

## THREE NOTES FOR ANTONIO CATELANI

**Negation.** Due to an erroneous evaluation of his work, or perhaps because of an offhanded interpretation, I have at times defined Antonio Catelani's work as being articulated upon reduction.

Said error or offhandedness is to be ascribed to a hurried classification: following the years of expressionism in painting, an opposite search arose, that for a formal rigour which, deploying itself through non-figurative sculpture, immediately recalled the Minimalist precedent.

It must be acknowledged that the misunderstanding was justified by the artist breaking ground in a group context with Carlo Guaita and Daniela de Lorenzo, the three of them seeming to form if not really a school surely a strongly homogenous group.

That was at the onset of their work, in the mid-80's, and the crystal-clear self-evidence of the constructive links upon which their sculptures were based further contributed to the muddle. Carlo Guaita's iron bars leaning on a wall were undoubtedly reductionist, and on the other hand interpretation's first approach of a new work is though philologic-formal means, excepting its later being able to contextualize the data resulting from such an analysis.

It has not taken me long to understand that there is nothing "reductionist" about Catelani, that on the contrary his works open up to a certain complexity. It is true to say that they lack a redundancy characteristic of the immediately preceding Italian art, *Transavanguardia* and its imitators, in the sense that they lack a rhetoric on subjectivity, but only in this sense. Catelani does not intervene on sculpture's modernist status, he does not decline its specificity by necessary and sufficient signs. Instead, he openly works on ambiguity, discussing the specific and putting it through verifications based upon a re-conversion rather than a confirmation of linguistic functions.

In other words (in terms of formal analysis), the sobriety of his works is daughter to no orthodoxy; on the contrary, it partakes in that experimentalist climate which has opened up in art following the recovery of tradition brought forth by "post-modern" trends.

However, Catelani's own way of joining in with such a climate is certainly articulated upon negation, if not reduction. If experimentalism places the art work back into the dimension of the game which plans the world, Catelani offers us projects that speak of their non effectuality, or propositions that border on paradox.

In his early works, one witnessed a definite weakening of sculpture's specific traits: works made of paper, plaster or wood barely jutting out from the floor or the wall, always presented as preserved fragments issued forth from a non presentable totality.

Sculpture, for Catelani, becomes a practice that takes on meaning only if it can relate to others, but such a relationship determines a loss: of identity, of integrity. Of peremptoriness. Thus the project, to become, must become "weak".

Such a process follows a seemingly necessary analysis, since the artist in sculpture does nothing but face constructivity's pertinent problems.

Except that Catelani's particular game is a play with the imaginary, whereby the practice of sculpture opens up to a comparison with the imaginary of architecture, the latter being the ultimate reference of each and every constructive postulate. Architecture as a normative system, as a theoretical postulate in view of which art's propositions are made to act, and not as an operational comparison in view of functionality.

Functions are merely enunciated for what they are, that is as possibilities. The weakening pursued by Catelani is, of course, an opening towards the possible and an overcoming of every territory, starting with an attention for the genesis of a form-structure.

At that germinative moment, purely ideational, when one might say structure thinks itself, its bestowing itself, its relating to space, every surmise of identity is taken as equivalent of any other.

In one of the artist's earliest works, a

moulding cut onto the edge of a marble surface is corresponded by others traced in pencil, so that the aperture to the possible entailed by the equivalence régime eclipses identity. But it highlights the significant function of sign. The wooden frameworks called *Typology* maintain a similar double nature. One might say they are built upon a reiteration of the grid to create a skeleton outlining the void; they become a typology of space and occupation of space. They underline constructive links, one might define them as being constructively explained, or rationality in act, and yet they are often presented overturned onto the floor, as in an emphatic negation of themselves.

Still, even this inhibition of "raised" elements allows one the possibility to theoretically consider those main signs which conform our experience of space. An aprioristic space, such as it is defined by the rules, but also a space that is lived.

Catelani's work, so replete with theory, is also interwoven with elements alluding to this other spatial quality. Perhaps his work really consists in underscoring the rules that act upon our lives, and vice-versa. Suffice it to think of the coloured glass surfaces which seem to imitate marble's chromatic effects.

**Nature.** To tell the truth, and the artist openly declares it, interest for colour is enacted without such mimetic intentions, and it pertains to a will of analysing forms at the moment of their inception.

They are, however, shapes already loaded with history, mutated by a tradition (which goes beyond modernism), already connected to a meaning, and which indeed carry this meaning with them. I have in fact stated that one is dealing with reconverted signs. Since they are not auroral, this side of meaning, they cannot be mythicized.

They can however be connected to something which, at least as first instance, one could define as an absolute: nature. In the installations called *Pendant*, one sees moulded coloured glass "leaves" unfurling vertically along the walls next to the real leaves of various plants.

Nature is not the disorder mentioned by Fausto Melotti, nature is order, a self-regulated system of processes upon which

cultural processes are modelled. The organic produces rules, and Catelani intervenes upon the mediation that culture carries out between nature and our experience. The pure significance which he is emphasizing in his contradicted constructions has this background.

**Style.** But there is more to it. In a 1988 interview with Maria Luisa Frisa (1), Catelani released a rather interesting statement: "Provisionality of style is the essence of art". What does it mean? What is style? That encompassment of distinctive traits which allows one to recognize an artist's work, which sets its singularity. This, in reality, is missing in Catelani's works, if anything each group of works has its own particular style; there is no singularity, there is multiplicity instead. Style is also, and foremost, that which characterizes an age and consequently designates a community, a community of tastes which "recognizes itself" in style, precisely. Such an act of recognition is not given, and I myself being ignorant learn only now that Kant was already thinking about such a community as a mere event, a hypothesis that one can only try to incarnate (2).

In any case today this community has effaced itself in the empire of atomized signs, the latter not being composable into something more sound and coherent such as style. The provisionality of Catelani's style means just this, his being "in the negative" within the realm of experimentalism expresses this simple and definite not-being-there.

#### NOTES

(1) M.L. Frisa, "Catelani, De Lorenzo, Guaita", in "Flash Art", Milano, summer 1988, n. 145.

(2) Cfr. J-F. Lyotard, "Peregrinazioni", Bologna, Il Mulino, 1992.