Deafness and the damned present

by Giorgio verzotti

A whole week went by before I could speak on the phone to Pietro Fortuna. I'd caught otitis travelling by train to Paris in a car where the air conditioning obviously wasn't working properly, and so was utterly deaf for over a month. When I finally did speak to him, we made arrangements as to when and how I'd be handing in my piece about his work, the one you're reading now.
It was a surprise to discover that deafness was a very fitting metaphor to express my relationship to Fortuna's work, and that I would learn still more about that relationship through a series of chance meetings (but again, that's always happening to me – yesterday's concert, the book finished three days back somehow lend me the keys to something I'll be writing about in a week's time...). One thing must be clear, though: when I say deafness, I don't mean mine – that's gone. I mean his deafness, his work's.
Several critics have written about Pietro Fortuna; none get round to writing about his work. There seems to be some issue there, that gets carefully deferred, procrastinated. What you do read is discourse about the interrelations of his art, ethics, life. And it seems extravagant, too, there should still be critics who'll insist on the relations between the artist's work and biography, when that question is quite patently vacuous: in Pietro Fortuna, life and art are quite simply one and the same thing – made to coincide more and more closely to the extent that he eschews all aestheticism, in his works as in personal existence.
My deafness forced me to apply to the other senses for communication, but that was simply a case of communicating through channels of expression. The deafness I'm talking about, the deafness of the work, points to an entirely different ontological plane: it has nothing to do with expression, expressiveness, or anything we might develop on that plane.
I was in Pietro Fortuna's company when I visited his recent installation at the Rome Macro, for which he assembled three great works, all of which had been exhibited before, into a new complex. Here was an opportunity to resume a dialogue that had been interrupted for years, and which had begun in the early eighties in Milan, when Fortuna was holding two personal exhibitions at private galleries. I remember that his works of that period traced some kind of itinerary, in which each piece stood out as a separate entity. In the hall of the Rome exhibition, instead, the three works constituted a whole on a massive scale, coexisted as parts of a novel construction. The itinerary has become circular: it is a circumnavigation of this imposing assemblage, with the eyes allowed freely to range over works that now appear so forcefully interconnected.
I prefer to represent it to you as a whole, and not an installation, or a display. These are terms that have something theatrical about them, whereas Fortuna makes certain demands of the relation of work to viewer: of the work, he demands frontal impact; of the viewer, the necessary detachment to receive it.
American critics like Clement Greenberg disapproved of what they regarded as the theatricality of minimalist sculpture: as they saw it, theatricality entails narrative, that the work be perceived

through time coordinates. When the instances of creative thought are deployed onto the phenomenological level, the viewer is obliged to engaged with the work through acts of motion, through an effort that is psycho-physical. As they saw it, the work must pose itself immediately, as a given, as a signifying totality; it must somehow transcend phenomenological temporality. That is when the perception of the work becomes eminently visual, a fact concerning the mind alone.
That critique, at any rate, applied to American "modernist" formalists. Fortuna, however, is not a formalist – or so he maintains. What, then, is involved in his demand for frontalism, non-temporality, non-narrativity (as his critics have so tediously underlined...)? What is most certainly involved is a quest for absolutes; also, the persuasion that art must not deviate from its constitutive mysticism, has to be expressed in the circular time of ritual and ceremony (ceremony is explicitly mentioned by Fortuna in relation to this work, and the inscriptions that appear on it, drawn from the Old Testament, from the Torah, and the artist's own meditations, lend a special tone, give a special kind of colouring to the work). Most of all, however, what is involved is Fortuna's notion of passivity.
The work is deaf in its relation to me because it will not let itself be "explained:" by not entering into a dialectic, it poses itself as an irreducible *diaferein* – of this we're all agreed. The life of the work resides in (consists of) pure obstention. There is more, though.
At a certain site within that whole, there is assembled a group of white plaster owls – some free, some hinged to metal circles that keep them apart from the others. There is irony in the precise naturalism of the details, as the wide eyes of the owls mirror my own interrogative gaze: they seem to be there just to become my counter-gaze, a harsh reciprocation in which I too am made deaf.
There is a splendid documentary about Fortuna, which I saw on the Internet. At one point he comes out with one of those remarkable statements of his, and says that passivity embraces the disquietude of an awakening. His concept of passivity is contiguous to what Emmanuel Lévinas framed as *profound suffering*: the disposition to listen to the Other from which springs my responsibility towards them. The counter-gaze of the work, the deafness it opposes against my enquiring pretences (and its sheer frontalism, and its mere ostensiveness) become a lesson in listening, a lesson of respect. The work teaches that acceptance of the Other is disquietude (remember? And the Third also...).
The dark and yellowy cylinders that rest, elegantly placed horizontally, also summon issues of responsibility towards an Otherness, and usher in a further consideration that also underlies the work of Fortuna.
In his drawings, Fortuna traces the images of objects he finds in his studio, all of them perfectly ordinary objects of every-day life, some related to his working activity, some not. The drawing deprives the objects of their volume, flattens them onto two dimensions. At the same time, though, they are rescued, Fortuna "salvages" them by giving them a different physical dimension. The images are overlaid and printed on transparent PVC sheets, accompanied by words and sentences; the sheets are then rolled up to form the cylinders, precisely. Streaks of colour also appear, which Fortuna applies manually (in the documentary we see him strangely handling the PVC with bare hands, thus leaving his "human" imprints on the works...). Some important consequences follow: in this new state, the object is somehow restored the physical volume it lost in being drawn; being

