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1984-1989

Jole de Sanna

Thought, image and sensation do not correspond to the physical impression of the work. They transcend it. They are extraneous to those objective attributes of matter and form which define and construct the work itself.

Form, which has always given image, thought and sensation their coordinates, has ceased to exist as a concept. Hence image, sensations and thoughts remain immanent to the work independently.

This is how I interpret the works and themes Fabro has been developing over the last few years. Parallel to the disappearance of the concept of form, we find, in his writings, the link between art and idea: «Art is to give an idea»¹.

This is not a contradiction but mere awareness of the way the work is completed in the mind and in language. At the same time, this relates to his first works. Now, however, idea does not imply a formal structure performing a support function to vision.

Esprit de géométrie esprit de finesse (1984). Euclide (1984).

In the years prior to these veritable enunciated propositions of Fabro's work in subsequent years, the *Habitat* cycle was developed and completed with the *Habitat di Aachen* in 1983. A *Habitat* is an artificially constructed space for the pleasure of its inhabitant. The two new works are a contraction of the following thesis:

«At that moment I had sought to be practical. Afterwards I felt the need to reflect more generically upon what it meant to make *Euclide* or the columns. Not things which fit in everywhere, but things which incorporate something new, which, form-wise, are also rather undefined. Yet theirs is the clearest of images: they are almost archetypes»².

With *Esprit de géométrie esprit de finesse* the construction is self-contained, even more finally and traditionally so than in *Piedi* (1968-71). The column is the compendium of a series of operations performed contemporarily, interdependently on sections. The gaze shifts towards them indirectly but without losing the design of the whole, the sense of disputed unity.

The sections are grooved along independent axes: the grooves are arranged according to the classical rule where the marble is uniform: where, instead, the veins emerge, the grooves follow them, yet only on the surface while still maintaining the same curvature. The code of uniformity and suggestions of dissimilarity eventually harmonize not according to patterns but by adaptation, by reciprocal receptiveness and a certain coquetry in the effects, colours and forms. Visual impact is enhanced by an instantaneous superimposition of movement.

Euclide achieves the inversion of virtual field into real field and vice versa in open space. It is suspended in the air like the first *Gioielli* (*Cristo, Budda, Zarathustra*, 1981), but unlike, them, it acquires image directly in the act of looking. The image is formed with the converging of lines in

the retina of the viewer's eye. Or rather, the object of vision is not fixed but refined to the patterns of the perspective virtuality which it is designed in. Euclide is the visualization ad absurdum of the spatial theorem of Euclidean geometry, or rather (*Paolo Uccello*, 1984) of the perspective paradoxes of Paolo Uccello. Two square frames, spaced apart, form a virtual cube. Suspended metal segments are inserted into the frames and an elementary mechanism, consisting of a running ring and invisible wires, transforms position of the segments into virtual perspectives. The positions change as the ring runs and develop visually as the viewer moves, breaking up into more or less golden sections which may be viewed and interpreted in all manner of ways. Once more a very simple, unitary image is accompanied by a whole proliferation of eye-catching features.

A marked, almost ostentatious sense of unity emerges as one of the most precise keynotes of Fabro's latter period. Unity is not reduction to one but idea of unity through diverse, nay multifarious events and interventions. The parameter for this convergence towards unity is the notion of time, which in Fabro's works is abbreviated right down to the instantaneous and the immediate. As he produced these new works, Fabro divulged his assertion of the disaggregation of form, which, after 1986, he called the *fall of form*. It is difficult to state that works and texts proceed along interdependent lines. We are apparently faced with an indomitable contrast between the conclusive judgement, expressed in the writings as to the references upon which the art world is based, and the works, which display a consciousness intent upon recreating. Fabro's words are dismissive: his numerous, frequent works, however, stand on a razor's edge, tackling menacing suppositions but capable also of annihilating any formal illusion. This paradox, or rational contradiction, is exactly that we are seeking to understand and explain here.

C'est la vie (1986)

Fabro first asserted the proposition of the fall of form when he took part in the «Chambres d'amis» exhibition at Gand in 1986. There, faced by the prospect of creating a family habitat in a house in Gand - the reason for the invitation and the subject of the exhibition - he appeared totally demotivated by all constructive and formal solutions. In the note explaining his intervention, he spoke for the first time of space as something behind him, apparently a thing of the past. His work at Gand is entitled *C'est la vie*. It consists of a long strip of cloth cut up according to the pattern of life set out by Sterne in *Tristram Shandy*. He dedicated it to a baby girl in Gand as a joke, just after the Chernobyl tragedy:

«When I decided to work in the newborn baby's house, a genealogical idea of space and the meaning of things was implicit. After Chernobyl that all seemed comical. Genetic mutation zeroes every humanist will. The gods conceal the reason of folly from the outset. I once more used Lawrence Sterne's doodle as a diagram of life»³.

These brief lines have the same effect as other recent writings. They cast a backlighting effect on the work. It is as if this and subsequent works were lit from behind. They have the charm and «sfumato» effect of things seen against the light.

Demetra (1987)

Of *Demetra* Fabro says:

«This piece was born more of meditation than of work. Like a prayer... I believe I can say that, Goddess willing, this is the expression, or rather the attitude of the Ephesus Demeter»⁴.

Demetra, like *Efeso* (1986), displays a detail of a face, the lips, which appeared for the first time in *Dialettica* (1985).

