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Body, Mould, Trace: The Figurability of Experience in Luciano Fabro's work

Translated by Alan Eglinton

In a text written in 1846 entitled *Why Sculpture is Boring that is more a chronicle than a theoretical essay*, Baudelaire violently subordinated sculpture – “because it shows too many sides at the same time” – to painting – “exclusive and despotic” – an object capable of stronger artistic expression¹. His words are calculated and his lapidary reasoning is certainly surprising. Although his judgement may today seem cutting, it constitutes a founding moment for the question of autonomy in the history of art, for which Baudelaire can be viewed as representative of the spirit of his times. This is what is at stake when he criticizes the sculptural style of his period: “a painting is only what it wants to be”. The superiority of painting, in that it offers a frame of vision, compared to sculpture which abandons the viewer to uncertain points of view (“vague and elusive”, as he says), far from reducing the question of autonomy to the question of the point of view, on the contrary, reveals all its specificity for nineteenth century Romanticism. One result was the doctrine of art for art’s sake of which Théophile Gautier was to be the herald in his famous foreword to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835). He recommended that art should preserve itself from other domains; from ethics, politics and social progress. This would put the question of autonomy rather in a “last entrenchment” than in a “new space”, to quote the title that brings us together here for this seminar (concerning the expression art for art’s sake and its tautological nature, there is a possible connection with the title *Arte torna arte*, a collection of Luciano Fabro’s texts).

However, if we come back to Baudelaire’s text on sculpture, there is an interesting nuance in it that allows more particularly to open onto the question of autonomy as it was formulated in Fabro’s case. Baudelaire described the sculptor’s “humiliation” when “an accidental light or a the effect of a lamp reveal a beauty other than the one he had imagined²”. In other words, at this moment in the history of art which is not a weak moment, a sphere like Baudelaire’s and

1. Text published on the occasion of the 1846 salon and then collected in *Curiosités esthétiques*: “Sculpture has several inconveniences that are the necessary consequence of its means. Brutal and positive like nature, it is vague and elusive at the same time, because it shows too many sides at the same time. [...] A painting is only what it wants to be; there’s no other way to look at it than in its own light. Painting only has one point of view; it’s exclusive and despotic: therefore, the painter’s expression is the strongest.” Baudelaire, Charles, *Critique d’art*, volume I, Librairie Armand Colin, Paris, 1965, p.166.

2. Id.

*Théophile Gautier's*³ refused the possibility of a work revealing itself to the viewer through the activity of his or her own gaze, simultaneous to the "activity" of the material (through its accidents and effects). In the end, a crisis ensued from what was to represent the most basic and nearly banal sense of what we've considered in the twentieth century as the heart of aesthetic experience – as Duchamp's famous expression instituted in 1914: "the viewer makes the painting". This postulate, which would become universal a century later, was at first a source of concern or fear for Baudelaire, suggesting even the artist's humiliation. He was sounding a warning in aid of what the sculptor had foreseen (a pre-vision) – something resembling an intentionalistic scheme – in particular concerning the material characteristics of his work. Already with Baudelaire, the question paradoxically arose – even if it was the result of a fit of anger or bad mood – of how a work could exist without its artist. The idea of the artist as a fundamentally absent being is of a certain importance in regard to the reflection on artistic autonomy or responsibility (absent at the moment when the work takes place for me).

This brings us to Luciano Fabro. Indeed on the one hand, he seemed to hold a position reminiscent of the "autonomists" such as Gautier, by refusing that the political and social dimension of his work be brought down to politics or to society as such. In the concrete shapes that his works took on, Fabro showed a will not to subordinate them to a direct and exterior referent. Of course, they offer many references to mythology, history, philosophy and to sciences... however, fundamentally, his forms are never really explicit, and never act as puns or metaphors (Fabro's art very much resists metaphors, except perhaps in the case of the *Italies* series). He thus affirmed: "Art won't change things at the end of history – society's history –, it must change them at the beginning, in its genesis, in human nature. (...) It's a matter of working on being, on nature, on matter, on intelligence, in other words on human qualities and not on human society⁴." In this position that consists in a way of extracting oneself, of taking refuge, there is a concern for autonomy. With the slight difference, obviously, that Fabro doesn't deny the viewer the opportunity, on the contrary, to have his or her own experience. Precisely he wants to establish the connection between the life of material and this question of experience. On this point, he reminds us: "the use of material is determined by the human experience that is reflected in it: elasticity, luminosity, transparency, reflection, refraction⁵."

