space of the Renaissance, including in particular *Paolo Uccello*, *Euclide*, and *Cristo, Buddha, Zarathustra*.

It is pointless to search, for common conceptual features between one group and another which would allow all these divergent forms to be joined together. Nor can their unity be found in the thoughts which these works provoke or are capable of provoking, or in the forms themselves. Instead, paradoxically, they are united by their autonomy, by the fact, which they have in common with the *Piedi* and the *Attaccapanni*, of being, more than anything else, positive, a positivity which has a variable wave length it is true, but which is still positivity none the less.

Each stratum develops along a particular wave length - in an iconographical sense in the case of the *Italie*, in a spacial sense in the case of the *Habitat*, in a pictorial sense with regard to the *Gioielli*, etc. - which naturally requires its own logic, but this is none other than the condition of the work itself. In none of these expressions is the work of art reduced to a mere demonstration of the simple modernistic reflectivity of this logic. For Fabro, on the other hand, it is a question of always bypassing the third station along the artist's journey, as described in the *Lettre aux Germaines*<sup>4</sup>, where «works of art cannot be viewed and cannot be discussed except in the measure in which they propose to give sense to culture»; these are the types of works on which «the treatises on history of art» are based and which «are likewise themselves the product of treatises on esthetics».

On the contrary, on his journey the artist Fabro reaches the fourth station, which the above-mentioned text also describes, where «the intelligence of nature is reflected in the work of art» and in it becomes a «quality of being».

---

<sup>1</sup> See his interview with Carla Lanzi (1965), cited in *Fabro. Lavori 1963-1986*, Umberto Allemandi & C., Torino 1987.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

---

<sup>3</sup> *Vademecum*, in *Luciano Fabro*, exhibition catalogue, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam 1981; cited in *Fabro. Lavori*, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> *Lettre aux Germains* (Milano 1979), cited in *Fabro. Lavori*, op. cit.