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**Luciano Fabro, The Autonomy of the Artist:
New Space or Last Entrenchment?***Translated by Jason Francis Mc Gimsey*

In 2006, Luciano Fabro participated in this seminar along with other artists like Thomas Schütte and Allan Sekula. Their contribution led us to consider the artistic act as a strategy of “doing”, capable of creating a new balance between ethics and aesthetics. In the first phase, we studied the evolution of contemporary art since WWII with particular attention to the changes caused by the new sense of what we called a “debt to the real”. The next phase, which begins with these meetings, aims to better focus on the importance of the work of art as the starting point for a dialectic exchange between historical instances and perception. In our study of the artist’s autonomy, we are not concerned with the individual and his or her talent and personal history. Rather, we are concerned with the dialectic relation that creative autonomy establishes with reality, with what the artist feels he or she has to testify to, what he or she feels obliged to protect and express through the choices that are behind all declarations of independence.

As a visual artist, Luciano Fabro gave life to precise forms, works of art, declarations and a body of theory and teachings. These forms are, at the same time, the diagram of an action that has a potential nature, in the sense that it is transmissible, analyzable and can become the object of work for another person. Fabro’s desire to teach only highlights this aspect of his work. Today, in asking if the autonomy of the artist opens new space or if it merely represents a last entrenchment one rightly poses the question of its transmissibility. Are the artistic forms of his or her invention unique results, historically determined by an individual, or are we dealing with a concept that can open up a historical perspective, be transmitted to the future and reactivate what was believed to be trapped in the past?

1 - WORKING ON FORM AND THE TERRITORY OF THE ARTIST

For the book collecting the work of the first part of our seminar¹ which we decided to dedicate in Luciano Fabro’s memory, he gave us a text in two parts: one from 1988 presented at the Maastricht Jan Eyck Academie on what was yet to be done in artistic teaching in the European Union; the second, from December 2006 – after his workshop in Lyon – was written for a conference in Brussels on graduate students in art schools.

1. Face au réel. Éthique de la forme dans l’art contemporain, seminar directed by G. Careri and B. Rüdiger, with: P. Montani, A. Gunther, Th. Schütte, L. Fabro, A. Sekula, E. Van Alphen and M. Bal: Archibooks, Paris, 2008.

Fabro expresses strong opposition to the proposal to create a Ph.D. in art on a European level. His argument is based on the need, for both the artist-teacher and the future artist, to transmit and to work on art to come. For Fabro, it is evident that art schools do not work with the present and for the contemporary, but for a future form. In his opinion, art school is the place where form is given to what has not yet been done but is already underway. For Fabro, art is a practice. It isn’t defined by the end product, but by working conditions, in the most traditional sense of the term: the execution of a transformation of material, but also the displacement of our point of view. Work not only changes the object; it also changes our perception of what has been done and what is left to be done.

In 1994, Fabro showed *Io (L’Uovo) (I [The Egg])* (p. 160), first made in 1978 using bread dough that continued to rise during the exhibition. *Io* is the form of a hollow egg in bronze, open on two sides and gilded on the inside. The surface is smooth, except at the bottom where there are handprints where Fabro held the egg. The measurements of the object corresponded to the size of Fabro’s huddled body. The work of the visual artist holds him to a form that functions like birth contractions. Like bread dough, it is in the process of becoming. The form is not the material bronze set in a mould, it is the point of balance that shows us the work that exposes it to the world and its constant changes.

Fabro anxiously watched the shift in contemporary art teaching towards a form of homologation of knowledge, incapable of integrating change into its own structure. The “professionalization” of learning in art teaching signifies the end of transmission of art. It is limited to what has already been done; learning will only be incidental, or what Fabro called “information on art”. The “teacher-informer” who only observes the state of art will be late in understanding what is still to be done, thus interrupting all transmission. For Fabro, the notion of *magistère*, teaching through active research, is the only way to reach this goal. This activity is based on a critical approach and an analytic attitude regarding the work of art being made, but also regarding the volubility of the surrounding world. Such a position is only possible if the artist is considered autonomous.

This theme was always dear to Fabro, he never stopped reformulating it over his long career, denouncing the sophisms of a discourse that, in his opinion, under the form of apparent freedom (money or the return of painting in the 1980s, for example, or globalization and the refusal of specific artistic cultures in the 1990s, or more recently the abandonment of the notion of *œuvre*) hide different forms of homologation. For Fabro, this was abandoning what should remain the specific artistic domain; where freedom is at once committed and experimental and where works of art are the result of taking up the position of author.