So why insist on the virtue of this organization of material, experience, the human and the work? Because without this, Duchamp would appear to be the real turning point after the nineteenth century for the question of autonomy. Because the painting made by the viewer reduces the producing artist's autonomy in favour of a potential viewer with a fertile position. However, the Duchampian strategy of retreat (Duchamp as an author-function and not himself or his works) leans towards a certain defiance, or mistrust, of materiality, seeking to work intellectually rather

than materially – he is thus considered as the father of conceptual art. As for Fabro, not only does he consider materiality as the very condition of an aesthetic relationship – it is his reflection, as he says – but he maintains this relationship, the encounter of his own absence with the viewer's presence, "outside of society" (the kind of formula that is potentially controversial but useful for what it says in the context of autonomy). With Luciano Fabro, an idea of the "human", a word that is recurrent in his writings, simultaneously designates a dimension of aesthetic experience – so "the new space" – and a dimension of disinterested, neutral, ahistorical form – so the "last entrenchment". In the second case it means the form or material first appears as such – as pure experimentation or relationship – before conveying or transmitting an intelligible message. It is in the name of this articulation that Fabro (or a generation of artists that he could be said to represent in the context of 1960-1970) would appear to be a better starting point than Duchamp for the question of autonomy in art after the nineteenth century⁶. Let's say that he brings the Baudelarian question back to life in a more specific manner than Duchamp would, because of this connection between materiality and experience.

Let's focus now on a specific work, *Lo Spirato* (p. 223, 227) the paradigmatic value of which for the whole of Fabro's work has already been remarked upon. First we should read the two inscriptions on the marble that constitute the work's subtitle. These two inscriptions are: *Io rappresento l'ingombro dell'oggetto nella vanità dell'ideologia*, which can be translated "I represent the encumbrance of the object in the vanity of ideology", and *Dal pieno al vuoto senza soluzione di continuità*, "From plenitude to emptiness without any solution of continuity." These propositions will take on the value of sources of inspiration for the analysis of *Lo Spirato* but also for Fabro's work as a whole.

It's a complex work but one which presents on its own all the mechanisms of, and reasons for, its complexity. The process of elaboration and its revelation, or its being made visible, is the subject of the work itself. As such, it can serve as a paradigm. The sculpture shows a sheet like a shroud, covering a body of which we can clearly make out the legs, the feet distinctly pointing up underneath, and the arms. However, the body stops abruptly, without any shoulders or head sticking out. It's an acephalous sculpture of a body that is evaporating or deteriorating, covering and uncovering itself at the same time, bearing both absence and presence, emptiness and fullness, sense and nonsense, but starting with the artist's body itself – as we can see in the photos of Fabro preparing the moulds that would lead to the 1973 marble work (p. 224). In a 1977 interview, Fabro described the work: "the body under the cloth has disappeared (*sparito*), as though it was exhaled (*spirato*), or even inhaled (*spirato fuori*), with only the sheet remaining as though it was suspended". *Lo Spirato* also serves as a paradigm for its long term process of elaboration, between 1968 with its first model, passing through different stages that lead to its

3. We know that the question of art's emancipation in relation to moral and politics will thenceforward evolve in another direction with Gustave Courbet.

4. Fabro, Luciano, interview with Daniel Soutif, in Luciano Fabro, catalogue, exhibition in the Galerie Sud space from October 9 1996 to January 6 1997, Paris, Centre Pompidou, 1996, p.37.

5. Fabro, Luciano, in Luciano Fabro, id., p.139.

6. The reason of this comparison with Duchamp is due to the many consequences (institutional, economic, philosophical...) of the crystallized autonomist paradigm in the ready-mades.

