

Over a lifetime

by Maurizio Marrone

I believe that all critical discussions of art are invariably confined to approaching their subject matter by way of cursory descriptions and more or less penetrating formal analyses of individual works and artists, and that this necessarily has to be the case for as long as certain apparently obvious and basic questions remain neglected, as they frequently and surprisingly are. What, then, is a work of art? What notion of the world does it communicate and uphold? What notion of the world does it conform to? What is the function of art in the uncertain dynamics of language, and how does its delicate relationship with the other categories of the spirit stabilize and reach a point of balance?

To a certain extent, questions such as these have laid the foundational grounds of a well established hermeneutical practice; their methodical import may be ignored (a common and, after all, more than legitimate practice), but this entails a shift of emphasis entirely on the 'how' of the work of art, to the detriment of the authoritative eloquence of that which is essential in art. In other words, it's one thing to decode a work of art meticulously, expand on its style, explore the web of its models and references; it is quite another to pursue such issues to attain the level of its fundamental language and of its aesthetic-phenomenological dimension.

Committed as I am to exegesis, rather than methodological dissertation, I have on frequent occasion maintained that all answers to the questions given above, with their various corollaries, rest on the tenet that a work of art, in its accomplished form (supposing this is ever realised), will always abandon its author as a matter of course, and, having overstepped the threshold of the artist's studio, be exposed to its own fate (bear the weight of it onto itself) as an absolute conveyor of meaning.

When such involuntary and inevitable parricide has been committed, the work of art, being in all respects a full linguistic item, might become integrated into a syntax (at times even redefining its rules) with outcomes that are wholly beyond the scope of its author's plans and intents, even when, as a matter of coincidence, they happen to harmonize .

The latent possibility of a structural distance of this order accounts for all those instances in which an artist's work (meaning, here, the production of a lifetime), no matter how closely it may be a 'likeness' of its maker, opens up a world of which the artist cannot be fully aware, and discloses horizons of meaning that sweep away and retroactively redefine the theoretical framework of its conception.

On the other hand, in spite of the space between the artist and the work, that distance which results in parricide, or possibly in parallel with it, there are examples that testify how the distance between the idea and the thing, the concept its realisation, the plan and its ultimate destiny, is burnt out by a firm and irreducible symmetry of intensity that partly restores the work of art to the original intention of the artist.

And it is in the light of this (never quite complete) symmetry that Pietro Fortuna's work acquires, in my opinion, full and legitimate intelligibility. Not because we are to understand the occurrence of a correspondence of this kind as a signal that the work of art

is an ‘accomplishment’, but because in the work of a lifetime (the life and work of Pietro Fortuna) we are able to discern, first of all, a search for meaning that finds its very *raison d’être* when the correspondence arises. Pietro Fortuna’s production is, taken as a whole, the indelible mark left by relentless effort whose final aim is to infuse the work and its bare presence with the foundational traits of an aesthetic. The being-there of the work of art is an expression of the necessity that it be ‘thus and not otherwise’, because ‘thus and not otherwise’ is what art itself is.

In the light of what has been said, such relationships of reciprocity become a necessary component in an analysis that aims to penetrate the surface and look beyond the sign and form of his work. Particularly so when we consider the aesthetic dimension within which his works become an act as they reach out to meet; his aesthetics is at one with a clearly delineated and not in the least naive view of the world: the being-there of the work reveals its having to be ‘thus and not otherwise’, because ‘thus and not otherwise’ is the way the world itself is. To speak of the work of Pietro Fortuna, therefore, is to look at his works as the *exempla* of a manner of conceiving art which coincides, first and foremost, with a specific view of the world.

In taking into account the complex relationships between the works, art and a *Weltanschauung*, I have tried to subject my critique and hermeneutic practice to the kind of progressive reduction and systematic synthesis that would allow me to capture the authentic and unique specificity of nearly thirty years of work. I therefore tried to conceive of a paradox whereby, through an improvised and entirely hypothetical cryptic contraction of language, I were obliged to select just one word that would condense the many that crowd my thoughts when I reflect upon his work and convey the most intimate meaning of his doing. Many different options naturally crossed my mind: rigour, tenacity, responsibility, infinity, coherence, meaning, truth, ethics, presence, silence. Each one of them shows the traces of a path, is evocative of the phases of an evolution, and gives form to fragments of meaning. And yet, to my own surprise, the word that finally imposed itself on all others, and in a sense is the ultimate foundation of all the other possibilities, is the word *life*.

