

DIEGO ESPOSITO. PLACES ESTABLISHED BY COLOUR

In the past five years, from 1998 to the present, the aesthetic tension of Diego Esposito's work, already portrayed in cycles of significant works which I had the opportunity to install in an exhibition held at Palazzo Fabroni in Pistoia (1998), has reached a degree of enunciation which I would not hesitate to call unmistakable. This "homecoming" to his native Teramo, where Esposito wished to concentrate the various methods and forms rendering the fundamental aspects of his artistic career, is solid proof of his remarkable capacities. In the two exhibitions placed like a distych - one at the city's Pinacoteca Civica and the other in the former Villeroy & Boch factory space - the feeling is a single one: to sing the dimensions of space, light, colour and vision through particularly exemplary, if not elementarily pure, shapes which evoke those entities poetically without having to resort to a representation of them. This lesson by Esposito here in Teramo may perhaps be intentionally emblematic and more effective, since he had sought the profound reasons of art as a very young man in those same places. This led him to exercise his talents for drawing and painting every day by putting to use his observations of a landscape still intact today, toward which Esposito had so often turned his gaze - as Cézanne had done toward Mont Sainte-Victoire - without ever tiring of painting its essential volumes and profiles. It is certainly in virtue of that accomplished familiarity with his place of origin that the exhibition on display this time seems among the most daring and also the most successful of those he has undertaken thus far. Having laid eyes on a series of pavilions of the former Villeroy & Boch porcelain factory fallen into disuse outside Teramo, Esposito chose them as the ideal site for an important project where he could show a paradigmatic synthesis of his own concept of art. Relying on the spatial virtues of those buildings and under the label of *Blue Outside*, he conceived and articulated a series of interventions by which he could stimulate its revitalization and, thereby, could emphasize the processes of sight and visual imagination whose fulcrum lies in a work of art. This task was not an easy one nor was it sure to succeed, given the fact that the spaces evoking the monumental and visionary architectures of the likes of Ledoux and Boullée or Piranesi, with their remarkable dimensions and complete lack of decorative elements, their hangar-like structures in a totally rustic state, the lack of a closed perimeter or of walls that would plug up and define that vast sequence of spaces, did not provide Esposito with much help for the interventions he intuitively had in mind. It is probable that, after his initial enthusiasm for that extraordinary empty structure riddled with holes like an extended skeleton, he began to think about how he could use it and about the objective difficulties of investing it with his own key signature works and, at the same time, exalt its bare structural characteristics and its own particularly significant features. In this case the arduous experience has been successful, especially for a fundamental reason that one breathes in when entering the sites chosen for this work and even those where there is no actual trace of it. It is as if Esposito's deposits of form and colour had the capacity to expand throughout the surrounding space, and to provide - as previously mentioned - a life-giving reverberation to the whole entity of that establishment. How did Esposito attain such a result?

Opposite the admirable Collurania hills which form a belt around the Teramo outskirts to the south-east, the sequence of the former Villeroy & Boch plant buildings seems to stand on a small Aprutine¹ acropolis. Their juxtaposition recalls the Città di Castello tropical tobacco drying sheds, an example of industrial archaeology in the Upper Tiber Valley in Umbria, currently housing the Alberto Burri Museum. Esposito - like an ancient city planner intent on recognizing the axes of the north-south and east-west roads for orienting its foundations - upon entering those spaces so long without the presence of factory workers but in which the recollection of their presence still lingers, and where the barrel vaults of the ceiling make a diamond-shape weave of ribs like lacework against the sky, must have wondered about the spatial quality before his eyes and must have made many reconnaissance trips and taken careful measurements before choosing the points of view for placing his own marks. These, in fact, had to possess those revealing capacities of spatial properties that he wanted to provoke with his work. The result needed to be two-fold: on the one hand to place a self-referential sign inside that place that would be admired for its own attributes and, on the other, by inserting shapes elaborated by art, to make the space of those halls authentically vibrate, to reveal their own characteristics and produce results observable to a careful perception. The distances between shapes would become magnetic poles, attracting the gaze which would have invisibly traced a series of projections, automatically becoming sources of perceptive dynamism.