For Fabro, those who have mastery over their territory “transmit a living language”. The autonomy of the artist is based on a deep knowledge of his or her domain, which implies absolute autonomy in deciding what knowledge to acquire and which connections to make, to render the constantly transforming domain productive.

Io is not merely the imprint of Fabro’s body, it also borrows from Fontana’s *Nature* series (p. 161). The forms in terra cotta and bronze produced between 1959 and 1961 began with balls of clay on the ground that also corresponded more or less to the mass of a body. Fontana let himself be photographed in the act of opening them with a stick, creating a hole that resembles a vagina. But *Io* also has the fingerprint that Manzoni put on the egg at the Azimuth gallery in Milan on

July 21st, 1960 (p. 161), letting himself be photographed during his action as well². Immediately, a territory appears. We are now in a situation where knowledge and action are intertwined. Like in trigonometry, we can now evaluate the breadth of the territory in which the action of Fabro's *Io* is situated. Beginning from the source, we can then see how the form acquires meaning. We have a general perception of a territory that we probably would never have had in the same way and, even if it was necessary for the creation of the work, it isn't indispensable for the viewer. There is also another work that Fabro perhaps shows us in this territory: the egg of Piero della Francesca in Brera (1472-1474) above the Virgin of Montefeltre that became the figure that gave meaning to *Io*³. The variety of directions that the artist develops to prepare the terrain and its extension do not necessarily constitute a path to be taken by all those who see it or who decide to work in the same direction. A territory is only valid for the artist who has opened it up for him or herself.

Thus, the author is an "amateur", but he is also the "dominus", the lord who exercises an absolute authority over his domain. Regarding his territory, which is potentially infinite, his mastery must be total. The artist's freedom of movement must know no limits, and yet can never be won. The artist can only occupy a territory if he is its author, that is to say if he doesn't neglect any part of it and keeps it in constant activity. Fabro constructed artistic autonomy in this tension between total opening and territorial "culture". For Fabro, this restriction, contrary to various opinions held in the current debate over the artist's role, includes the mastery of the technical, economic and social approach, since it defines the domain of action and its *raison d'être*. Therefore, it is not only the works of Fontana and Manzoni that give meaning to Fabro's piece. On the contrary, it is the difference that is made by his artistic, economic and cultural action, in the most concrete of senses.

Fabro believes that autonomy is inscribed at the center of artistic work. Form is the release mechanism, producing a tension between the artist's territory and the terrain to be occupied. All form therefore displaces this territory, questioning it to the point of risking everything. Each new form redefines historical perspective, finding new origins and defining its heritage, transforming the works of art that came before us and redesigning the artist's path.

Here we are dealing with a paradox. Once accomplished, the work of art, taking from an open and precise territory, changes that very territory, altering the territorial histories that preceded it and that made it possible. It isn't only Fabro's egg that takes form thanks to Fontana's Nature, but Fontana's work that is changed by the piece that came to question it.

2. The Azimut Gallery was founded in 1959 in Milan by two artists, Piero Manzoni and Enrico Castellani. It was an experimental space that also published a review by the same name, gathering artists from different "conceptual" schools in Europe around the idea of "Achrome" art, to use Manzoni's term which was also used by the Zéto group and Yves Klein among others. The action "Nouritures d'arte di Piero Manzoni. Consumazione dell'arte dinamica del pubblico divorare l'arte" (roughly, Art Food by Piero Manzoni. Consuming Dynamic Art by Art Devouring Public) was held on 21 July, 1960. It was the last exposition in that space that had hosted other actions by Manzoni like 12 Linee (12 Lines, in December 1959) and Corpi d'aria (Air Bodies, in May 1960).

3. In 1978, at the Maenz gallery in Cologne, Fabro exhibited an egg hanging from a platform. In bronze, it was as big as a chicken's egg, like Manzoni's and Piero della Francesca's one. Instead of Manzoni's prints, Fabro had a Roman acronym representing human mating stamped in the hot wax of each copy.

