

CARLO SEVERI AND GIANNI PETTENA

Carlo Severi This is certainly an antirhetorical exhibition. For the visitor it is a moment of discontinuity in his daily anxiety. A moment for listening. This is due above all to the penetrating discretion of Diego's work. A never-loud way to attract the attention that belongs to these pieces. And then there is a more technical aspect, something close to a visual method. It is not just an invitation to capture one's attention, to explore with the gaze, to seek - in the space surrounding the artwork - some visual correspondence... It is an invitation to look far off, to look beyond the limits in which the artwork is materially circumscribed. The show is titled *Passaggi*. Among the other works *Cascata* is a good example of this going beyond the gaze. In the work the cascade of water has become unmoving colour. Yet, in the same moment, it has become light that changes continually. The interior movement remains. It seems that there is a wish (this time on the part of the work and not the artist, but it does regard him as it regards all of us rather closely) to extend itself far.

So, thinking about the development of the group of artists we are speaking of this evening, I would say that, over the years, many of the things that I could have observed about these people have gradually become characteristic elements of their artworks. For some time now Diego has established this intimate contact with his art. Something that we probably shared on found together, without openly declaring it, is this discrete desire to go beyond. It was, I repeat, something not declared. There is, however, in this discrete desire an open debate. When we showed several works together in Paola Betti's gallery in Milan, it was a time of great crisis of invention, of very strong vertigo in the art world. The idea (although undeclared, it was no less clear or less lasting) was to respond to this crisis by using discretion in a determined way: counting on time, counting on the contemplation of space; counting also on the search for far-off references, the most remote analogies, facts of independent visual invention; to remove the horizon line even farther without losing the thread while, of course, continually risking to lose it.

Once Diego and I visited an exhibition together. It was a show of African musical instruments and it had an interesting subtitle: *Forme sonore*. We liked it very much. I remember that there was a large drum with a kind of face etched at the base where the stretched hide was wrapped under. The accompanying label read: African drum with anthropomorphic decoration. Now anyone believing the label would have left the museum thinking they had only seen a decorated musical instrument. But we said to ourselves (inspired perhaps by the face): imagine the sound made by that drum. It was very big, so the sound was bound to be deep, intense. Is it possible, we wondered, that there is no special relationship between that anthropomorphic figure and the drum's sound? What if this object, instead of being simply a decorated musical instrument, was an attempt to imagine the face from which this sound originates? What if the object contained an attempt to transform a sound into a voice?

The question presupposed an implicit hypothesis: that one could construct a mental device able to move far way, to go beyond labels, to the point of trying to hear that sound in the

pure presence of the drum, as well as in that tightly-etched face. I remember we had a long conversation about it. One object after another, seen in this light, revealed something new. The museum filled with sounds.

Some time later we found another series of objects in the horrible colonial museum that unworthily decorates the city where I have been living for twenty years [Paris]. There were African harps (Zande, to be precise) that could not be touched, let alone try to play them: as in all shows, they were shut up tight in their display cases. However those harps, like the drum, used other images to prolong the instruments' pure forms, their devices designed to make sound. Again, faces. These faces seemed alive, they embodied not only the sound of the rhythmically plucked cords but also the voice of the person playing them. Open lips, a song just hinted at: it is in this way that a sonorous form is generated, through the prolongation of an image in sound; through the simple, commonplace, profane, and daily ascertainment that inside a visible form one can always glimpse an invisible one, to which one can add the idea of producing sound (present, nearby, familiar, yet always one of the forms of the invisible) through a particular relationship among visible clues. A face, a stretched skin or several chords, closed eyes, a trace of the lips where sound issues forth.

This special relationship between clues offered by the eye - in African art but elsewhere, too - creates a kind of invisible presence that doesn't have anything especially sacred about it, yet it remains literally miraculous.

In my opinion, Diego goes after visual situations of this kind. Borderline situations in which - even in a kind of lightening flash that can be seen from time to time, in Venice more often than elsewhere - one searches for a particular configuration in which a visible image cannot sustain itself in perception without the very acute perception of another invisible image. Generally, these images occur spontaneously, they are literally without an author. That the world is full of works like this, without authors, is certainly one of the first discoveries of an artist's work.

A third aspect that I wanted to address with regards to Diego's art is the musical element. Music, as I mentioned before, reserved for visual forms. But the analogy here is so strong that we have tried to use even the same notation as music, The emphasized note, the parallel insertion of different rhythms, the crown, the sign that we put on a note to show that the player must avoid interrupting its development and let it fade: all these draw something which, with other means, Diego does fairly often. He lets the chromatic vibrations reverberate around the work spreading the surrounding space with echoes.

Gianni Pettena I have known Diego Esposito for many years and, for me, this exhibition represents the synthesis of my thoughts when meeting and speaking with him. Unable to attend the inauguration I came the next day, Sunday in the early afternoon, when no one else had gotten there yet. I walked by myself through this place, this palazzo which I have been through other times with friends or visitors, but never like this, alone, listening to the sound of my footsteps and discovering a sequence of completely new spaces, different

from what I had always imagined to be Palazzo Fabroni. So Diego had taught me a lesson in spatial perception; an unexpected lesson because of the unforeseeable nature of its wisdom that allowed me to listen to the sound of my own footsteps and to perceive the transferal of outside places into interior rooms. Yet the sequence of interior rooms was very close to my way of highlighting, in a space, the possible symmetries – or their absence – or the possible reflections that a wall or a path can have on the facing wall or on the next path, connected to the preceding one. When Diego arrived and we began to walk through these spaces together, I was reminded of something that had already happened to me many years before with another artist, Smithson; in spite of our different training (art school for him, architecture for me) Smithson and I found ourselves working on the same ways of defining, of understanding a spatial event or else of recognizing ourselves within it. We usually sought our places that spoke in low tones and helped them to achieve a normal tone. In our conversation published in 1972 in *Domus* magazine, Smithson and I spoke about our intolerance of “beauty spots”, of those spectacular postcard-like places, of that way of relating to or choosing a spectacular backdrop for one’s own uncertain formalized pondering (just think of how artists use Forte Belvedere in Florence). Instead one can emphasize, by underlining it, the absence of quality in a place that has never looked for quality, not only of an aesthetic kind.

Esposito helps me to look in a mirror. He makes me feel the remorse of not concentrating enough on making a thought physical and of letting myself be distracted by education. Even if sometimes when I listen to a student illustrating his work I get the feeling that, in designing, the student is trying to get away from the force of gravity and fundamentally this is just what Diego is trying to do or what often I try to do when I work on space: to investigate its logic, structure, intimate connections.

I discovered that Diego Esposito has spent days, even weeks in Palazzo Fabroni. He has studied and understood what was expressed and unexpressed in that sequence of spaces. And the result is clear, tangible, because when one walks through these rooms, gravity, the usual manner of perceiving a space, no longer exist. We cross through this space but, as in a drawing by Moebius, we cross it without any predefined references or limits.

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Extracts from the round table held on 13 May 1998 on the occasion of Diego Esposito’s exhibition at Palazzo Fabroni, Pistoia