

maria cristina carlini

Sculpture as extension

Maria Cristina Carlini's big-sized works in the old town centre of Paris

“See to it that I [sculpture] am not an object, but an extension; see to it that I do not remain within the three dimensions, where death is hidden”. These are two of the “commandments” left in 1945, on the eve of the disappearance, by Arturo Martini, in his well-known booklet *La scultura lingua morta* (Sculpture as a dead language), hoping in a “rebirth” of sculpture¹. Opening, relational nature versus closing, isolation and statues. Precisely, extension versus object.

These are sharp and far-seeing forecasts, in which the master – then tormented by the “impossibilities” of that sculpture of which he had been the protagonist for decades – foresaw what – only – sculpture would have been able to save, always within the framework of radical changes, in the imminent crisis of the traditional statutes of the arts. In fact, that concept of extension will take – obviously, with connotations different from the ones connected to a different cultural context, postulated by Martini – a more and more crucial prominence, beyond mere environmental terms, within wide, flexible topological coordinates involving the totality of a space meant and frequented as a field. The one assumed by the interventions on a town planning scale created by Maria Cristina Carlini for the living reality of the old city centre of Paris, in direct contrast with a past loaded with historical - and specifically cultural and artistic – memories lived in the present and as present.

The roots: earth, water, fire, and the hand

These achievements of Carlini's maturity imply a long approaching way² which is proposed here once again in order to compare and understand in a proper way not only to the evolution of her imagination and attitude to shaping, but also to the way in which her preference for certain materials and techniques has gained ground and been consolidated, in and with that evolution, and how at a certain point she has turned to unprecedented and even unpredictable materials and, as a consequence, creative processes in these last fundamental works.

First of all, we cannot avoid starting from the “brainwave” – that the artist always stressed in her biographical notes – produced by the moulding of clay on the wheel at the beginning of the 70s, for Maria Cristina cannot be explained without an understanding of the sudden conversion that she always mentions in her biographical notes. This came about in the early 1970s – when she was working with clay at the pottery wheel in Palo Alto, California, where she lived at the time, doing a two-year stint of study and practice in that field of

ceramic art with which she was to identify for years afterwards and which was to remain her safe anchorage even when her experiences entered more complex terrain. Earth, its primary nature and the primordial relationship it enjoys with man that comes to the fore when he mixes it with water to work it and shape it, then gives it solidity by subjecting it to fire - like water and earth itself, a primary element. Not unlike the hand-driven potter wheel in its own way, a tool and extension of the very body of the craftsman, more than of the artist, for purposes that were certainly originally thoroughly practical, but which have melded with the quest for structure, functional but, with the passing of time, more and more charged with those attributes that go beyond the merely useful.

Even then, though, the artist did not experience the archaic roots of matter and her methods of shaping it as an intentional return to the past, to prehistoric times. There was nothing ideological in her choice, nor less “stylistic”, in the sense of referring to styles from remote bygone eras. In fact, her commitment took form outside the logic of the liberating flight from crisis, from values and thus from civilisation that had marked European art at the turning point of the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries and in the historical avant-gardes. With consequences those were often certainly very fertile, leading to the re-establishment of contemporary art itself in the quest for an unprecedented sense of dawning rather than one for a style as such. And which on other sides – just think of the “savage values” expressed by the great Dubuffet – incarnated the moment when the ‘wound’ inflicted on modernism by the two great world wars, in a conscientious response that developed into an “non-representational” art, also known by the strikingly effective name of *autre*, i.e. other. This register of application to the working of earths – which is also alien to the revival of tradition on an ‘archaeological’ register, of the ‘aseptic’ catalogue-like reviewing and refashioning of the forms of the past, considered as nothing but the past and thus, ultimately, as something inert – was to remain exclusive in Maria Cristina, first in Brussels, where she moved in 1975, and then in Italy, where she returned in 1978 and ultimately put an end to her silence in 1983, when she showed her works in the Fortress of Angera, on Lake Maggiore. Still wanting to improve her work and compare her technique with those used by her peers, the artist went back to study in the United States in 1984, this time at the Californian College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, near San Francisco. But she was soon back in Milan, where 1985 saw her present a series of very interesting pieces in her studio in Via Ciovasso, which she has named “Le Terre” (Earths), after her materials: vases of glazed stoneware or covered with slip, or else made using both techniques, always at high temperatures of course, like the other containers she realised in glazed refractory clay; and also irregular plates and ‘cartouches’, shapes like scrolls with raggedly raised edges, stoneware plates shaped on the wheel with inlays of different clays, again fired at high temperatures. There was clear evidence of the thrust derived from fifteen years of experience, also as a consequence of her more recent studies in California which, as a booklet-catalogue about the works states³, “Mark a turning point in her research, directing” the artist “increasingly to consider just the earth, in all its colours and its nuances”.