For Fabro, this paradox is constitutive of the figure of the artist, who, like a tightrope walker, must master an essentially unstable territory. Each effective, unexpected and therefore new form also acts on the past. The form displaces the foundations that have made its invention possible. For Fabro, the artist can only invent; he or she is working with potential energies that place him or her on the edge of the present. This present is not simply the most advanced stage of an evolution; it is the central point of a revolution that affects the future as much as the past. The present of a work of art is, according to Fabro, the eye of a cyclone that displaces everything that has become accepted. The manifest nature of knowledge, but also the experience of the real can be called into question again by a completed work. Like the immobile eye at the center of a hurricane, it opens onto a new horizon where everything familiar has changed place. For Fabro, the artist is constantly rewriting his or her own history.

2 - THE GENEALOGY OF ARTISTS

If we follow Luciano Fabro in the radicalness of his declarations, observing their material and historical precision, we can easily discern that the uniqueness of all revolutionary act is, in Fabro's opinion, related to the possibility of its being accompanied by other acts that could take place before, at the same time and after it. This can seem surprising for someone who gives such importance to the genealogy of artists, «masters» as he calls them, artists who are part of the evolution of an unquestionably linear history. Manzoni, Fontana and he himself are part of this lineage of «masters»⁴. Since the 1990s, Fabro had emphasized this idea of genealogical decent. This logic of a linear heritage doesn't seem to correspond to the idea of a territory where the work of art, unique, powerful, like the center of a revolutionary movement, redefines time and history through its very existence.

Yet it is this apparently irreconcilable opposition that seems to me interesting to investigate. It highlights what Fabro thought important to stress at a certain moment in his career. If the work of art remains an independent and powerful cultural agent, the artist's participation in history is an indispensable condition of creation.

There was a decisive moment in Fabro's career that seems to throw light on this notion of genealogy. On April 26th, 1986, the nuclear reactor in Chernobyl, Ukraine exploded, contaminating the earth, men and animals, causing thousands of deaths between the people who died immediately and those who would die due to the consequences of a disaster that rendered the area uninhabitable for several hundred years. Invited to participate in the exhibition "Chambres d'amis", held in private homes and organized by Jan Hoet in Ghent in 1986, Fabro created a piece dedicated to the youngest inhabitant of the houses used. A sheet, big enough that it could never be fully opened in a house, was cut with the different line drawings with which

4. In his text "For a Reformed Art", Fabro summarizes this line of artists: "Let's simply say that my history starts with Mantegazza. Then there is Medardo Rosso, then Boccioni, then Martini (for his negations), Fontana, Manzoni, and Lo Savio. Maybe none of these names reveal my history to you. But I am am testifying it, representing it through syntheses and in its genesis." op. cit., p. 154.

the character of Laurence Sterne's (1713-1768) novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* sums up the diagram of his life - erratic lines that never repeat the same form. In the catalogue, Fabro wrote about the work *C'est la vie (That's Life)* (p. 165):

"In deciding to work in a house where there was a newborn, I wanted to give a genealogical dimension to the space and to the meaning of objects. After Chernobyl, all of that seemed ridiculous. Genetic mutation destroys all humanist will [...], only the gods know the reason behind such madness. Once again, I have chosen Laurence Sterne's scribbles as a diagram for life⁵. [...]"

3 - THE TWO TIMES OF HISTORY

Here we could talk about "genetic mutation", which calls into question the human body and its particularity, now left to the chance of its genes. Yet, it seems to me that the notion of genetic mutation points to another, equally powerful, change in the perception of time. After Chernobyl, all notions of history seem ridiculous if we consider history as the measure of human time. The disaster in Chernobyl seems to result in an awareness of two distinct forms of history.

The radioactive pollution of the earth around Chernobyl is measured in centuries. Humanity has produced an accident that greatly surpasses the length of time it can envisage, individually or socially. We have entered a timescale that is measured in geologic cycles. Humans live in an environment, of which they are the product and which only passes through the present form of civilization for a limited period of time. Our inventiveness and actions affect that environment, even producing our own destruction. On this scale, no individual action is significant.

To measure an individual's action, mankind has created its own measuring units. In human history, all action produces changes in relation to previous generations, which will determine the next. In this perspective, genealogy is a measure of time, the unit of which is a human life. A generation is not only what is begot by a father and generated by a mother, it is also the scale of time that enables us to understand the world as an enveloping whole composed of precise events and actions that can be recorded in our collective memory and in relation to which all acts and affects take on meaning. Genetic mutation destroys humanist will because it changes this scale; it destroys the time of action by eliminating its measure, value and relevance.