The unifying element of that device which Esposito chose to stimulate individual sensitivities was the colour blue, specifically for its particular tonal quality, and called it *blue outside*, to all effects, because it draws its own luminous intensity for being, everywhere in this installation, outside the building covering, in full daylight. Esposito's first real on-site gesture was to find a colour which denoted the goals he had previously chosen, so that the colour would properly allow him to achieve an optical and emotional stimulation from afar. It was possible to obtain fixed points and, especially, to even unify the qualities of those rough, deformed surfaces characterized by varied heights and distances from the cold and anti-expansive properties of that blue. In more concrete terms, Esposito's act rotated around three cardinal choices for the entire qualification of that space. The first was the conception and realization of a "garden" of white ceramic remnants left by the industrial processes once active on that site.

Nastro (2003) is, in fact, the first large installation one encounters today upon entering the former Villeroy & Boch plant vestibule. The second choice consisted of discerning the rooms to sight from different points of view in the six large side access "doorways" through which one can see a blue square outdoors, painted on the imprecise surface of the wall running around the perimeter whose purpose it was to fence in the building complex. And a large metal grid was to be inserted to block one of the doorways on which there is a transparent blue diaphragm, specifically called *Blue Outside*, 2003. The third choice involved raising a single white wall containing a long arrow-slit of a window for sighting and observing the hilly countryside to the south-east of Teramo.

In short, he has diffused the feeling of colour-light everywhere and, along the perimeter opposite each installation, Esposito has placed a cable to keep the visitors “at the right distance” for seeing the works. The latter is a means of guaranteeing both the perceptive result that Esposito intends each observer to seek and attain, and the work itself, which requires a perspective point of observation appropriate for overcoming the *trompe-l'œil* effect he achieved when painting the square area in blue. In greater detail and from a closer viewpoint, the three perfect geometrical figures painted blue on the perimeter wall opposite *Blue Outside* show a rough, heterogeneous wall fabric, the presence of other pre-existent materials, wires, nails, corrugated pre-fab panels made of concrete fibers, plastering, bricks, holes and a surface even consisting of different heights. Therefore, only standing at a proper distance permits one's visual perception to automatically correct the perspective it receives. But, similarly, for each of the installations, Esposito has activated the “rules” of vision to deliberately obtain certain results. The outdoor light in *Blue Outside*, traversing the transparent material used to fill in the sustaining grid, projects a blue reflection on the floor, and in the room, as well as shadows that seem to create dialectics with those projected on the ground by the openwork ceiling vaults covering each hall. The blue embroidery projections, in sunlight, have the faculty of adding a subtly charming sense of decoration, capable of lending the space a quotient of derived colour sense that would otherwise be absent.

When darkness falls, the same blue - produced by a luminous source - appears in the arrow-slit window which explicitly recalls Esposito's *Rievocazione del mio orizzonte* (1976) and which, during the day, allows us to see the profile of a hill in front of which the artist, as an adolescent admirer of Paul Cézanne and Caspar David Friedrich, paid a daily visit at dusk to fulfill the rite of painting landscapes *en plein air*. This blue light brings a metaphysical coolness of night time to that vista. It is still the devotion to painting by other masters, in other eras, with other concepts, that is surfacing, rather than a “romantic” invitation to contemplation. Likewise, and indirectly, the long passageways parallel to *Nastro* cramped between two rows of oxidized iron beams make the shiny, clean fragments of porcelain into an ideal “growing plot” such as that of the stones and sand of a Japanese Zen garden. On the back wall, where the two “plant-beds” end, a rectangular red metal surface, well beyond its literal flaming import, evokes the mouth of the furnace that Esposito had seen when conveyor belts used to take the ceramic “biscuit” to be immersed in the high intensity heat which baked the material and the elaborate shapes created by the factory's workforce. The contrast of these three colours - the shiny red for the huge fiery metal panel (0.98 x 4.90 m), the shiny white of the fragments of ceramic (4.90 x 70 m), and the opaque rust colour of the metal frames on the grey floor - is one of the most characterizing points of Esposito's entire palette used in these halls.

