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Vedova the Sculptor

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The principle of an art that is a link between the living nucleus of being and the framework of the outside world depends, in the work of Emilio Vedova, on the transparent medium of painting, which is not bound in any narcissistic manner to the painter's own identity, nor given to secreting an image of self, but rather tends to dissolve in the subterranean current of a method that seems to oscillate between the construction of a synthetic universe and the rupture and scattering of its fragments. His paintings may in fact be seen as an imaginary body aimed at reasserting the disruptive cry of life, or as the multiple splinters - always broken and changeable, and difficult to control and govern - of a movement and presence at once corporeal and imaginary, and sustained by an internal vortex.

Given this, the question that arises is whether Vedova's vision is governed by a desire for coherence or a desire for disorder and chaos - whether his paintings or plurimi, reliefs or disks, in laying bare the innermost movements of the spirit, seek external participation, reaching out to seize and control the fragments of being in all their redundant physicality; or whether they present themselves as transparent metaphors of a dissolution and explosion that encompasses the profound range of his contribution to the upheaval of images.

Such a duality, in fact, leads one to wonder whether, when speaking of Vedova, one must turn one's attention to the extraordinary control of the whole, highlighting the singular energy and power animating it from within, or instead emphasize the variation of identities - personal as well as contextual - that pass through the gaps, fissures, cracks, creases and overlappings that separate and agitate his surfaces, giving back to us the fragments of a discontinuous, dramatic space. His art either unleashes something prearranged and borrowed from the logic of painting, or else it aims at shattering the object on which all his effort is concentrated, to the end of *redramatizing* the language of painting to bring it into the realm of sculpture.

For Vedova, putting oneself in syntony with the superabundant flux arising from the dispersal of fragments and materials tending to create ruptures in space and time, means changing the subject of painting into a subject of sculpture: immersing oneself in a continuity based upon discontinuity, to bring to the gaze a selfsame thing that changes, breaks up and becomes articulated into irregular sequences characterized by a disturbing forward movement that no longer looks back to the nucleus but rather to its explosion, its dispersal into splinterings and reflections, scattered across a magnetic field where the audience is snared by suggestions of environment and setting.

If one re-examines Vedova's adventure in sculpture and installation - from *Scontro di situazioni* (*Collision of Situations*, Venice, 1969) and *Intolleranza '60* (*Intolerance '60*) to the *Rilievi* (*Reliefs*, 1961) and *Plurimi*, 1961-65; from *Spazio/plurimo/luce* (*Space/Plurimo/Light*, 1967), the *Ciclo del Carnevale* (*Carnival Cycle*, 1977-83) and the *Ciclo Lacerazione* (*Laceration Cycle*, 1977-78), to the *Tondi* (1985), *...in continuum, compenetrazioni / traslati* (*In continuum, Compenetrations / Transfers*, 1987-88), and the Studies "*A te Berlin da Venezia*" ("*To you, Berlin, from Venice*", 1988-89), to *Chi brucia un libro brucia un uomo* (*He Who Burns a Book Burns a Man*, 1993) and

the *Untitled ...als ob tondi* (1996-97) - one notes how the poetic impulse fully displays its percussive power by exploding the magmatic element of his painting and transforming it into a movement of fragments and splinters made up of light, color, form and material and seeking a magical communion with theatrical and architectural supports. The energetic rhythm of the elements used represents an awareness that the path of visual art is consigned not only to the stroke on the canvas, the ignition of the pictorial system and the attraction of the gaze toward unknown realms, but can achieve the same objectives by extending into space and thus involving all the senses. As the search for an other visuality remains constant, constructed on an evolution of the language of painting, the medium of painting, in order to become sculptural, must pass from an epidermal stage to that of a melting-pot, from which it might give rise to a new material aimed at unhinging the sacred perimeter of the painting in favor of a magmatic spatiality that goes beyond the limits of sight, to where art merges with architecture. And if art is to be based on a form of spatial communication and persuasion, with painting as its fulcrum, a communion with the world may be established by disproportionately expanding the centrifugal power of the image, which in Vedova does not attain any supposed scenic or theatrical specificity, but becomes spectacular precisely because it manages to express something unique, something that in its expression precedes theater: life itself.