As their titles reveal, these works have a sense of divinity about them. They hold the visual and psychological field solemnly. Their most significant precedent is the *Iconografie* (1974) glass basins dedicated to martyrs, visualized in the ideas expressed by the dedication. The title *Iconografie* is a useful pointer towards a theme which emerges in particular in a series of unpublished interviews at the Casa degli Artisti in Milan in 1982-83: thought over image. This thought seeks out points of reference more interior to the human being than image. Its main aim, however, is to determine and denominate the presence of image in the artist prior to the work of art. He says the artist possesses the image at the start of his work: that it must be clear-cut and visualized right from the beginning. This is undoubtedly a different way of going about things from the one adopted in *Italie* (1968), for example. Here, Fabro set out to study the succession of formal gestures, to follow a form which was coming to an end and, as it did so, opened up to language and meanings.

Speaking again of *Demetra*, he wrote:

«I chose this stone because it did not look like a fragment. Although it was irregular, it was a prism. *Demetra* is completed as a figure of which we see the mouth... All the rest is there all that appears to us is the mouth. I might add that I had a very strong feeling of the sense of predestination I was giving to that stone, the confidence I was giving it, almost as if it were a person... To sustain this act, I must have a high idea of things»⁵.

Here we read about predestination, profound ideas, gesture and, however we may seek to isolate them in an area of personal experience specific to this work, we sense that the references of the memory have been shifted elsewhere, to places that are different from and external to the artistic object. At this point, the word *metaphysical* is once more ready to step onto the scene.

***Effimeri* (1985)**

Demetra reawakened intact or subsided strata of sense, as too did his work in progress. If we find ourselves using the word metaphysical, it is because vision dilates the contact elements and inner reactions of the viewer. It would seem logical to expect a dilatation of work structure time and, in parallel, of the spectator's absorption time. Instead, the opposite is true. The *Effimeri* are a determined, straightforward statement of a concision which suggests the immediate, the instantaneous. They are constructed with a simplicity which increases, episode by episode. They are signs either created on the ceiling with metal segments (Galleria Stein, Turin and Kunsthalle, Munich, 1988) or are arranged in modular elements on the walls, reminiscent of the purest tradition of composition (*Effimero Fiorentini*, 1985, *Effimero ARC*, Paris 1987). Their construction accepts simplicity and precariousness as criteria always subject to new controls. To reaffirm and amplify the statement, the *Basta la vista* group was added to the *Effimeri* series. At the Kunsthalle in Munich, the *Effimero* on the ceiling runs to the bounds of space from one *Basta la vista* to another, signposting them. Like the *Effimeri*, the *Basta la vista* are made with chains, metal sheets and bent, tense frames, frames with illusion-effects. According to Fabro, they evoke certain skeletons in modern art. In actual fact, they provoke evocation of certain modern topoi to measure how far the visual thesis has changed in relation to them.

Comparison with modern bone-structures is prompted by titles such as *Nudo che scende le scale*, a marble slab bent by two lateral notches, one curved, the other angular. The title is a reference to Duchamp, author of the *Nudo*, and also of the ball of string (*Stoppage étalon*) and the rotating

machines (*Rotoreliefs*). Duchamp complicates the vision of simple things, Fabro translates complexity into simplicity. Nevertheless, his translation never gives up or makes omissions. So, at this point, things become complex, as *Prometeo* so comprehensively demonstrates. The work moves as a helix but is made with plane (static) geometrical parts: a pentagon and a triangle inscribed in a circle rise from marble pillars, tied to rods. Static geometry, marble sections more like kerbstones than columns, staffs and rods used for plotting and measuring geological sites - nothing referring to dynamics: the work starts to move like a helix and, therefore, breaks. The sides expand, the helix shatters: the dynamics takes up a position opposite futurist dynamism. That predicate is turned upside down: everything normally assumed to be a predicate is about to be turned upside down.

Fabro is invested by a catastrophic idea of reality, nature and things. In his comments, writings and lectures, we find the idea that context makes every modern design tragic.

Yet his works - the very fact that he completes them - respond with a personal stand, a determined alternative to the context. The absolute, inextricable complication of reality has made vision perfectly Simple - the *Effimeri*, the *Nudi* etc. Yet above our questioning heads, on all the *semplici*, or simple signs, sighs nothing more and nothing less than an enigma. Are the *semplici* «elementary signs of anguish» or, as I would prefer to call them, ideograms of a dawning language? Are they «simple» because they are conclusive or because they are origins, starting points? *Ovaie*, like their title and their description - marble eggs stringed on metal filmants - and the *Nudi che scendono le scale* too appear as points of departure, whereas variants on the *Nudi*, such as *Troubadours* (1989) or the *Obelischi* (1987) seem concluding chapters in modern art.

The latest work is the *Infinito*: once again it is impossible to say anything definite about it. The floor design displays the symbol of infinity, the split circle. This symbol, however, is also a «load bearing» element, translating the conclusion, the circle, into cyclicity.

¹ See below, L. Fabro, *Art to art (lectures 1987-88)*, p. 194.

² L. Fabro, conversation with Jole de Sanna, November 1988.

³ L. Fabro, *C'est la vie*, in *Chambres d'amis*, exhibition catalogue, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Gent 1986.

⁴ L. Fabro, *Notes on Demetra*, unpublished.

⁵ *Ibid.*