The coupling of such a concept with the work of an artist whose language and style were formerly erroneously taken as being related with the formalist currents of conceptualism and minimalism (whose aesthetic blueprint is a recursive exercise in metalinguistic abstraction) might seem rather audacious. Yet the centrality of ‘life’, in the twofold sense that I shall propose, is what ultimately that locates Pietro Fortuna's works in a place of existence and thought that is ‘other’ and keeps it ‘sheltered’ from any inclination to self-referentiality and literary or didactic ambition. In saying this, I should also stress that in no sense such reference to life is to be intended as aesthetic flaunting and spectacularization of an unhealed wound (as in Damien Hirst), nor as the symbolic display of a primitive sacrifice, in relation to which art is, or would stand as, a cathartic synthesis (as in Herman Nitsch).

Devoid of all pseudo-scientific contamination (vitalism, holism, etc.) and hyperrealist simplification, life, as it manifestly appears in a number of productions from recent years (Realismi, Lilith, Dura spina, the Matan video), acts as a germinating element whose purpose is to display no other thing than its own quiet transcendence. It is the unaccented yet irrevocable element which shelters art from all mimetic *hubris* and eschatological

reference, lays its making before irredeemable inevitability, before a time that does not make promises.

The component that, like a mineral 'fixed residue', precipitates from his works and ensures that they do not take a didactic or narrative drift is life, understood as disposition to the expression of meaning that rejects the categories of past and future and is immersed in the unadorned fullness of the present. At the same time, life is the ultimate horizon of intelligibility for his entire work, to the extent that it stands as the non-transcendable foundation of his day to day practice, where the co-belonging of the work, art and reality absolve all existential and signifying function.

In Pietro Fortuna's life there is nothing but art, because art is not a communicative function amongst others: it is a pure act that leaves the world be as it is in its transcendent reality; it is the only event that turns life into the one act of responsibility whose final end is to bear witness to the pure and simple being-there of the real. It is also by virtue of this phenomenological slant and attention to the unmediated adherence to the modest yet noble being 'thus and not otherwise' of things that his work, devoted to sheer testimony, is unencumbered by metaphoric and literary proclivities. Fortuna rejects the image not out of a faith in the semantics abstraction; what he rejects is the representational logic of the image, its ambition to 'stand for something else', its wanting to be 'too much' with regard to the 'little' that ultimately makes up the essence of objects. It's as if his work turned to things in order to grasp and then give back their stern modesty: a modesty which, because it is irrevocable, exceeds the dynamics of reference and call for the intimacy of an act of testimony.

In this sense, every work of art is an exemplary word that brings with it the memory of the simplest and most sublime vital act: the gaze that precedes all words and takes in the irreparable purity of the real.

This return to things and to a conception of art as an elementary and therefore 'inescapable' act of life, has induced me to seek not the models, but the analogues, and to interpret the work of Pietro Fortuna as an indirect phenomenological articulation of Joseph Beuys's extraordinary prophetic intuition. And yet, by virtue of this philosophical vein, that which represented an apparently naturalistic connection between art and life in Beyus (although his position was in fact a great deal more complex), acquires with Fortuna a new and entirely original ethical tinge.

In order to avoid contaminating this singularity with a rhetoric of art as socially engagé that is entirely foreign to his instance, it is necessary to be clear about the meaning of words. The meaning of ethics is only seemingly unambiguous: we all know, or think we know, what we are really referring to when we talk about, or say are guided by, ethics. Yet, on closer inspection, that word, that concept with which we feel soundly and peacefully familiar, loses depth and solidity as we attempt to seize and capture its essence. Its assumed meaning shatters and disperses into an infinity of definitions, each one of them claiming onto itself authenticity over all the rest. We frequently regard ethics as the complex system of rules that is based on an unaccountable yet shared principle (what the Greeks called *mythos*) and regulates the social dimension of existence. In reality, ethics is always in excess of its normative expression (a *corpus* of precepts and conventions), and, as regards its most intimate meaning (its very *raison d'être*), it wholly

coincides with the principle that allows it to be the 'commonplace' of all possible communities.

In directing his attention at this commonplace as the elective seat of his art, Pietro Fortuna's work pushes beyond the indeterminate bounds of ethical experience. From this point of view, the aim of art is not to construct new images of known models (nature, man, the world). It is, rather, that act of a foundational existence which occurs wherever a form of action is realised as a reflection of its own commonplace; it is the gaze which, as I said above, takes in the irreparable purity of the real and follows its transcendence. This testimonial and ana-iconic disposition of Pietro Fortuna is a *de facto* act of responsibility; it is, in fact, the archetypal experience of every concrete and responsible act, and represents the (untold) substratum of our own ethical conscience.

The quiet and authoritative inertness of the objects which he, as if it were a sacrificial rite, adds to reality (Tails, Ma 'asim zarim, Sinedrio, Die Insel, Temanza), falling on this side of any symbolic and communicative initiation, displays a restraint that does not admit for words, because what is experienced through them is not a narrative time, but the ecstasy of something which is exemplary in its becoming manifest. It is here that, with Pietro Fortuna, art becomes experience of the good.