Vedova's constant, repeated questioning of the nature of painting is an ongoing attempt to redefine one's relationships with that elusive interlocutor - which variously assumes the identities of debris, double, action and shadow, sign and trace, continually diving back into the unknown. This also explains the constant oscillations in the artist's visual language, where as the relationships with the nucleus of painting present themselves in a different light, the linguistic strategy changes as well. If at first the expressive focus was aimed at safeguarding the visuality of vital presence through signs and traces confined to a perimetral area, that of the painting's surface, Vedova's work, through an involvement with architecture and the theater spurred by the process of exhibition - as in *Vitalità dell'Arte* (*Vitality of Art*, Venice 1959) - and by the stimulus of a notion of total theater - as with Luigi Nono and *Intolleranza '60* - shifts to the intervention as a stratification of the spectacle, one that is bound to a place. And since this place is concrete and material, not separated by the wall of the gaze, Vedova's painting turns into sculpture, becoming itself body and space, in which the powers of appropriation and expropriation clash in a physical dimension that metamorphoses in direct contact with the vitality of the environment.

The starting point of this progression is clearly *Scontro di situazioni* (1958), the construction of canvases placed in corners and on the ceiling for the *Vitalità dell'Arte* exhibition at Palazzo Grassi in Venice and for Vedova's solo show at Zachenta Palace in Warsaw, 1959. Here the moment of spatial manifestation of the genetic nucleus of painting is seen as a prerogative to expand the environmental weave of the painting, to the point of turning it into an architectural wall. It is a dynamic shift that showcases the artist's fascination with giving art an unexpected, unique dimension, such as that with which it resonates in the successful incorporation of bodies, artist and spectators in the *Plurimi* first shown in Rome and later at Kassel.

Certainly the awareness of the stage-like qualities of the painting of Tintoretto and Tiepolo, of Rembrandt and Goya, as well as the frequentation of Venetian architecture and urban spaces, with their strong visual currents, that we find in Vedova's drawings and paintings from 1935 to 1942, are the matrices informing the powerful thrust of the transition from painting to sculpture as spectacular spatial events. The irruption of a single painting in a corner of the exhibition space, or the placement of a painting on the ceiling, like the on-stage explosion of sounds and images of fragments of materials and light, underscores the artist's need to consider art as a nucleus of life in which we must immerse ourselves. This immersion demands a particular condition, beyond visual

illusion, that requires the inundation of the architectural and theatrical space. Here the sculptural enriches the painterly, as knowing articulations of color and stroke are thrown into disarray by being set on a labyrinthine path where there are no points of reference. Painting does not mean copying the world and quotidian reality of a person or society, but rather convincing us of a vital other presence whose reality is only an amorphous sign. By accepting to enter into this labyrinth - which becomes more and more prominent in the work of the 1980's and 1990's, with the wild, surprising articulation of the *Tondi* and *Dischi* and ...*in continuum, compenetrazioni/traslati* - Vedova's art ushers in a metaphorical flux in which we hear the uninterrupted cry of existence and things. What we see is no longer a selfsame thing in transformation, but a multiple element separated by the threshold of an irreducible difference made up of rendings, breaches, articulations, joints, climbs, suspensions, verticalities, gravities, crossings and violent, excessive colors, a kind of crumbling, a plastic orgy marking a line of rupture on the level of expression.