The crisis of individual free will participates in an evolution that is associated with the notion of modernity. In this sense, the mechanization of human activity, the Revolution and the two World Wars were all important disruptions in the evaluation of human time and individual action. The tragedy of the last war, with its immeasurable human loss and the absence of any possibility of evaluating the enormity of the crimes committed, produced a new consciousness of the distance that separates individual will from the inexorable flow of time that is beyond our control. Since then, we have had a schizophrenic perception of time, a millennial vision with a naturalist perspective where the individual is insignificant, and at the same time, a vision strongly centered on an increasingly accelerated time of generations and revolutions in customs and fashion.

! 5. In "Chambre d'amis", Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Gand 1986.

4 - THE TIME OF SHOCK

To better understand this complex connection between different temporalities, as well as the relationship, which seemed natural to Fabro, between a humanist time determined by lineage and the idea of autonomous and omnipotent work of art, I will rely on a thinker who - at the dawn of the tragedy announced by the rise of National Socialist Germany in the thirties - tried to reconfigure this complex problem. Walter Benjamin attempted to think through the experience of a temporality that escapes the individual, while maintaining individual will and autonomy at the center of his reflection.

In his study of Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin proposes a surprising reading of the artist's autonomous condition and the idea of "art for art's sake". He comes back many times and in multiple texts to the poetic and critical works of Baudelaire and suggests we reflect on the question of experience. Through an attentive analysis of art, society and the utopia of the XIXth century, he suggests we read Baudelaire's work as fundamentally innovative, because it is constructed on the impossibility of experience. Benjamin begins with the idea that all aesthetic appreciation can only be built on what is commonly called "experience". Something happens in an unexpected way, we note an aspect of reality that seems new to us and begin to take in the world that surrounds us in a particular way. Stimulated by this particular perception, experience is activated. Only on this condition can aesthetic activity be triggered. Here, Benjamin relies on ideas developed by Friedrich Schiller in the context of post-revolutionary disappointment. For Schiller, one can only see clearly and become a free-willed being through an aesthetic appreciation of the world in a specific historical context, one that presupposes the creation of new schemes for understanding reality⁶. According to Benjamin, experience is the basis of this understanding; it is the encounter of reality that is awoken in us, and the prospective activity of our unconscious memory.

All of Benjamin's readings of Baudelaire's work are based on the impossibility of this primary and indispensable condition for the appreciation of reality. For Benjamin, Baudelaire's work is rooted in the modern city, in speed, in the impersonal relation to the whole, that of the individual drowned in the masses. The elaboration of experience is no longer possible because the fundamental encounters of the individual with reality are now only registered through shock. In Benjamin, this is a painful meeting with reality that the unconscious refuses to remember. The sensitive body and information coming from the outside clash, preventing the constructive activation of involuntary memory⁷. Baudelaire's poetry has abandoned the possibility of building

6. Through his elaboration of Kantian philosophy, Schiller tries to find a new function to teach sensitivity, moving aesthetics from the subjective field to the domain of vital functions capable, according to him, of exercising an influence on our ability to judge. Schiller seems to make aesthetics a vector of transformation of the subject that works on the same base as the perception of the real, thus freed from the dualism between the elucidation of the rational (die Vernunft der Aufklärung) and the arbitrariness of meaning (die Willkür der Sinne). Aesthetics thus operate the possibility of producing new schemes to comprehend the world. See, Friedrich Schiller, *über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*, [1795], Reclam, Stuttgart, 2006.

7. Benjamin recovers the notion of "involuntary memory" from Proust and analyses the implication of experience in the reconstruction of unconscious memory through narration, thus describing a decisive link between experience and narrative.

itself on experience and on a shared sensitive relation to the world. In this sense, the condition of shock can be understood as the impossibility of recording encounters with reality.

5 - THE LUCID ARTIST

It seems important to me to stress that experience through shock⁸ and the failure of involuntary memory do not produce a diminishment of feeling, on the contrary. For Benjamin it is a condition of lucidity and awakening. He insists on this lucid quality in Baudelaire and attempts to highlight the particular way what he calls shock operates: "The question of knowing how lyrical poetry can be founded on an experience where feeling reality through shock (Chockerlebnis) has become the norm. In such poetry, we should expect a highly developed conscious; it should call for the representation of a plan that was already being elaborated at the time of its conception."⁹

A little further on, still in the fifth chapter of his text on Baudelaire, he writes: "Baudelaire's poetic production is of the nature of a task (eine Aufgabe). There is emptiness in front of him which he puts his poems into. His work can not only be defined as historical, like every other: it is desired and understood in this way¹⁰."

