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«An isolated and positioned organism»

Cristina Mundici

From the lips of Emilio Vedova: «In this room of my house, which was Martini's studio, I have seen the sculptor work. He used to hold the material up, with a special system of tie-beams, and he worked on it moving continuously about the room, moving the material together with himself». For Martini, this seemed to be the most effective way of handling a sculpture, in order to verify immediately the reaction to the changing influence of the light, anticipating in advance what would be the destiny of that object: a three-dimensional object, to be precise, and therefore liable for collocation in the most various ways and in the most various environments, and consequently subject to the infinite alterations that the form meets with in different spatial conditions and with the different play of light.

One knows that the problem of the positioning of plastic objects is old history. On the contrary the painting by its very nature is bound to a supporting wall; given an environment, the possible collocations of a painting are in themselves numerically limited. In a painting, at worst, the question of relationship between object and surrounding space is resolved within the painting itself: not a real fact but a problem of representation. In the first fifteen years of the twentieth century this indeed imposed itself, in painting, as one of the essential questions around which were constructed poetical works and pictorial practices.

More or less during the same years precisely this problem of relationship between object and surrounding space became much more pressing for the sculptor, looking for a third way which lies apart from both monumental sculpture and from furnishing ornament. Beginning in the nineteenth century and reaching a peak between the Twenties and Thirties of the twentieth century, public bodies requested great numbers of monumental sculptures with which to fill town streets and squares. Against this, these beginning years of the twentieth century saw an ample production of knick-knacks, furnishing ornaments, small decorative objects and so on: small sculptures of small dimensions, in short, destined above all for more or less domestic spaces, created to embellish a defined, limited space, to accomplish the precise function of completion of a dimension or internal atmosphere, globally distinct.

And the other sculpture, that is all the possible production that is neither monumental nor knick-knack, «how», in what measure is it thought out and above all for what space? Between the two wars sculptors found themselves handling a material to which inferior expressive abilities were generally assigned in comparison to the chromatism of pigment, to invent a dimension for it, a form which does not extend itself to the monumental nor diminish itself to the gew-gaw and, therefore, to invent for it a spatial collocation. A costly operation, this, in terms of mental energy, and risky. By its very nature, sculpture lives both of the sculpted material and of the space which is around it; the sculpted object is in any case a presence made of the relationship between itself and the surrounding atmosphere, more precisely it is subtraction of space and recreation of it again, it is «an isolated and positioned organism», according to a definition by Longhi. And so the sculptor had therefore in

those years to reckon with a sculpted form that neither «lives» in the open air nor «lives» in the closed and domestic space of a house. Therefore it is a question of reinventing a dimension for sculpture, an environment that offers it hospitality, its own collocation in space. But what space?

Beginning in the Sixties one assisted at the spreading of an artistic practice that activated itself only in the presence of a given space. The sculpture, if one can still speak of sculpture, lives of the relationship with a defined environment, the enjoyment of the spectator is orientated towards a totality built up of both material object and place in which it is positioned. Terms like installation, environment, in situ make themselves known to indicate the inseparable pair, material and environment. The problem of the collocation of a sculpture is resolved a priori, contextually at the invention of a form; there where for form is intended the one and the other entity. In those same years 1960-70, environmental art became widespread; even the artistic operation in the open air is resolved as an intervention on a given environment. It is carried out on a specific spatial reality and it is the creation of a form impossible to propose anywhere else.

Earthworks, Conceptual Art, Arte povera, Body Art, Minimal Art: and as many forms of artistic expression which closely link their one intervention to a precise «here and now», to a specific definition of place and time. It is perhaps not by chance that in the same year, 1974, two articles, the works of two key personages in the histories of contemporary art, appeared in two different magazines, «Artforum» and «Data»; the one is William Rubin, director of Museum of Modern Art in New York, the other is Giuseppe Panza di Biumo. Stimulated by the presence of artistic forms having features so completely different in comparison with the traditional categories and types, both reflected on the possible spatial collocation of the new works and, therefore, on the most opportune museum arrangement. Indeed, if contemporary art lives of its close connection with a place, how do you preserve the works, how do you guarantee enjoyment of them, and how, therefore, do you place them? Or, how do you reinvent the place delegated to receive them, the museum?

The exhibition which, from December '87 to April '88, fills the rooms of Castello di Rivoli repropose, at a distance of nearly thirty years from the new artistic expressions making themselves known, sculpted objects, «statues», sculptures. And with these the same old questions - what is the positioning of a plastic object in space, the construction of a form which clearly marks out the boundary between material and surrounding space, the problem of the influence of light and its direct participation in the formal construction, the necessity to finish off the plastic object in its vertical development and also to provide it with a base to stand on, the contradiction between full and empty in sculpture, the invention of a form independently from the precise definition of a time and a place.

Is this exhibition, then, a record of a trend in action, is it a sort of desire for permanence, or a remediation on the plastic and on its collocation? Definitely it is the opportunity to put works of high quality in relation to a very particular environment, which just by itself permits the maximum attention to the arrangement of objects in it. Mutual excitement, therefore, both of the sculpted object and of the spatial values around it.