With the *Plurimi*, dating from 1961 to 1965, Vedova's pictorial world comes unravelled. Perceptions become enriched in the multiplication of visual and physical perspectives and, after throwing representation into crisis with spurious, intense signs, he reaches the point of demolishing the unity of the painting's perimeter, disordering its existence to propagate the violence of creative disunity in all places. The *Plurimi* - including the dramatic plurimi of the *Absurdes Berliner Tagebuch*, 1964 - call into question the homogeneity of painting in order to shift it entirely into the realm of architecture. They make possible the discovery of another "order," that of primitive organization, anterior to the traditional perception we have of pictorial objects. The painting itself is lost, but its density and spatial flux is recuperated. It carries within itself the association of the context, such as that of a Berlin marked by the drama of the War and the construction of the Wall, as well as by the density of a profundity that could only be expressed with a sensation of weight and burden such as that of an object suspended or resting on the ground.

The unifying value of the *Plurimi* is their heaviness, which is visual as well as existential, social as well as personal, historical as well as ideological. They represent a crystallized fall, a new gravity entering the field of form, with all its prickles and dazzling wounds. They are fragments of a temporal and spatial rhythm capable of reorganizing the entire landscape of painting according to an essential, forgotten dimension - that of a painting that becomes sculpture, a fragment transformed into an aggressive, explosive unity because it remains continually faithful to the truth of art as rupture.

While the *Plurimi* (1961-65) are indeed disruptive, they also assert a unitary power, as if they wished to demarcate a kind of ideal place and posit, in process, the project of a construction aspiring to a concrete, physical elsewhere, based on the integration of space and time, of painting and sculpture, of theater and architecture. As they hover in their spaces, they in fact attest to a powerful concentration of energy that harks back to a notion of habitat: an "other" world, beyond the linguistic limits of art.

Upon close examination, the *Plurimi*, through their ability to adapt and take in, to metamorphose and integrate, expand towards the *outside* of painting. Being multi-frontal, they are disturbing, because they aim at establishing a visual duplicity that opens up to complex, varied lines of reading and interpretation, of imagination and analysis. The first such line, for example, would concern the relationship between recto and verso and between surface and material: it involves density as well as separation, in a changeable relationship between the development of the visible and tangible parts. Painting here presents itself in two roles: as surface image and as spatial density, both alive and animated by the separation as well as the aggressive contact. Moreover, with the surfaces peeled off and scattered in space from ceiling to floor, the painting is transformed into spatial vibratility. This is true of its outside as well as its inside, implying an outer as well as an inner light,

which multiplies in all the possible combinations. Their interrelation finally brings another significant sequence into play, where a unity is opposed and combined in a plurality that is further complicated in the course of the different installations of the work, from Berlin and Kassel to Venice and Lugano.

The ability to enter into changeable relations, whether in a rapport of syntony or of aggressive contact, of friction or interlacement of the *Plurimi*, is also the root of the *Rilievi*, 1960-64. Here the elevation of the materials and the stripping of the surfaces into protuberances and transformations of substance - such as wood and paper, clots of paint and fragments of canvas, plaster and rape - give shape to vibratory sculptures such as *Per uno spazio (For a Space)*, 1961 and the *Rilievi* (1963-64). The disruptive introduction of the material - with its charge of energetic expansion - transforms the painting surface into a structural opposition between outside and inside.

In this way, Vedova attacks painting in order to make it radiate outward so that it might transform itself literally into a luminous, spatial radiation.

In the first case, the inebriation of the act of painting and its ritual quality as chromatic occurrence are negated as material events and transmuted into an immaterial magic. In *Spazio/plurimo/luce (Space/Plurimo/Light)*, 1967, in Montreal, the light visually solidifies the clusters of glass, those little sheets Vedova made in Murano, and creates a spectacular, powerfully spellbinding event.