The presentation of these works attracted the interest of the press, which dwelled in particular on the ‘archaism’, as well as the technical perfection, of the vases and the plates, but also notices the novelty of the artist’s freer, more open pottery, in which, with the benefit of hindsight, we recognize the beginnings of her more mature output, the promise of great developments, reaching even as far forwards as the works which are presently exhibited in Paris. Thus did Luisa Espanet write about “[...] A nerve-ribbed shape, like that of a crumpled leaf; about “another, more fleeting, one, like a handkerchief

fluttering in the wind”, as well as about “a vase entirely variegated by an incredible mauve colour”⁴, while Riet quoted the artist, who “says: ‘what is more fragile and at the same time indestructible, more fascinating than an element such as earth?’ “ and therefore invited readers “not to consider the pottery vase just as a container any more, but above all as an artistic manifestation to give shape and form to earth “⁵.

This hope was also expressed in relation to the “enormous plates with their uneven layers”⁶ shown in her studio in Via Ciovasso, which, like the cartouche shapes (both of these shapes were the result of a characterising meeting between different materials: porcelain with or without inserts in stoneware, or with slip or finishes in majolica or stoneware in two colours), inaugurated a new operative approach, introducing Maria Cristina not only to a broader spectrum of choices and thus of objectives, of methods of forming and of their nexus with invention, but also inducing her to leave pottery as a “genre” and the risks of being relegated to a ghetto and impoverished that a classification of that kind could involve. In fact, there are pottery artists: people who devote or have devoted their time to it, making specialised choices and pursuing aims focused primarily on producing objects - mostly vases, cups and plates, but also decorated tiles, lamps and other things, or ornamental figurines, whose purposes may be utilitarian and functional, but also aesthetic and decorative, sometimes exclusive. But there are also other artists, most of them sculptors, but also some painters, who turn to pottery for the quality of the materials and of the methods of processing that they postulate when they find them particularly congenial to their creative motivation, to their expressive intentions. These are artists who choose to work and fire clay when they find that it suits what they want to achieve in terms of free creativity. As in 1997 I entitled an exhibition’ at the Netta Vespignani⁷ Gallery in Rome, the time has then come to talk about “artists’ ceramics”. Not unlike the approach that should be adopted to describe the work of those who primarily - and sometimes even exclusively - devote their attentions to ceramics, but to create sculpture, not only everyday objects.

The watershed lies essentially between sculptors who use ceramics, or also use ceramics, for purely artistic purposes, without excluding anything, and those who use it as something statutorily self-concluding, also in its objectives, with a prejudicial restriction that may have a fallout effect on their real participation in the progression of the arts. In the second half of the 1980s, with these less orthodox works of hers, Maria Cristina Carlini passed from the second of these categories to the first, in the process gaining greater freedom in all senses: from creating ceramic sculpture without being subject to conventions and limits, to the very possibility which she then put into practice of adopting materials and techniques other than the ones peculiar to pottery, on the basis of nothing more than the intentions that motivate her approach to creating art, whether pottery or otherwise. And this without waiving the archaic values related even just to the gesture of the hand that shapes and passing beyond the circumscribed confines of even highly specialised craftsmanship, not abdicating to the creative concreteness of making, which is certainly not an end in itself nor an exclusive aim, but a moment in a more extensive interaction. Adopting a stance, as is obvious, vis-à-vis ceramic art, against its exclusive concentration of technical expertise and also against its subordination as a mere tool, bereft of any somehow specific “quality” of its own. These are misunderstandings that have led respectively to confusing the means with the end and to neglecting (sometimes even ignoring) the peculiarities of the method of working clay, so varied and rich in possibilities, with the consequence that the title of ceramist is attributed to simple, albeit highly expert, craftsmen and at the same time to artists who know little or nothing about pottery and do no more than transfer their drawings

or paintings onto a support unlike the one they usually use or casually handle clay, in both cases refraining from any consideration of the specifics of the material and the processes involved in its use.

