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VASCO BENDINI

Supreme Circle

In 1965 and '66 I felt that my traumatic research in Bologna was being snubbed. Critics seemed to be more interested either in the emerging artists or in naturalistic works and had avoided any contact with me for over a year. Arcangeli, as usual, more open-minded and unprejudiced, came to see me in my studio in via Belle Arti 8 in August 1967 and, even if disconcerted by my new works, he offered to introduce them. For some days we had feverish contact. Then, one morning, hesitating, he showed me what he had written about me. He apologised for “not having managed to do any better”, and said I was to consider myself free to reject it. Among the other things he wrote: “Five years have gone by”. (he had actually last written about my work in 1962). “Bendini’s answer to me was his silence, his inner conflicts, new works. He has given evidence that, for those who have the nerve to swim against the waves, it is always possible to land on a new island. At that time I could not foresee his evolution; I simply wanted to trace a sense of continuity for him. I certainly did not intend to, as they say, “label” him. My fears were vain. Bendini has gone a long way and our close relationship is again renewed, a link I was already well aware of even before...”.

The exhibition, set in the Studio Bentivoglio in September 1967, was greeted and followed with unexpected sensation. There were violent reactions, especially from other artists and “influential” critics from Bologna and not only. This open hostility eventually cooled down and ended up by repressing any “excitement” in the Momi itself.

A close look at my works between 1950 and 1965 shows very clearly that I was already aware of my mental order and that the norms of my sub-consciousness were well known to me. By 1966, it had become clear to me that my education and experience would drive me to new acquisitions, but the only way to be sure about their continuity was to be ready for further developments. My

active imagination would reach and express its own life, driven by its internal logic. And I was ready for this next step.

From my “relentless extroversion” stemming from “a persistent and obsessive introversion” I then passed to the perception of others, considered objectively. I began to investigate both neutral and public spaces. I analysed how the world affected me and the others, and how the others affected the world. The problem was to catch this very moment and to manage to visualise the field of harmony existing between myself and the others.

I then decided to provide anybody who came in contact with my works with support, directions which could directly be followed through personal participation. Some reflections by Merleau-Ponty supported my intentions: “I gaze upon on a living being on the point of acting; suddenly all the surrounding objects acquire a new layer of meaning. They are no longer things that I might use, but things that will be transformed by my behaviour”. It is indeed another person who is making use of my objects and treating the objects I experimented with in a different way, though similar to mine. So my own body finds a sort of extension of itself and its intentions in a different body. We become like two minds which have found a common, though indirect, way of communicating. Two behaviours start interweaving .

Solitude and communication thus become aspects of a single world. It was from these thoughts that, in the first months of 1966, my first three behaviour works were born: “Come è” (As it is), “Finzione I” (Pretence I), “Il mio spazio” (My Space).

The work “Come è” consists of a long mat on which two opposite chairs are placed, separated by a wooden frame covered with cellophane. A small microphone is hanging in the middle. The visitor is invited to sit on the first chair. On the second one there is a scarlet plastic figure resembling a human being, which has a hidden amplifier as its heart. At the left foot of the first chair, there is a mirror.

Behind the figure a shiny black oilcloth is propped against an easel. The black cellotape wrapped around the legs of the empty chair nullifies its specific function as an object of daily use,

making us think of other possible interpretations. What is left now sitting on the chair is a subject mirroring itself and echoing its own voice, an "I" which ignores both itself and the others.

The second work "Finzione I", instead, consists in the restriction of a non-accessible space contained within large frameworks which have the function of screens and which are arranged into such a way as to provide different perspectives. Artificial objects are hanging on the framed canvases and some veiled images are painted on them; some areas are delimited with black cellotape, structural devices with the function of indicating different times and places. The whole structure is wrapped up in a big transparent white plastic sheet, making it inaccessible, almost as if hibernated. On the threshold of the pretended interior, on the left, there is a chair with virtual back legs covered with black cellotape. On the far right, a red slash in the shape of a mouth makes it possible to look inside. In order to gain access to the interior, the visitor must rip the plastic sheet. The mouth slash arouses the curiosity of the visitor, although its secrets are wrapped in the cellophane. Secrets which are visualised in "vacuum and silence".