The space of the Montreal Expo is transformed into the stage of a sacred function - that of painting itself - which greets the mass of spectators by presenting itself in a metamorphosis from impasto of color to impasto of light. In that great architectural cradle the projections become the fruit of a magical transformation where the sparkling of the material, while still liberating the artist's unconscious, becomes the creation of a collective vision. The perspective of art is reversed here; the shift from the projection of matter to the projection of light implies a transition from anarchy to rigor, from ebullition to crystallization. With *Spazio/plurimo/luce*, 1967, Vedova seems to seek gradually to emancipate himself from an idea of art as personal identity, in favor of a notion that corresponds to the structures of contextual communication. The development of an outward projection thus heralds a different strategy as to the language of painting, which must henceforth be translated into a "total" spectacle no longer perceptible only from the univocal perspective of frontality, but from that of spatial circularity.

Thus we have the immersion of action, as well as its outcome, in a new, hyperexpanded universe teeming with painting and sculpture, architecture and sound, materials and movement.

There is no dissociation in this universe, since every element is congealed energy cancelling out the anarchic phase, the moment of putrefaction and expurgation, in favor of conceptuality and immateriality. It cancels out the stable and liberates the *volatile*.

The explosion of the *Plurimi*, with their dissociative charge, indicates the course to be taken. The simmering, radical irreverence toward all limits and petrifications find new life-blood in the *Ciclo del Carnevale*, 1977-83 and the *Ciclo Lacerazione/Plurimi binari*, 1977-78, which offer a new dissection of forms and surfaces re-creating a continuum of stirring power. The *Carnivals*, in particular, effect a transformation based on the process of regeneration of a place of spectacle such as Venice; and even though they are not directly dedicated to the theater, they are its senses and flesh. They return the artist to the dark womb of his culture, evoke its historic core, the construction site and the public square, the anatomical table of a physiognomy at once terrifying and welcoming, emblematic and lexical. The power contained in these totems unleashes a volatility and ephemerality that are the result of the corrosion of that pictorial fixity that is a mask of defense and attack. Under this mask hides the expressive potential of an individual and a society that live on errant power and regenerate themselves as they continue to swim upstream against the currents of life and history. With the mask's element of duality, the *Carnivals* highlight the double that

originates in the unleashing of the vital waters bearing rebirth as well as extinction. They constitute an immersion in the complexity of the belief that sees history both as advancement and dissolution, and are the threshold to a dualism that is primitive osmosis as much as theatrical ceremony. Having made the power of consciousness a filter capable of feeding the primordial energy-drive as well as the artistic impulse, Vedova succeeds in creating an "organic" whole that embraces at once the disturbing presences of his own as well as the culture's masks. He brings out their double valency, inspired by a dramatic vision bound to the breath and explosion of signs as to the presence of the person. The mask that appears in the *Ciclo del Carnevale* is a barrier between body and spirit, conscious and unconscious, between the personal and the social, the representative and the represented. Like art, it is a mediating surface on which all the profundities of existence accumulate.

The complexity and multiplicity of Vedova's art also pass through the temporal register that forces painting and sculpture into different moments within one same perimeter. In the *Ciclo della Lacerazione* (1977-78), the plurimi become "binary" and dissociation and discontinuity are translated into an arrangement/fragmentation centered on a single unifying object. Compared to the *Plurimi* of the *Absurdes Berliner Tagebuch* (1964), these ensembles do not concentrate on surfaces in order to divide them and make them explode so that they form a dissociative block; rather, they arrest the scattering process or at least shunt it to the inside, transforming the flow of the surfaces into a perpetual metamorphosis of forms and transparencies, of associations of signs and colors. Within the enclosure of the metallic frame there is a movement that leads not to dispersal but to concentration. The painting *throbs* according to a controlled movement that makes it possible to enjoy every one of the associated or dissociated elements.

