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## ***Domenico Bianchi's material mysticism***

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One way of understanding, in retrospect, the so-called neoexpressionist eighties is as a time of search for the aura, call it the holy Grail; and the renewal of the sense of art as a holy Grail. This exploratory renewal occurs under the auspices of the archaic; the artist hopes to find - in the child's mind discovery is simultaneously invention, as Donald Winnicott has argued - aura in the unique qualities of a particular material, or in irreducibly strange, anomalous form, or in artifacts which seem existentially one with their history. In other words, the sense of aura is an intuitive effect of the irreducibly non-rational, non-discursive.

Bianchi's brilliance is to have articulated the sense of aura through a combination of reductivist and expressivist means. His works exist at the extreme where abstraction and representation converge - the spiritual ideal of art ever since Kandinskij insisted upon their essential oneness, the sameness of their goal. It is as though Bianchi's emblematic «central» forms - self-enclosed, self-entangled and odd in shape, often with mystical radiance or else luminous in their very texture - were both representations of an abstraction and reductivist statements of a deep expressivity, inherently and inexplicably indwelling. (An *Untitled* red 1989, work of oil and wax on fiberglass epitomizes this ambiguous radiance). They are at once images and abstractions - assertions of what is ultimate and deep and thus can only be expressed abstractly through purely formal means, but that can also be symbolically imaged, for it is intuitively visible.

These forms are the sacred hearts of a restored inwardness - a modern interiority, that is, an inner life that is irreparably conflicted and twisted in on itself, with only temporary respite in futile compromises that can hardly pass for harmony. The strangeness of Bianchi's central shape seems to embody the innate flaw of the modern heart. The subtly bizarre, seemingly unplanned awkwardness of the shape, which sometimes seems a perverse paradigm - or a mutant organic growth magnified into schematic visibility (whether curvilinear or angular, it belongs to primary process) - has a supernatural pulse. It re-invents the idea of supernatural sensation, as Gauguin called it. The shape is peculiarly primitive and irreducible (the primitive is in fact a means of articulating the irreducible in modernism). The allusion to Gauguin's primitivism - as an idea, not a style - is not arbitrary. Bianchi's art is at the crossroads of many art historical forces, as a good postmodernist art should be. That is, an art ambitious to retine and fuse the various streams of past modernist art without succumbing to a jaded sense of déjà vu, and above all to pursue them back to their common source. Indeed, Bianchi's ambition is to re-articulate the subjective source they have tried to enunciate in their different stylistic languages, but without the sense of using or obligation to any one particular language - without the stylistic encrustations that clog the sense of the source's purity and ineffability. His central form is the seemingly styleless core from which all psychovisual possibilities emanate, which is why in fact that center is so varied in form. We can indeed regard Bianchi's art as a recovery of the lost center, to allude to the title of Hans Sedlmayr's book critical of

modernism. But it is not - and can never again be - the old center. Yet it may be more magical, for it is a tricky center - a reinvention of the center with modernist means and within the context of the modernist ambition to create an absolute art that bespeaks absolute subjectivity. Bianchi's ecstatic, subjective center - a center emblematic of the irreducible subject, who according to so many thinkers has disappeared from the modern world (but survives in pathological form in the universal epidemic of psychopathology, which includes the obsession with simulation as one of its forms) - is a major realization of that pure subjectivity or interiority that, according to John Gedo, art has been determined to make both symbolically and materially manifest since Mannerism.

Art historically speaking, the problem Bianchi's art addresses and solves in its own special way, is that of reconciling reductivism and expressivism - the minimalist and expressionist mentalities, if you wish. In the sixties the reductivist tendencies in modernism came to a climax. Less indeed did seem more. The eighties renewal of interest in the expressive implies that a certain kind of «more» is out of reach by any kind of «less». Where the reductivist approach ascetically uses a few means to create a work which is ideally like a drop of intellectual blood, to use André Breton's phrase, the expressivist approach, with its more expansive sense of material possibilities, creates a work ideally like blood from a spiritual wound. Expressivism assumes that self-consciousness must be abandoned in order to articulate powerful unconscious forces. In other words, where reductivism tries to come as close as possible to silence and absence, expressivism aims to establish a strong sense of reverberating presence, that will echo forever, as it were. Bianchi's psycho-spiritual works are simultaneously reductivist and expressivist: they have a reductivist look of simplicity and immediacy, but they use such means as surface tension and self-animating form to achieve a sense of expressive density. They are intellectual and spiritual blood in one: the blood of intellectual and expressive elation in one drop of shape.

In an untitled 1989 work a broad white line - simultaneously within and on a black field - seems to meander, as though taking shape, but with no shape specifiable, namable, final. The over-all result is formless, but one can no doubt read, within this hallucinatory formlessness, various coherent forms. Is a skull, interlocked with an aborted infinity symbol, at the very center? A more abbreviated version of a similar «shapeless shape» - more or less exclusively of the «introverted» central element, within a kind of broad halo constituted of numerous circumambulating lines - appears in an untitled 1988 yellow work. This piece, with its «sensitive» oil and wax surface, calls attention to another important way Bianchi achieves his aura. In fact, the seeming involuntary, quasi-automatist drawing - the eccentric central emblem - on the surface can be regarded as a secondary, all too literal aura. The subtly material surface itself is the primary aura. Material surface is full of an aura of its own. In a sense, Bianchi's drawing on it takes advantage of - «learns» from - this inherent aura. It is as though he was bringing the secret, sacred life in the material to life through his working on the material surface - raising it from its grave in the dead material.

Bianchi's xylographic works, with their gently but insistently tactile surface, are the clearest example of this effort. The sense of touch they convey is a sign of the invisible - incommunicado - aura within; the emblem is the external aura - the aura made obvious for the world, the aura as the world conceives and conventionalized it. (But Bianchi gives it an unpredictable expressive twist which reminds us of its inexplicable, innate origins). Didier Anzieu, in his book on *The skin ego*, notes that the skin is the source of impression and feeling - words whose meanings cannot always be differentiated, for at bottom they both indicate «subjective resonance». Bianchi's articulation of the skin of the picture - a skin which seems simultaneously superficial and unfathomable, transparent and opaque, diffuse and concentrated - is the profoundest aspect of his works. The central emblem is like a tattoo that is made by a mix of discreet and indiscreet pressures on this skin. This emblem, for all its anomalous character, is self-cohesive, in a way the skin can never be.

And yet this osmotic material as a coherence - a quasi-uniformity - of its own. Bianchi's works are a brilliant intensification and complication of the obsession with the skin ego of the picture - its surface grain - that began with Gauguin's and Munch's woodcuts and continues in those of German expressionism and Ernst's frottages and surrealist decalcomania. But where such surfaces are often harsh and crude, however eloquent, those of Bianchi have a refinement that is beyond the suave and sentimental. He has given the skin of the picture a new uncanniness. Sometimes Bianchi's shapes seem billowing or cloudlike in their amorphousness, at other times they seem the cross-section of an erratic grid. Sometimes his colors seem depressive although never grim - and his shapes latently manic. But always, whether conveying deep reflection through forms that seem embedded in or just below the surface - tenuous «outlines» either rising from or sinking into the surface (an ambiguous effect Bianchi is master of) - or intense directness through forms that seem to project beyond the picture, Bianchi always offers a peculiarly seductive surface, at once open and closed, found and invented. Bianchi's fascination with surface has led him to use Roman tiles and other found materials with «sensitive» surfaces, always in a way that makes clear that their skin has a subtle if archaic ego.