These first two works were displayed for the first time in Venice, in September 1966, at the Sala Degli Specchi in Ca' Giustiniani, in San Marco in a collective exhibition which took place in the same period as the Venice Biennale and, probably for this reason, had many visitors, including all the most important critics. The most frequent questions I was asked were: "What is this change due to?", "What is it you want to express through these objects?", "Is it figurative art or rather theatre?". Calvesi, the only critic who was not taken by surprise, wrote in the catalogue: "...Just a few words for Bendini, my old fellow traveller, whose familiar world I recognise as unchanged behind what his enemies consider a disguise (how numerous and how relentless can the enemies of authentic and honest people be!). How can I explain that, behind this meditation of a chair facing a plastic, scarlet, human-like figure, behind this philosophy of objects and appearances we can find a concentration -as usually ineffable- of Bendini's complex, yet synthetic mental process, the ontological flower of his poetic greenhouse? How not see that, although the instruments of language

might be literally similar, an ocean continues to separate such a secluded and solitary world as this and the wide world of the recognition of the object, so typical of the Americans?''.

In my third work "Il mio spazio" I myself appear, wearing a black tight track suit. I am lying on my back on the floor, with my head raised and my feet leaning against a semicircular mirror which reflects my figure entirely. This image of myself reflects my original body which is not in the mirror, as it appears, but opposite it.

It is the only possible perception of my body, of myself, even if it is nothing but a mere reflection of my body. The mirror, indeed, frames a fictitious image of myself in the same way as it reveals a real image of an absent sky over it.

It is not my intention here to refer to all my behaviour works, whether or not contained in the I.N.A.R.H. catalogue of Rome, 1968, since they have been extensively analysed in the catalogue of the Anthological Exhibition in Bologna's Gallery of Modern Art, yet I will not fail to mention the action "Io. E io ora" (I. And I Now) which I gave life to in the Civic Museum hall in Bologna: In January 1969 a very special trade-union art exhibition was organised: it was open to everybody, to artists and ordinary people alike, but was not to be followed by any ambition inspiring catalogue. What was even more striking for that period was that single or group events were allowed in any public area of the town. As far as I know, it was the first example of a totally politicised exhibition. I had decided to take part in it with a protest action. I had intended to appear in the centre of Piazza Maggiore, completely immersed into dung, lying inside a crystal coffin. A simple pipe in my mouth was the only means of communication with the outside.

This space symbolically represented the only breathing space granted to man. Palach's harrowing and extreme act of rebellion seemed to confirm my denunciation, but it gave me evidence of the uselessness and naivety of my action. I found myself in a disheartening and hopeless situation. Could I retrace my steps with indifference? No. I had to get out of this existential dead end. Smash my objective world into pieces. But hadn't I already done that in 1965 and declared in my works "Sentimento come storia" (Feeling as History) and "Senso operante"? I saw a

more radical alternative in a form of "estrangement". A practice of "inauguration" in an imaginary position of "isolation". Symbolic satisfaction.. Virtual initiation, expressed through ritual acts, in a sort of self-assuring imaginary game. The choice of an artificial place of action, the only possible way to avoid contagion from the crowd's folly. It was in this state of mind and with these convictions that I walked into the Civic Museum in the morning of the 17th, one day after Palach's death. I had all the lights focused on me, as if to strip my flesh off, in some way. Then, with my right arm outstretched and, following the rhythm of my own heart, I traced a circle, as if to enclose myself in an uncontaminated space, a new space, my only possible self-protection. I imagined myself moving like someone who, for the first time, discovers himself as an object of this world, an object of experience. All of a sudden, I became aware of my very eyes, as means of knowledge, as fragments of matter. Then I slowly regained my initial position with my arms down along the sides of my body and, at the same, slow rhythm, I moved every limb of mine (head, eyes, mouth, tongue, hands, arms, legs and feet) as if I were pointing them out to myself, as if I were gaining consciousness of them for the first time. A pause of a few minutes followed as a preamble to meditation.

Then I virtually traced the shape of a broom. A slow movement of my legs simulated my flight on it. When I reached the "Primary Circle", I slowly climbed up an endless ladder that led me to the "Supreme Circle", where I found myself climbing up a rope. Towards what?

I stopped motionless, as if dazzled, for some minutes. The revelation of the promise? Then, steadily, I stepped out of the magic circle.

(Translation by di Maria Carmela Lapetina)