7. Fabro, Luciano, interview with Achille Bonito Oliva (Rome, 1977), in *Dialoghi d'Artisti, Electa*, Milano, 1984, cf. Fabro, entretiens/travaux 1963-1986, Paris, Art Edition, 1987, p.166.

sculpting in marble in 1973. 1968-1973: in other words, an interval during which other works were carried out, other works were made, which were thus in collusion with Lo Spirato, of which the implicit implication with these other works can be observed. This "collusion" could also most simply evoke the fact that the works coexist in the artist's studio, literally juxtaposed both in time and space. The work of one resonates in the others and vice-versa. Consequently, Lo Spirato was paradigmatic because it was a studio piece and nearly always remained there, being shown on rare occasions⁸. The rhythm of its rare but regular exhibition, between 1973-74 and then in 1980 and 1991, shows us how Lo Spirato became the Ariadne's thread along Luciano Fabro's path.

This final marble sculpture is thus the result of a long work process and of several plaster moulds. Most of these were destroyed but one of them from 1968 has been conserved. Several repeated attempts were made by Fabro to obtain the right imprint of his own body; sliding himself several times under the sheet and putting himself in the position both of the dead and the immortal. We must recognize the importance of this experience of incarnation, of the sculptor entering the sculpture. From 1968 onwards, he acclimated his body to the plaster coating covering it – it became like a natural coating or the veil of sculpture through its hardening and in its becoming material. It could also be said that the plaster flowed and hardened, or congealed, at the same time as Fabro's body breathed and beat before leaving its trace that no longer breathes.

Concerning heartbeats and breathing, we must look at a work entitled Tamerlano (p. 225) from 1968, the year Fabro started the Lo Spirato process. Tamerlano could be considered as an outgrowth of Lo Spirato, or at least its missing head, which Fabro said was "neither a face nor a mask". It appears to be a quite ordinary mask, which has been cast in bronze from a plaster mould, but from its external side, as though the plaster was used not as a mould but as an unmould. If a casting process is always an inversion in one sense or another, here the inversion is precisely not the result of a process but the process itself. In this apparently tautological act, Fabro makes us consider technique, not as the creation of the same, but as the creation of a double, which is different. So Tamerlano exhibits the living body as a trace or an index of this double, through the little tubes that allowed the model-body, the subject of the experiment, to breathe during the operation.

With Lo Spirato, Fabro created his avatar or his morphogenetic double that he destroyed on several occasions, that he broke, decomposed and modified to obtain the 1973 marble: Lo Spirato. The laborious character of such a process could evoke one of Fabro's reflections when he pointed out the prudishness of Western artistic culture regarding making work visible – physical work, including the act of working the material: "... in such a way that the work can't be seen... because of the cult of "naturalità" which forbids to see it with a sense of decency⁹."

8. Lo Spirato was shown in Rome in 1973 (Parcheggio Villa Borghese), in Parma in 1974 (La Pilotta), in Milan in 1980 (PAC) and in Lucerne in 1991 (Kunstmuseum).

9. "Come si guarda il proprio lavoro" (How to look at my own work), Brera, May 3 1984, in Fabro, Luciano, *Arte torna arte. Lezioni e conferenze 1981-1997*, Turin, Einaudi, 1999. "... Che il lavoro non si vede... per il culto della "naturalità", che proibisce di vederlo per pudore⁹."