Ceramic sculptures (but not only)

Earth - actually it is important to say it in the plural, earths remain focal in Maria Cristina Carlini's way of creating art, in the very same works which are presently being presented in Paris. From them, the artist draws the substance of her image, conceived to be sure, and thought out, but in a close relationship – I daresay dependence – with its qualities, bearing in mind the internal potentials of those matters, expressed in firing, in the definition of volumes and colours themselves. The former - the volumes - have nothing to do with the ones familiar to sculpture arrived at “by addition” or “by subtraction” nor with that which many an artist have for some time now been arriving at “by welding”, as in a master like Anthony Caro. The project that underlies this opus must inevitably come to terms not only with the changes brought about by the fire, but also with the impossibility to encapsulate the results - volumes and structures completely in overly exact prior definitions, even if they evaluate the endogenous mutations produced by the heat. What comes out of the kiln will never be the material translation of a previous calculation. It will have all the approximation of an event in progress, not just one that is theorised or represented with the signs of the agitation and transformations that have taken place. Just like in the crust of the earth and in its external appearance. Just like in a vital reality, then, not in its reconstruction. And as for the colours, once again, these are something that comes about during the long process of creating ceramic sculpture, of its elaboration under the effect of the temperatures, of their gradual rising and falling, and in the variety of the composition of the different materials used for the paste and the coating.

While all this continued to be experimented throughout Maria Cristina Carlini's entire career, from a certain moment onwards it was accentuated as the medium for autonomous works of sculpture, absolute, in the etymological sense of the word, in other words unfettered and free of restrictions. That was the moment when the ceramist can be said to have undergone the transformation into a sculptress who uses ceramics. This can already be seen in two Wall Sculptures in 1986⁸, which means that they were contemporary with the first Irregular Plates and the Cartouche Shapes, which the artist had been making since the previous year⁹. Carlini no longer used the potter's wheel at this stage, but sheets, with a base made of stoneware or porcelain, or stoneware inlaid with a variety of clays, as in many sculptures executed in the following years. The results made their presence felt for the dynamic balance between their centripetal and centrifugal forces, acting on planes and in depth. Maria Cristina soon moved out into environmental space, building walls and architectures that articulate what is already there in her smaller works, charging it with meaning, in images of quite considerable dimensions, although always with an extreme, quite often rather fleeting, fascination. This is the case of her leaden Nocturnal Dreams¹⁰, where there is evidence not unlike the works she has executed on a larger scale, with a certain analogy with the genetic characteristics present in every cell of our organism - of that “hidden force that the earth guards mysterious“ described by Stefano Zecchi¹¹. A force that “is revealed in the thousand forms that bear the image and the meaning of the earth. What is far away and divided, dispersed and nameless, finds focus and unity in this energy that gives rise to lift...].” And “maybe” continues the philosopher, “the sentiment of this quest, which allows the artist's intention and the will of

the material to flow, without stopping it at a predetermined place, is what fascinates the visitor who wanders around Maria Cristina studio, as she gets to grips with her earths'. To be sure, that "sentiment" comes across from every one of Maria Cristina's works, which for years now have nevertheless set about seizing the observer and conveying anything but satisfying messages, lately with more intriguing, at times even alarming, involvement. These messages are such as to trigger off questioning processes of analysis. The pleasure of the material" that thrived in Carlini "is not an end in itself It becomes a tool for circumscribing enigmatic places that try to embrace space and are repelled by it, as it has been observed in this connection by Elena Pontiggia"¹², who dedicated to Carlini enlightening critical interventions.