The poet is no longer able to elaborate experience and, as a consequence, it is no longer a material that can be recomposed and transmitted by narration and language. Reality, then, would be perceived through shockwaves. Nevertheless, it is a stimulation of the conscious producing an awakening and a lucid insight of a poet's action as an individual in history.

W. Benjamin talks about a plan at work at the conception of the poem. Something that, given the moment of inspiration, is already destined to one of the empty spaces that Baudelaire knew, according to him, how to recognize and where he "put his poems". For Benjamin, Baudelaire "inserts" his poems like one inserts a missing puzzle piece. This idea is the contrary of the usual interpretation of the development of the creative act. The future space of a poem already exists before the idea of writing it suddenly occurs to the poet. Here, Benjamin seems to be interested in the way in which events lived under shock stimulate the poet's conscious to the point that a kind of plan is activated, calling forth a task (eine Aufgabe). It is a strange temporal idea that makes the moment of creation, the idea, the inspiration and the actual production of the work of art its aim. A connection is made even before the existence of the work of art per se. Benjamin evokes "Chockabwehr", the protection of an individual's feeling through shock and says: "Maybe we can finally see the particular efficiency of shock defense in the fact of attributing to the event, through the renunciation of the integrity of its content, an exact temporal position in the

8. The notion of "Chockerlebnis" doesn't only mean the absence of all experience as interpreted by Giorgio Agamben who speaks of "man who has been dispossessed of experience [and who] is exposed to shock without a minimum protection", in his *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, Verso, New York, 2007, p. 47. It seems to me that, for Benjamin, it is rather another form of sensitivity to reality where all perceptive activity, despite everything, remains operative.

9. See "Baudelaire", chap.V, p. 434, in *Walter Benjamin Schriften*, ed. T. W. Adorno and G. Adorno, Francfort-sur-le-Main, Suhrkamp, 1955, vol. 1.

10. "Baudelaire", chap. V, p. 434, vol.1, op.cit.

consciousness of the event."¹¹ An exact position, a signal in the individual's temporal perception; the conscious doesn't seem to produce dialogue in the classic sense between, on the one hand, our body's feeling, its perception and on the other, rational agency, knowledge and the analysis of these perceptions. Rather, our conscious resembles a clock with signs placed on it that measure its progress. These are stable points, located moments, dialoging from the outset to play with the world before having developed a point a view or a discourse.

The artwork would thus be a reference point that determines "an exact temporal position". It shows us the moment when something essential has occurred, even if we are unable to recognize it as something we have experienced.

6 - TWO CONSCIOUSNESSES

Benjamin's analysis would be impossible without the traumatic experience of art that came out of WWI. The Dada and Surrealist works are hinted at in his interpretation of Baudelaire's work. For Benjamin, the autonomy of the artist is the answer to a profound change in the outlook of modern man. We can well see how Benjamin prepares the ground for an approach sensitive to the traumatic condition of a real that exceeds understanding. After Walter Benjamin's suicide, the catastrophe was in the end even more incommensurable than what he saw deep in the wide eyes of Klee's *Angelus Novus* and that he baptized "The Angel of History". The angel is looking at the spectator, but for Benjamin he is looking toward the past: This collection of things that appear like nothing more than a chain of events, the angel sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed, but the violent wind of progress irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned¹².

Humanity has begun to live again after the foreseeable catastrophe and they have caused new ones, like Chernobyl. However from that moment on, they have lived with the consciousness of a dark premonition of events which they have not experienced nor been able to record as experience. With Benjamin, we could say that we now live with empty boxes that, because they create problems and are not the result of experience, remain there, an identifiable hollow waiting to be filled.

With the notion of plan, Benjamin recognizes an idea of form which is completely new for art. The work of art is destined to have a function, it is already in itself, implicated in a dialectic relation with the real and with history, long before the concrete meeting of the poet's words with the world and of form with the spectator.

Consciousness occupies a new place for Benjamin: having become the guardian of our sense of time, it makes artistic production a necessity a priori. The vacant space in which the poet is supposed to insert a poem, that gap, is already form, it is written in a plan. This is a type of

11. "Baudelaire", chap.VI, p. 435, op. cit.

