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Paola Pivi

A Project for the Castle

Marcella Beccaria

An extreme tension pulling towards the outer limits is one possible definition for the poetic force that animates Paola Pivi's works. Indeed there is no concession made to virtuous half-measures. For Pivi a work is the expression of a liberated form of reality raised to the nth expressive power. "What interests me is the absurd aspect of reality", the artist has said. In other words, hers is a phenomenology of excess, constructed with tireless tenacity and distilled in works that appear to have the concision of sharp statements. A brief reflection on some of the works she has made so far may illustrate these points.

The starting point behind a work can be found in a seemingly simple reality like that of cookies. *Biscotti (Cookies)*, completed in 1996, is a complex construction made of thousands of biscuits assembled so as to form an imposing, rigorous yet at the same time essential architecture. The work is as large a construction as one may make by piling up biscuit upon biscuit. The gesture is almost elementary, yet the result is a clear idea of mass presented in the shape of a fragile but compact matter. As well as retaining energy, according to a natural law of compensation, the work also releases it in the form of a strong aroma which permeates the space where the work is installed. And once completed, the piece can be remade. This is also the case with *Progetto per un'opera di marzapane (Project for a marzipan work)*, again from 1996. Here the architecture is created through the use of different combinations based around the shape of a cube, in this instance through the act of laying down a domino pattern of rectangular slices of bread which compose cubes of one to six sides. As with an engineering project, every individual element is necessary to sustain the whole. As in other of Pivi's works, created with edible materials and therefore extremely perishable, the rigorous design of the work is the key by which it retains its strength.

Camion (Truck), 1997, can be considered another manifestation of the spirit of logical necessity which informs Pivi's work. The piece is composed of an articulated lorry lying on its side and installed outdoors. The genesis of this work is extremely complex: firstly it implies an effort to organize forces and means in order to find an adequate-sized truck and turn it on its side. The operation also involves the coordination of external forces, human and mechanical, such as the two cranes required to overturn the vehicle. Yet at the same time, the result is immediate and has the essential quality of an epiphanic vision. Trucks are the biggest vehicles circulating on the road. The vehicle's relatively simple geometrical shape moves through space; it is capable of going on for thousands of miles. The act of overturning the truck on its side, with an action which rotates it through exactly 90°, besides evoking the mythological gesture of David felling the giant, isolates the truck's very nature by exposing its essence.

The spectacular is certainly an important component of Paola Pivi's works, which deliberately seek

excess, an excess that is present both in the work itself and in the process which feeds it. *Leoni (Lions)*, 1998, for example is an installation composed of twelve arc-lights with a combined power of around 64,000 watts. The lights require a powerful external generator and the visitors enter the exhibition space following the same path as that traced by the cables which supply current to them. Depending on one's individual reaction, spending time in the space where the work is installed can be either pleasant or literally unbearable, since both light and heat are emanated in great quantity. *Leoni* is a work of energy in its pure state, a discharge of adrenaline so strong that it might even prove to be lethal.

Concentrating energy fields seems to be a fundamental component of Pivi's *modus operandi*. In some way tautological, *100 cinesi (100 Chinese)*, 1998, is a performance where a group of Chinese men and women, all dressed identically, are squashed into a square space. Spectators find themselves confronting a mass that, although entirely physical and composed of individuals, is also an abstraction of the concept which becomes self-evident in contrast with the viewers attending the performance who walk up and down in disorderly fashion.

The role of the artist, not only as generator of sense but particularly as locus of power, is emphasized and exhibited through various actions and operations. It's a courageous idea which doesn't attempt to mask its almost cynically utopian aspects. *Senza titolo (Untitled)*, 1999, presented at the Venice Biennale is a Fiat G91 plane rotated through 180°. The artist's action succeeds in giving full form to a process which appears to have all the components of an absolute logical incongruity. The fighter aircraft is tamed, exhibited in such a way that its formal structure is emphasized, while its destructive potential is denied. The flying object *par excellence* has apparently landed, maintaining perfect symmetrical balance, in a position which is a contradiction in terms. What is being exhibited here is thus also the artist's capacity to mold the impossible, the willingness to occupy the extreme limit of representation.

At the Castello di Rivoli, Paola Pivi is showing a piece that marks a significant evolution in her path, a piece which expands on some of the main themes that define her work and make it such a singular presence on the contemporary scene. *Senza titolo (Untitled)*, 1999 is a work made of thousands of artificial pearls, which are strung like myriad chains hung from an extremity. Talking about this work and the series to which it belongs the artist has referred to it as "the maximum concentration in space of precious elements." The image of the pearl is highly suggestive: it represents the yin principle, the fundamental symbol of female creation which in many cultures is also associated with the idea of immortality. Every pearl, even if artificial, represents the transfiguration of elements. This work further develops the concept of mass and energy, which has always been central to Pivi's artistic project. However, compared with the works described above, in this instance such concepts are made objective, tangible and in a way durable, yet through an element which is a mystical center. The strings of pearls, like so many rosaries in close proximity, are chains of worlds. The total effect is extremely luxurious. In Pivi's words: "I see luxury as a slow unfolding of energy." In this sense the work also condenses the theme of a sought-for precious quality which she previously explored in a series of pieces in the form of small precisely fashioned sofa-sculptures which had been drenched in perfume. Here the aspect of luxury is given an exotic nuance, another important component in the genesis of the work. Contained in the pearls is the idea that the finished works are both the result and an integral part of a complex operation involving several different factors, that gives shape to a utopia of excess. The work becomes a piece of jewelry in which each individual pearl condenses many hours of work and carries the flavor of a

remote land. As Derek Jarman once wrote "to see the world in a grain of sand."