In the city

Towards the end of 2000 – in *Fall of the Theatre* (*Caduta del teatro*), 1999, for example, or in *Notes* (*Note*) and in *Phantoms of the Lake* (*Fantasma del lago*), both from 2002-2003¹³, Maria Cristina Carlini uses plates. The experiment is stimulating, in terms of both research and results, in its approach to testing the possibilities offered by a variety of materials and in the way it forces a breach in the hegemonic hold of ceramics. Besides, this remains of primary importance, in the same sculptures realized in metal and since the design phase of the projects, almost always of stoneware, including in the works executed for Paris, then magnified on the definitive scale through the recourse to corten steel. This material does not only allow enlarging the work to an extent difficult to obtain with stoneware due to the need of using big stoves for the firing, but also allows a sort of plastic moulding capable of transferring the effects fixed by the hand in the stoneware scale models to the big-sized works. This obstacle was sidestepped in 2007 by Carlini, who was by then determined to "make big", through the installation of a series of small-sized elements fired separately. Like in *Muro* (*Wall*), measuring 200 x 1.300 cm, with the tautological effect – not representative – of a real wall built using stoneware blocks. The visitor can admire it in the *Salle René Capitant*, in the palace of the Town Hall of the 5th District, which wanted and promoted this event, with another two contemporary works, always in stoneware, which for their characteristics – including dimensional – are not suitable to be placed in the open air: the magic installation *Stracci* (*Rags*) and a bunch of spheres/eggs irregularly cracked which evoke emotions experienced by the artist during a journey in Africa, the continent after which the work is entitled, and at the same time bring us back to the original subject of germinal, planetary, cosmic and anthropological, which with different accents recurs along the long path of this exhibition. This can already be seen in the two sculptures which make us get closer to the main adjoining poles of the display, the small square facing the façade of the Sorbonne Church and Place du Panthéon: *Inizio* (*Beginning*), in Boulevard St. Michel, near the meeting point with Boulevard Saint-Germain, on the side of the Hôtel de Cluny, a flamboyant Gothic building which houses a museum dedicated to the art and life in the medieval France; and *Madre* (*Mother*), in Rue Sufflot, which ends up in Place du Panthéon. The former, from 2008-2009, measuring 200 x 200 h 170 cm, made – like the other – of corten steel from a stoneware model, consists of a half-sphere with materially chipped edges, suggesting precisely, with its "shell", a germinal growth (but the symbology could be more general, in the cosmogonic reference to the splitting of the primordial egg in two parts), which communicates, balancing itself, with the three minimalist parallelepipedal bars projecting on the one side with an orderly iterative rhythm; the latter, from 2007-2009, measuring 200 x 200 h 170 cm, has a similar – but oval and entire – shape, opened by long and ample cracks, suggesting an advanced phase of the birth of life, always in

connection – though always on a more general level – with the diversified symbolic interpretations of the egg peculiar to many archaic civilizations.

A less cryptic work, always with reference to nature, is *Mistero* (Mystery), from 2008-2009, measuring 170 x 200 h 350 cm, in the vicinity of the Panthéon, which includes real birch trunks, highlighted and protected from behind by corten steel sheets fixed on the angle; a different theme can be found in *Letteratura* (Literature), from 2007-2009: some open books measuring 500 x 250 h 350 cm and made of corten steel. This time, the model they are drawn from is of stoneware, but of iron; they are installed in front of the façade of the Palace of the Town Hall of the 5th District; and finally *Legami* (Ties), from 2008-2009, measuring 180 x 190 x 470, facing the Sorbonne Chapel, a strong, solid structure, from a stoneware model, made up of two high corten steel parallelepipeds connected by a grid upon which climbs up – until obstructing the space – leaden material which contrasts by colour, mobility and intentional disorder of its moulding with the two parallelepipeds, which are also marked by interval, cuts and wears as caused by time: *Legami* (Ties), which are precisely not abstract or definitory, but dialectic, provisional, open to a topological enjoyment which, despite the dimensions, contradicts the historical notion of monumentality. Not unlike *Giardino di pietra* (Stone Garden), from 2008-2009, a big iron structure measuring 600 x 1600 cm, covered with resin, whose interpretation is intentionally difficult (the reference to the Zen gardens could be real, but it does not certainly fulfil the diversified, mysterious range of meanings radiated from the work), the most imposing of the works presented, with a considerable impact in the whiteness of its volumes, which rise peremptory and light in front of the temple of the Panthéon, alluding to mountain peaks or to something else geologically natural. It is a bold sculpture which will no doubt give rise to discussions and fully fits into the issue of sculpture as a dimension we mentioned just a few lines above, precisely in the terms described above. In other words, beyond coordinates of a mere setting in a given space which certainly lessens – though without dissolving it – the limit, also feared by Martini, of the closing “within the three dimensions, where death is hidden”, to which the great master opposed – though always in an old-fashioned logic – the opening to a “fourth dimension”, which had its remote origins in Boccioni’s “interpenetration of planes”, in his novelty still based on sculpture as such, in its opening to the outer space, just like Martini’s research precisely on the “fourth dimension” in pursuing the breaking of the separated nature of sculpture (the statue, the base) within its specific terms¹⁴.