rolled up, the object is now protected and "preserved;" the object is rescued from being consumed (metaphorically, by the gaze) and from material deterioration. On the symbolic plane, the salvage of the object teaches us that art is not a form of economics, that it has no use value (it does have an exchange value, but that is determined by the market, which is to say by mechanisms that are foreign to its essence); that art is not a productive practice, and indeed tends to subtract, rather than accumulate. These issues that surfacing in the work of Fortuna could be radicalised: we might say with Lacan that art is always in "perte pure," in a state of *pure loss*. I mention the great Frenchman because my deafness is in part due to him, and because some of the landscaping I find in the work of Fortuna is reminiscent of Lacanian topographies.

I spent seven hours travelling on the TGV from Paris absorbed in the last of several essays his biographer, Elisaberth Roudinesco, has devoted to him: serious air conditioning, ensured ear-ache, prolonged deafness. But I jest.

What else might one see in the Pietro Fortuna's grand work in the Hall at Macro?

An electric flashlight shining onto a small bronze bell. Light is essential for all artists: Fortuna, who is an artist in a special sense, understands the profound indebtedness of technique to light, and therefore also of artifice to light, and understands how light is instrumental to human action. He also realises its limit, though, which lies in "burning out" the contours of things, impeding full apperception of the object. It would be a mistake to interpret the flashlight shining on the object as a metaphor of rational thought, or as metaphor of the relation of thought to "the real." It would be a mistake, and there is another work to confirm it: it is a sheet with a heavy iron frame around it, and we learn it addresses the theme of the good. All that we actually see on the sheet is a list, somewhat casually arranged, of the names of benevolent institutions and renowned criminal organisations. We wonder what it might mean: in my opinion this is what "the real" is all about, here presented in its extreme aspects, undecidable, unaccountable. I have mentioned Lacanian topographies: the one that structures the psychic determines the positions of the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary.

The real is given as an analogue of Heideggerian "Being-in." The real is properly that which cannot be defined other than through the mediation of the symbolic (the real, I once said in conversation with Thomas Ruff, is like one of his photojournalism pieces with no caption – banal, but one gets the idea). The real is that which exists absolutely as a given, the real is deaf to accountability. It is up to us to distinguish, up to art to redeem.

And yet, what could be more alluring than the temptation to capture the real without mediation: to grasp things as they stand prior to signification, prior to signs; to grasp the perfect adherence word and thing. Fortuna speaks of this explicitly, because the fundamental logic of his work revolves around this utopian ideal. The frontalism he attempts to institute is a modality of thought that aspires to being actualised in experience. It is an absolute "here" striving to match an absolute "now;" it runs counter to all depths, counter to all perspective schemata (whether temporal or spatial), for as long, at least, as depth and perspective continue to be the outward signs of an ideological construct, of a world-vision.

Hence, also, the considerations on time Fortuna brings into his notes on the work at Macro (the title of which is *Glory*, *The Tears of the Angel* – and much as I dislike revelling in citation, I find it impossible not to draw a parallel with wide gaping eyes of Klee's *Angelus Novus*). Lost between

past and future, the present becomes nothing, eludes conscious experience as well as abstract thought, poses itself as ungraspable – just like the Lacanian Real. Demoted to "damned present," without depth and perspective, we decline to take it on; suddenly, though, as the Feldmarschallin in *Rosenkavalier* says, "it surrounds us," and finds us unawares, and brings us melancholy.

To take on the present, to attain the "thing," to overstep the need for the symbolic and for depth is a dizzying mental progress, and in fact leads directly to mysticism. The utopia of certain philosophers and artists is the attempt to lower the dimension of mysticism onto the asperities of existence. I see no exaggeration in adding that, if absolute frontism and the transcendence of phenomena from time is a divine attribute, we must be grateful for these attempts to bring the divinity among us.