Moving along the many directions allowed to the viewer, in certain key points of the space it is possible to simultaneously make the red and the blue coincide, or else the whites and the blues, or else the green of the hills outside and the same blue, a common denominator of the sense of space the artist obtains. In this sense, what Esposito once defined as “tension to the place”² is renewed with great success, all of which goes to confirm certain inimitable features of his recent work.

Particularly in *Blue Outside*, the source of natural outdoor light that Esposito uses to introduce a colour has its philological premises in the transparent grids of such works as *Dialogo* (1998), seen in Pistoia and reformulated in Ludwigsburg (2001), but also in *Naos* (2000) executed in various versions in California in San Diego, in Cassino, Teramo and again in Ludwigsburg. In all these instances, the principle of leaving glimpses of light through a reverberation of the source behind the grid offers a filtered, attenuated, semi-hidden and diffused sense of it. Such methods for showing light do not preclude the assumption, obviously, of symbolic values such as the intensity which expands on the external structure or - as in the specific case of *Naos* - a spiritual value which is diffused from the holy cell, where it is in custody. Yet it is evident how Esposito has continued, since 1979-80 when he travelled “toward the East”, first to Greece, Turkey, then to Japan and Korea, to “displace” this luminous sign (as he does with his sonorous ones, too) by means of a changing variety of spaces which reproduce a “gnostic light”. In the Paola Betti show in January 1980, “the space of the small garden opposite the entry vestibule was illuminated by Esposito with an intense, sunny, cadmium yellow light, not natural but more innerly suggestive. This device would return to view in 1982, although with different values, in the *Introduzione* to the works on view at the Vera Biondi gallery in Florence [...] placed on the threshold [...] to define the internal and external parts of the space”³. Likewise, in *HYS (Haifa Yellow Sound)* (2003), presented at the Haifa Second International Installation Triennale in Israel, one could perceive the sound of a violin from the door through which a yellow light flowed. *Blue Outside* is equally pervaded by the element of sound: opposite the work Esposito has set up custom-made musical recording.

So, this work activated in the former Villeroy & Boch factory, where generations of Teramo's residents spent their days working at fervently producing porcelain for many long years during difficult eras of the city's history, is a truly complex one. The genesis of space created by introducing forms and colour provokes a chain of resonances in the architecture where evocations related to the energy and vitality in the factory when it was functional can still be felt on its grounds. At this point, in dialectic opposition to the results obtained in the latter installation in Teramo, we need to make a comparison with his work *Efesto* (1995) or the more recent 43° 51' 678" N - 11° 6' 570" W (2001), where each direction of space seems to precipitate into the well of that mirroring eye placed in the core of the stone.

In fact, if in these works of stone that Esposito is starting to place at the four cardinal points, turned like gazes toward cosmic space, we need to imagine enormously vast reflected dimensions of the sky, in *Blue Outside*, to the contrary, what is exalted is the paradigmatic *topos* which is the point of departure of various observable angles of a multiple, kaleidoscopic, sense of space tending toward infinity. Therefore, it is possible to discern the opposite of the other in each work, but they each reveal Esposito's will to suggest an eye and a chameleon-like sense of sight with the capacity to hold its own against a sensitivity of perception of reality evermore careful, more complex, more ontologically open. Nonetheless, the Villeroy & Boch installation in Teramo opens a query about waiting for the architectonic space to be qualified vis-à-vis its original functions, the decisive moment of which lies specifically in the artist's mark upon it, Esposito's work, in that