With the *Plurimi binari*, Vedova succeeds in unitarily integrating the diverse elements in a configuration that works both vertically and horizontally, and creates a "free zone" of mutations that drive the surface/wall to produce a ceremonial of multiple perception. The power to make the combinations and mutual interferences between paintings further germinate reaches its acme in ...*in continuum, compenetrazioni/traslati* (1987-88), a work that attempts a further concretization of the *spectacular* labyrinth of the painting/sculpture. Onto the body of the paintings is grafted a maelstrom of images that seem to cling to one another, blinding one another or else mutually overlapping. Their skins touch, highlighting a tactility surfaces with charges of black and white ferments. After having renounced uniformity and stasis, the artist thus seeks to abandon superficiality to enter a *depth*, new, more irreverent, physicalized, blind, tactile idea of painting where the superimpositions play on the lightness and heaviness of the images layered one on top of the other. In this effort the painted images mediate their energy, intertwining and overlapping, to produce a nucleus that lets the "narrative" throb and yields a painting that trembles with farms and perimeters, surfaces and volumes - a painting that folds in on itself but also ferments and stratifies itself, exposed as it is to the impact of its expressive force. ...*in continuum, compenetrazioni/traslati* (1987-88) is a way of making art that avoids the torment of the *Plurimi* and creates its own defense: the desire to exist as a concrete, constructive and architectural physiognomy.

The reconstitution of the painting's body and the search for a certain harmony and unity - still revolving, however, around the discontinuity and drama of signs and colors - finds in 1985 an all-enveloping form, a kind of model or original mould: the figure of the circle. These becomes concretized in the *Disco* and the *Tondo*, two distinctions by which Vedova differentiates his circular, bifrontal and vertical paintings from the frontal and horizontal paintings on the ground. This figure enriches the continuity of the lacerations and rendings, the multiplicity and heterogeneity of Vedova's paintings. It reconstitutes their shattered body and brings it into an area that becomes the piece of choice: the circle. The disk and tondo are thus a reshaping of the relationship between

sculpture and painting; they add a further transformation of the motif of the birth of matter, one which is bound to a form whose emblematic character translates the vital power of action into a virtual universe in which the spirit moves with the ease of a primitive force. The appearance of the tondo and disk introduces a principle of higher order into the disorder, and in it the surprise of disconnectedness and effort finds a unifying envelope. With their circular form, the tondo and disk belong to the high forms of the history of art. They are related to the form of the Renaissance *desco da parto* ("birth table"), articulated with the story of the birth and life of the "creator;" but first and foremost they indicate an absence of distinctions and divisions between forms and elements. The circle is the principle of perfection; it contains all hierarchies, all eras, and thus can accept all the activities and dynamic inclusions of material and immaterial life. A place of union, it is the origin and the end of the universe. This is why, in the history of art, its form has seduced artists like Botticelli and Michelangelo, Raffaello and Parmigianino, Veronese, Vasari, Pellizza da Volpedo and Delaunay, Fontana and Wesselman. The tondo has asserted itself as a principle of visual and spatial energy, both iconic and anti-iconic, aristocratic and popular, human and industrial, sacred and profane. It is a cosmos of the composite co-habitation of forces and forms, colors and lines. It brings together different, closed worlds, concentrating them without depriving them of their singularity, becoming only the total image of an ensemble of relationships which, though disparate and contrasting, crystallize into a unique presence by virtue of the birth of art. The unificatory success of Vedova's disks and tondi lies in their ability to bring together simultaneously all the problematics of his works from the *Plurimi* to *...in continuum*; the surfaces establish an active interrelationship (the disks, as we have seen, are double-faced) made up of exchanges, echoes and responses. Moreover, they move freely in space, settling to the ground or climbing up a wall, leaning against one another to create intertwinings and multiple wholes, cleaving the walls with *Non dove / breccia '88 - III (Not Where / Breach '88 - III)*, 1988 or revolving about themselves. They reflect one another and echo the complexity of the surrounding architecture. They prod its immobility and monumentality, producing an effect of vertigo and, at times, submersion, which becomes a dazzling light of forms and colors, movements and positions. In their circularity and verticality, which make them move in all conditions, the tondo and disk function on a level of total freedom. They slide and rotate in continuous reflection of the architecture, prolonging the life of a dissociation and provocation that submerges all context. Their mobility, in its formation into clusters and groups, single units and pairs, captures the attention of any exhibition space, whether in New York, Milan, Celle or Venice. They function in the service of a concentrated energy, which nevertheless manages to disperse itself in order to take command of the space. Finally, with their multiplicity, they lure the spectator into a labyrinth that seduces and imprisons the gaze.