“All arts are placed and distributed in their own horizon”, noticed Martini¹⁵, in the case of “sculpture, on the contrary, its horizon is still its pedestal, where the ordinary reproduction of the model is nailed and dies in the same three dimensions. Sculpture is a solid like the earth and it is common knowledge that this finds its motion, i.e. its own life, in the atmosphere [which] turns around it, which is called precisely the fourth dimension”. On the contrary, today Carlini writes (this is the motto – as well as the ultimate sense – of this exhibition): “A sculpture is a part of the place where it is situated; it consists of the work and of the surrounding which contains it, so that it is not a foreign body but a part of the life which surrounds it”. This implies a sharp advancement compared to Martini’s thought which is clearly evident in that “the life which surrounds it” instead of “the sculpture life”. This is achieved through the choice of an extension which is not only physical and – as such pre-given, measurable and, in the final, object analysis which inserts these last works of the artist’s in the heart of today’s reflection on sculpture, fifty years now after the spreading and imposition of the crisis of the traditional linguistic statutes, historical realities, not absolute and perennial values, already deteriorated between the 19th and the 20th centuries by Medardo Rosso and Rodin, and then – between the 1940s and the

1950s – demolished at the very roots by the autre positions of the non-representational, from which, besides, in Western Europe and the Far East originated the radical renewed questioning of the conventional – precisely as historical – autonomy and “specificity” Of painting ad sculpture, in connection with what happened overseas – in the art which since then would become more and more influential on the “old” continent – in the New Dada and then in the Pop and Op Art.

This event had developments with repercussions in Italy too, Carlini’s homeland, with precursory examples of considerable importance in sculpture as well. Just think of Alberto Burri or Umberto Milani, and especially of Lucio Fontana (his first plastic Concetto spaziale (Spatial Concept) dates from 1947), who, amongst other things, was very active in the practice of ceramics, just like another master, Leoncillo (Leonardi).

This path, through the happening, the performance, the installation, the Land Art, accompanied by theoretical formulations of artists and critics, like the American Rosalind Krauss, gradually leads to today’s positions, marked by the indefinability and inaccessibility of sculpture as something recognizably specific which makes the analysis difficult and a no-old-fashioned critical reflection hard. Now, this lack is not only underlined but proposed – for a new examination in the framework of an international Convention in Venice on Fare Storia (Making History) – by Paolo Fabbri.¹⁶ In his opinion, the variety of “artistic phenomena apparently so different from one another [which are usually called sculpture], the gaps and contrasts, but also the connivances and deferments, set us the general issue of sculpture. In fact, one of its possible identifications is referred to the exploration of the network of relations amongst the works, to the analysis of their significant elements, of their relations not only with the space, but also with the onlookers’ physicality itself, with their placing, with the nature of the objects, with their shape, with the same quality and material mass which makes them concrete. Today, sound and light can be defined as the matter of sculpture when they are themselves sculpture. The ratio exciting today between the spatial extension – really ‘monumental’ – of these manifestations and their temporal permanence – which sometimes is only connected to the ephemeral duration of the exposure – brings forward the space-time ratio, which traditionally stabilized the sculptural work”. On the other hand this also happens in the current presence in Paris of Maria Cristina’s works – which are precisely monumental, however, on a guideline which does not denies the formative and manual characters and the attributions of volumetric bulk of the space of sculpture in the past.

Luciano Caramel