The work or the experience that comes into being by the work of sculpture is engraved in it in addition to what it represents. If we take Lo Spirato for what it is, in other words a recumbent statue – a missing body, yet a lying body – like the ones found on church floors, then it is the entire spectrum of funerary sculpture, including its most subtle evolutions, that resurfaces in it. Like Fabro himself, if we put the problem of autonomy back in a more largely aesthetic, rather than economic framework, what results is that any return to art history that preceded him, leads the artist to a material use of this history. History is in the materials; so a relationship to history and the experience encountered through the material become autonomous at the same time. In this case, it is the history of funerary sculpture. With Jacopo Bellini's fifteenth century drawing for a tomb project (p. 226), we have an example of figurativity intrinsically deduced in the equation between history and experience. With its bipartite structure of which there are examples in the Middle Ages, it does not represent a battle between the forces of good and evil that the defunct body is trying to extirpate itself from, nor the paradise this body is destined for, but in a more profane than sacred sphere, simply his role as a teacher and a scholar, in the bas-relief on the front side of the tomb where his sculpted body lies. The sculpture holds in its form, the possible figure of personal experience, which is not necessarily concerned with a people's history or sacred history but rather with "micro-history", the history of a sort of bare experience through which substance and the body's investment have been emptied, the history of its time on Earth. Compared to Bellini's tomb for the deceased professor, Fabro's experience cannot be rendered in the figurative order but rather in the figurable, a subtle displacement that shows that the substance of which the body has emptied itself in Lo Spirato is very simply the sculptor's. From then on, if we come back to this historical interval, 1968-1973, suddenly the meaning of the work resurfaces and ensures the work its autonomy; that is to say, it becomes a work of which the periodic nature can answer for a history that, while inscribing itself in the history of forms and materials – the form of a funerary sculpture or the material marble – also inscribes itself in its own independent, historical rhythm. Its own rhythmicity is its own historicity.

In our research and also in our museum visits, we're used to seeing title plaques that sometimes don't indicate a precise date but an interval, so that one wonders what happened between these two dates. The answer is sometimes obvious, depending on the work's composition and history, whereas on other occasions, it remains totally mysterious. In the case of Lo Spirato and behind the idea of a body inhaled or exhaled, it could literally be a question of the work's expiration time. Not the time it took to be finished but the time of its expiration from the artist's body. So there is a double expiration: visibly, this headless body that has apparently expired under the aspiratory movement of the sheet, but also the sculpture «expired» from the artist's body. The historical interval between two dates is therefore, firstly an interval between two states, that of a body breathing and that of breathing frozen in marble but also between the visible and invisible, absence and presence. Consequently, here the interval has as much to do with a material and quite representable given – the process we described with plaster, etc. – as with a mystery. However, having discussed incarnation and shrouds, as we have just done, the word "mystery" itself is charged with the mystery of Incarnation in Christian theology (note that only one letter separates the words "expiration" and "expiation", in the same way that the Italian words, expired and spirit, "spirato" and "spirito" differ by one letter).

Without developing this aspect that would take us too far from our subject, we can now take up the thread of the funerary sculpture with a case well-identified in iconology: the representation of the transi on Valentine Balbiani's tomb (spouse of the cardinal of Birague), sculpted by Germain Pilon in 1574 (p. 229). In the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance, the "transi" designated the representation of a body in decomposition on a tomb. The transi is on the lower level, represented at the point of death and in a state of putrefaction, beneath the living and animated body that the sculpture resuscitates. Consequently, this traditionally represents an image in two stages and on two separate levels that meet in contradiction, that inform one another, that work in a montage, one in the other. By simultaneously representing the body through the physical presence of its members, and because of the disconcerting absence of the head, in a certain way, Lo Spirato reconfigures this montage but in a picture with a single and immediate level and temporality. We could say that Fabro is a transi in his own sculpture which aims, more than at simple autonomy, at a fantasy of absolute autonomy where no difference would reign between the sculpture and the sculptor or between the dead and the living – where the idea of autonomy would be associated to the idea of sculpture as automaton. We no longer look at it as a present object but as an absent subject, or more precisely, the subject of the experience has transit, shifted, into the experience of the object (the word transi can be understood as something "that is in transit"). In the end, this is the distinction that Fabro made between Rodin and Medardo Rosso, when he said that for Rodin light could hang on the sculpture like a piece of clothing whereas Rosso's sculptures were created from a mental and not a physical projection¹⁰ - this conception contravenes the Baudelairean thesis of boredom. Indeed, a sculpture can really come into being only if the index of materiality, that reveals the initial experience for the sculptor, is rethought.