One finds the figure of the circle again in the projects *Per uno spazio* (1996-97), sketches that present Vedova's future intentions to permeate architecture. They are little maquettes that bear witness to yet one more step taken in the dialectic between order and disorder, stasis and motion. Made of metal plates and scored with scratches and paintings, these future disks internalize the idea of the labyrinth. They are fraught with curves and cuts, forms and protuberances that highlight their radiant power, which is no longer only external but internal as well. They declare their own wakefulness and activeness as to their identity, as magnetic, ecstatic poles with respect to the architecture. Their lacerations operate on two levels, on the inside and the outside, on light and shadow, on high and low, thus unleashing an energy that enables the gaze to penetrate their innermost being as well as that purifying vertigo that stems from their *shredding* of forms and images, space and volumes.

Far from constituting themselves as inert entities, the disks and tondi express the magnetism of Vedova's painting, which unfolds in terms of *quanta* that, as active signs, initiate a flux and reflux

of images which, when they interact, thrust painting into a sculptural realm of open, radiant tension, even while maintaining the boundaries of their own individuality. They go from being unique nuclei of life to forces whose potency alchemically transforms architecture into a devouring stage of forms and colors, objects and actions. Within its space moves Vedova's whole *nocturnal* vision; the *Dischi* (*Disks*) are its latest aspect, since they stand at the transitional point between painting and sculpture. Their composition in space makes them twofold, with a dissociative charge aimed at finding the zero point into which fall the worlds of volume and void, life and death, art and architecture, abstract and concrete, fixity and volatility.

With its precarity and instability, the *Dischi* transcend the limits of expressive safety, proving that if a certain kind of painting wishes to lay claim to spatial conflicts and stage them, it must live in a state of risk. It cannot merely continue to line up a series of terms - paintings - in sequence; rather, it must let itself be carried away by an overwhelming force that cannot be subjected to any logic other than that of a living condition. Bereft of their surface identity, the *Dischi*, *Tondi* and *Brecce* are not meant to bask in their roundness, but rather to evoke a constant transfusion of artistic continuity. They are slashes and punctures, surprises and fragments that reactivate the buried forces of a perceptual condition. Whether slicing the air or unhinging the walls, they present themselves as cosmic forces conveying the faculties of the human being. And since life is non-repetition, the ceaseless creation of ideas and images, we begin to understand Vedova's need to bear witness to the human tragedies that lead to the disappearance of cultural vestiges. In the 1993 work *Chi brucia un libro brucia un uomo* (*He Who Burns a Book Burns a Man*), the dramatic whirlwinds of war that led to the destruction of books, codices, libraries and archives of memory, are transformed into a disco plurimo, a kind of circular book with movable pages that has the ability to embody the silence of a culture reduced to ashes, a culture that finds its metamorphosis no longer in a product but in a warning sign with human roots struck deep in tragedy. With this work, Emilio Vedova enters the interstices of a social body torn by obsession and fanaticism and denounces its dark, inglorious resolve. This brings with it the blackness of a transmutation no longer reflecting human forces but the horror and blood of the victims, from the citizen to his body of knowledge.

Chi brucia un libro brucia un uomo is a journey into blackness and the cruelty of a society that witnesses the decline and contempt of multicultural stratification and accepts its degradation and extinction as inevitable. With this "monumental" disk, Vedova lets us feel the weight of art's tension between limits and limitlessness, between the registration of the imperceptible sign and the macroscopy of the symbol. He strikes the secret fibers of his painting and sculpture in order to retrace a matrix which, if it is lost in the paroxysm of power, will lead to the death of Culture itself, and hence of Art.