sense, takes shape as one of the few plastic pictorial cases directed toward a sensitive reception of a place's environmental properties for the purpose of obtaining - by means of a thoughtful insertion of works - a heretofore unknown and surprising spatial potential and quality. From the time of the earliest spatial experiences (Fontana 1949) and those of Environmental Art (*Lo spazio dell'immagine*, Foligno 1967), artists' interests in new dimensions as departure points for the conception and creation of works of art has grown in proportion to a dilation of individual awareness and hence to the expansion of the complex notion of space. Land Art and Californian post-Minimalism have contributed to further extending the confines of the concept of environmental awareness onto a planetary scale. On the other hand, Manzoni's challenge with *Socie du monde* (1961) has still not been surpassed even if digital art and the use of the Internet, in formulating new images, occupy the air surrounding the Earth, but certainly in a more timid way than scientific astronomical technology projected into the starry distances,

In this thirty-year context of experiences with ongoing effects, results such as those reached by Constant, Dan Graham, Michael Heizer, Jan Dibbets or Gordon Matta Clark, Maria Nordman and James Turrell, must be considered an objective reference with which Diego Esposito's dialectic work has already been in touch for some time. The particularity of his case is that, instead of being launched by vast American avenues or Californian deserts or Dutch plains, it originates out of the memory of ancient Italian nomadism in the regions of Ascoli Piceno or the Abruzzo, from the anabasis at the sources of Western visual culture, in Greece, Turkey and the Middle East and, finally, from the fertile encounter with Asian culture, with Japan and Korea. Spores of all these cultures have fertilized Esposito's sensitivity for reaching a concept of his work which, even if well-defined, is receptive to and transmits the environmental conditions and properties of a site where, each time, he situates his work and dedicates himself to obtaining a new sense of space from it.

Seen from these points of view, Esposito's pictorial-plastic works from the 1990s show all the stigmata of listening to distant sounds. The exhibition of these at the Teramo Pinacoteca Civica allows us to once again - after the important appointments in Pistoia, San Diego and Ludwigsburg - reflect on their morphologies, and to discover that in Esposito's formative principles salient nuclei of contemporary art are still alive.

In this sense, *Naos* (2002), a work in Corten steel and yellow light situated in the lake of the Teramo public gardens, is emblematic. Placed in that urban oasis on occasion of the exhibition called *Exempla -Arte italiana nella vicenda europea 1960-2000* (2002), it occupies the centre of the small pond which reflects the sky, the vegetation of the park and Esposito's work itself with its luminous reflections. An evocation of the cell of the Doric temple, it nevertheless borrows its structure from the orthogonal grid of squares of Japanese houses made of wood and paper.

Naos has a two-fold spatiality: empty inside, it is pervaded with a source of yellow light that entirely clarifies it, providing the outside of its walls with the sensation of keeping an invisible presence from our eyes. But, like a sacred garrison, *Naos* likewise is encamped in open space occupying a place on the lake that, like an island suspended on it, is completely surrounded by water. With the more famous yet different Oriental model of the Kyoto Golden Pavilion, this work shares

certain concepts, as does the hermetic, ideal, impenetrability of the Greek temple cell. But this is not Esposito's only creation to make those relationships we have mentioned emblematic. In fact, *Cascata* (1996), with the same blue found in the installations at the Villeroy & Boch factory, revealed, from the time it was started, the characteristics of a plastic organism belonging both to the morphology of Occidental topiary culture - that of Italian and European gardens, from Boboli to Versailles - and that of the Zen garden in Ryōanji and others, where sand is "combed" and the immobile stones sitting in it seem almost to move imperceptibly. The grooves which run the length of *Cascata* as well as recalling Esposito's creation made of granite in the Villa Jucker park near the Orta Lake (1995), evoke the rows made by the rake, the same way the rounded linear shapes superimposed on the long plastic metaphor evoke stones or clouds superimposed on it.