So the question is whether Fabro's body is transiting somewhere according to the terms we've defined, and if so where exactly, in what articulation of thought and practice? Where is the experience he proposes situated spatially? This brings us to a mystery other than that of the Christian Incarnation, just as powerful, which is the mystery of casting itself as a technique, that is to say as an automated and repetitive operation by definition, but also as the direct prolongation of the mind (factors which are related to the sculpture as automaton). We think of the multiplication of a thing and the mould brings it into being in the prolongation of this thought. The mystery specific to the technique of casting is something that has been explained best by the philosopher Gilbert Simondon, author of the outstanding book, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*¹¹, published in 1969 around the same time Lo Spirato was being made. Simondon is concerned with the worker, not the artist. This is interesting as regards the notion of work introduced earlier, since the mystery that we will evoke here through Simondon is the mystery of the aleatory, elusive or uncontrollable "work" produced by the mould. In other words, the mystery that means that even if you do your best in preparing the material, its reception in the mould and in managing all the parameters of the operation, you will still have to take into account the immeasurable and unpredictable aspect of the contact between the material and the

mould because give or take a millimetre of surface, it can always contradict your expectations (and also contradict boredom). Because of its remarkable resonance with Fabro's (or *Homo Fabro*, as Germano Celant called him) Lo Spirato, I'll quote Simondon's book: "If only we could enter the mould with the clay, become at once mould and clay, live and feel their common operation, to be able to know the taking of shape itself. Because the worker elaborates two technical semi-chains which prepare for the technical operation: he prepares the clay to the correct consistency, eliminating lumps and bubbles, and correlatively prepares the mould. He materializes the shape by making a wooden mould and makes the material malleable. Then he puts the clay into the mould and into the press but it is the system constituted by the mould and the clay that conditions the giving of shape. It is the clay that takes on a shape according to the mould and not the worker that gives it its shape. The man at work prepares the mediation but he doesn't accomplish it. The mediation accomplishes itself after the conditions have been created. So even if the man is very close to this operation, he doesn't know it. His body wills it to accomplish itself, allows it to be accomplished, but the representation of the technical operation doesn't appear in the work. The essential is missing: the active centre of the technical operation that remains hidden¹²".

In Lo Spirato, Luciano Fabro demonstrates the keenest possible awareness of this phenomenon which is not the Christian mystery of Incarnation but the mystery of sculptural incarnation. On reflecting upon Simondon's prolegomena concerning a theory of the mould, one better understands the philosophy of expiration time in Lo Spirato and the phenomenological constellation that is created between body, mould and trace (the double trace of the imprint and of time). By entering the mould with the material, by becoming at once mould and plaster, the artist brings, with his own body, visibility to the "mediation" or the normally invisible "work" of casting; what Simondon calls the "active centre of the technical operation" can begin to unveil itself – hence the iconological importance of the veil in Lo Spirato (reminiscent of the tradition of veiled Christs in the late Baroque period but more particularly of the most famous one made by Giuseppe Sanmartino in 1753 at the San Severo chapel in Naples).

Another connection between Lo Spirato and the *Io* (L'Uovo) sculpture (p. 231) made in 1978 is also possible and productive. Indeed, in a similar process of relating through the index body/mould/ trace, Fabro moulded his object according to his body's postural experience, to his own weight and to his foetal measurement (huddled in the position of a foetus). The result was this sculpture of 176cm in circumference and 64cm in height. In the shape of a sectioned egg shell, *Io* ("I", "me") gives us a glimpse of its golden inside, the difference in the treatment of the bronze treatment in its double lining with the black outside of the egg, like a human body of which the entrails are starting to show to show as its mouth tears open or its stomach gapes. Initially installed in Bernini's Fountain of the Bees in Rome (as though to bathe it in a regenerating amniotic liquid), the sculpture shows not only the artist's hand prints, as though he was taking it in his arms but also this figural trace of his own body is a *mise en abîme* made by the incision-drawing of a man in a foetal position on its external face.