Proceeding with methods and signs similar to those previously practiced, Esposito realized *Look at Me* (2001) with coloured panels MDF and *In canto* (2001), a triptych in silver leaf, for the exhibition at the Kunstverein in Ludwigsburg. These works seem to share a linear design which, if in *Cascata* it seems to have one of the reference morphologies, it actually is also present in *Ottoinfinito* (1998), a work seen in Pistoia. The surface partitions of *In canto*, in particular, with the musical score in mind and its articulation on the five-line staves, bestow it with a silent sonority interrupted only by the "pocket" fabricated in the lower portion of the paintings. The triptych is also composed by an element - almost a pause - devoid of any mark excepting a small cavity denoting a void. More explicitly, this was carved out as a perfect circle inside the yellow square of *Unicum* (2000) in San Diego, where it still resides in a private collection. Instead, two works that appeared in Ludwigsburg are among those on exhibition at the Pinacoteca Civica in Teramo: *Altre parole / altri movimenti* (2001) and *Partitura* (2001). While the first of these also has a precedent in *Colore verso suono* (1996), the second, with its vertical development (170 x 78 cm), reveals and confirms Esposito's interest in spatial grids based on a neo-Plastic matrix. The component of sound in Esposito's work was a subject discussed at one time⁴ both when the work specifically adopted this property - in such works as *Forma sonora* (1989-90), *Suono* (1991) and when the *Stanza della musica* was exhibited in the Castello di Mesola (Ferrara) - and when, borrowing the structure of the five-line staff, the artist executed works including chromatic "notes", which is also the case of *Partitura*. Appropriately, the presence of primary colours in the rectangular shapes of the five parts comprising this work, bestows it with a sense of belonging to both the areas of the visual and the sonorous which it joyously projects into space. Esposito has also found it necessary to discern - as in the case of the Bicker Studio naval shipyard in Amsterdam and now in the former Villeroy & Boch factory - the supporting axes of space in the Teramo Pinacoteca Civica and to employ them in suitable works. *Cascata*, therefore, found its fulcrum and goal in *Dualitudine* (1989-93). To the contrary, the simulated and obtained breaking through on the walls of the ground-floor rooms was the task of the virtual thresholds painted in acetate blue previously employed at Palazzo Fabroni.

The artist's essential repertoire on exhibition for the occasion of his return home, makes use of the presence of a certain number of mosaics and of *Corpi neri* and *Oggetti invisibili* (1986), so called because of the effect of the metal which, when inside a furnace having been heated to incandescence,

also becomes incandescent and invisible. The sculptures are actually seats of light absorption and irradiation and open a noteworthy chapter of Esposito's inventiveness concerning the concept of presence-absence of auras of works of art. It is appropriate to observe that it is the transforming fire as well as the artist himself, both in the *Corpi neri* and in *Nastro's* large red metal sheet, which are the creators of those forms. And it seems justified to affirm that the substantial quantity of examples on exhibition, all of an incisive and remarkable quality, emphasizes, well beyond Esposito's devotion to the masters - from Iacobello del Fiore to Brancusi, from Newman to Mondrian, from Utamaro to Fontana - the fact that the lesson he has learned from them has been transformed into a new essentiality of forms, purity of design, chromatic equilibrium, invention of spatiality - elements fundamental to Esposito's capacity to employ his works to disclose a poetic dimension of qualified space in places where such an attribute is totally absent.

Bruno Corà

NOTES

- 1 "Aprutino/a": Medieval Latin name for "Abruzzese", or pertaining to the Abruzzi region [*trans. note*].
- 2 B. Corà, "Diego Esposito. Luoghi a nuove arrese di accoglimento", in *Diego Esposito*, exh, cat, Pistoia, Palazzo Fabroni Arti Visive Contemporanee, Skira, Milan 1998.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*