10. Fabro, Luciano, interview with Giovanni Lista, in *Ligeia*, "Arte Povera", n°25-28, October 1998/June 1999, p.30.

11. On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects

12. Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, Paris, Aubier-Montaigne, 1969, p.243. Let's specify that Simondon's passage on moulds had already been spotted by Georges Didi-Huberman who quoted him in his text for the show *L'Empreinte* organized in 1997 at the Centre Pompidou and where Lo Spirato was shown in the documentary form of photographs.

The artist can experience and transpose the experience of taking shape itself. In this sense, we can read back through Fabro's many, often absorbing, reflections on his experience of things and notably on the role of sensoriality in what he called "taking possession of a situation"¹³. Lo Spirato literally consists of taking possession of the paradoxical situation in which matter places every sculptor, which is at once a myth and reality, as when Michelangelo saw shapes appear within the rough block of stone. Even without developing any further the mystery of Christian Incarnation, the analogy with the mystery of taking shape in the mould is more than simply anecdotic or metaphorical. With Lo Spirato, despite the weight of the marble it is made of, Fabro demonstrates the fact that a shape always expires at the same time it is produced, as in a watercolour stain, in which one can make out a body, which that nothing prevents from reverting to a simple trace of water, and that thereby indicating the autonomy of form itself. It's in this way that we can reconsider his interest for Rorschach's blots, which he showed in his proto-form ink drawings in the 1980 work Macchie di Rorschach. The question remains as to how the artist can extract his own autonomy from the autonomy of form but obviously, the answer is partially in the question. Undoubtedly it is also in the proposition engraved by Fabro in the marble: "I represent the encumbrance of the object in the vanity of ideology". Encumbrance and therefore alternatively "disencumbrance", or retreat of the I/body in the affirmation of an experience (watch me disappear under the sheet or watch me take on the shape of a foetus) that leaves a trace or an index, as an aesthetic experience and an autonomization.

However, it is possible to attempt an approach of this subject by concluding on a last work by Fabro, Tre modi di mettere le lenzuola (p. 275)¹⁴ from 1968 to remain in the interval assigned by Lo Spirato. We see him then assiduously working on what we could henceforth call the figurability of experience through folds, in other words that which seems to totally escape from my experience as a viewer in what passes from the artist to his work and from the work to me, making the sculpture boring for me, in Baudelaire's terms, because I don't know how and from which direction to look at it. It could very well exist only in the artist's experience whereas, precisely, this experience may rise to the surface and appear to me from the moment the sculpture accepts to eschew the stage of the surface (as in Io (l'Uovo) which doesn't have a surface but a body with its outside and its inside), to its becoming a shape, in other words, to part with, to disencumber, and by fidelity to Fabro's iconoclastic temperament, let's say un-learn (we could also say to "un-dress"). The result in several works that radiate around Lo Spirato – and the Attaccapanni (p. 321) could also be added to this group – has often taken on the non-form or the proto-form of a fold, where my gaze, outside the artist's experience, may slide, flow, subdue from plenitude to emptiness without any solution of continuity. The fact of giving a figure to the invisibility of experience concealed in the work (as one would hide a coin inside a fold), while attracting my gaze through the same crannies and gaps in the work, is something that Fabro could do with other means than folds, for example by using reflections (all of the 1960 series in the different works Buco, Impronte, Mezzo Specchiato¹⁵), or with weight, bending and laceration.

This is also where my gaze coexists with the tactile sense, where the two mix. This is what the three sheets are for; they are variations on disappearance of the object in favour of its experience: even if the goal in itself cannot be attained, what matters to Fabro is striving towards it. The disappearance of the object, like the disappearance of the body in Lo Spirato, definitely reproduces the disappearance of the gap that separates the word "apprehension" from the word "prehesion". Since the latter means "to sieze", "to grasp", then "apprehension" can also designate as much apprehending without touching, as being on the verge of touching or more exactly its entre-deux, in between seeing and touching. The prefix "-ap" in apprehension participates in the expiration time of the work: this time condensed by the activation of my gaze that finds, if not a path, then a rhythm, marked by the folds, the holes (buco), and the nooks and crannies of the space the work constructs, during which an experience can occur.

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