12. "Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen", chap. IX, op. cit., p 499. trans. Eng. Walter Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History" p. 249.

consciousness that has abandoned, not only experience, but also the linear temporality that it resulted from. For Benjamin, consciousness produces knowledge of that which needs to be known. If Benjamin's reflection gives a pertinent interpretation to the dialogue that Picabia's machine-like drawing or Duchamp's bachelor machines create with the world and history, it also highlights another aspect, which is present in Luciano Fabro's thought: his idea of the omnipotent artwork which would be capable of changing the future and the past. This concrete conception of the work of art has in common with Benjamin's idea of Baudelaire's poetry, the fact that it is above all essential. It was created to accomplish a task in response to a plan that it was already destined for, before and beyond any desire of expression on the artist's part.

For Benjamin, as for Fabro, this type of timeless consciousness, capable of fusing with all necessary forms, can only be based on one point of view, an individual perspective that moves away from the surrealist idea of unconscious automatism. As Benjamin says, shock is a defense mechanism; it establishes a temporal consciousness where there was an absence of experience. The individual puts a sign in the place where experience escapes him or her and he or she won't remember what happened, but rather the moment when he or she missed something essential. Benjamin gives us a completely new vision of History, no longer a linear construction obvious to everyone but a construction that is above all subjective. Each person places his or her own signs where something essential is missing. History is composed according to this idea of an infinite number of singular perspectives that affirm with conviction a chain of events where, according to Fabro, each and every one is there to testify truth: "Maybe none of these names reveal the alchemy of my history to you. But I am trying to bear witness to it, to represent it with syntheses and in its genesis¹³."

For Fabro and Benjamin, this individual perspective is not at all in contradiction with the idea of a general consciousness that has done away with experience. On the contrary: so that a creative individual can recognize a new form, the task he or she must perform, he or she needs to rely on individual perspective. He or she has to establish a basis from which to measure the distance that separates him or her from the experience to be reconstructed. It is in this sense that, for Fabro, the idea of a genealogy of masters isn't at all contradictory to the power of the work of art that is projected into the future and into the past, beyond the artist's time and intentions. If certain artists have been able to identify the historical perspective that Fabro established for himself, it would be naïve to think that it is completely applicable to their own work. The perspective established by Fabro is naturally based on finished works that impose their history through the construction of connections which are in no way valid outside of the synthesis achieved in them.

7 - ACHROME TIME

Comparing the mechanisms of Benjamin's thought on aesthetics and history and Luciano Fabro's convictions, we move away from the psychological approach that the idea of an experience through shock implies. We move away from art between the two wars and the feeling of impending tragedy

13. op. cit. p. 154.

that made that idea possible. However, in the conceptual nature of the art of two generations of artists that Fabro identified in Milan as his predecessors, Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni, there are mechanisms similar to the logic developed by Benjamin. The *Manifesto Blanco*, in 1946¹⁴, aimed to put an end to the problem of form in art, embracing all forms and integrating them into a total space where art no longer described reality but rather made it exist through light and sound waves and through materials. Form is rendered autonomous – it no longer represents reality, it is in reality. The singular action of artists, their avant-gard method of manifestoes and self-managed spaces are there to assert this in a perspective that is at once singular and new. We are most probably in an "achrome" space, in an outer space, at a "Zero" degree of experience. In the postwar period, visual arts developed the tools of a language that determined precise, but conceptually open, spaces. On July 21st 1960 in Milan, Manzoni signed, with his fingerprint, the potential space of a total creation. In most histories, this has become a date to remember – on that day a form which was new, yet obvious to all, came into existence. The photograph of Fontana's action taken by Ugo Mulas in his Milanese studio as he was concentrating on performing the cut of his *Concetto spaziale*, was not intended to become a document in the service of the myth of heroic art. It is a precise statement, one man's action within the history of humanity, that takes place in Milan; a precision necessary to construct the conceptual space of the work. The meaning of the operation is available to the viewer only as a conceptual parenthesis that is opened thanks to the dialogue between two irreconcilable temporalities, the artist's "here" and the "there" of form. Neither the existence of form, nor its conceptual opening have meaning in themselves. A cut in a canvas or the artist's fingerprint on the egg are revealed as forms only if they become a dialectic agent, an operative form capable of giving depth to the complexity of our "real" experiences.

8 - THE TIME OF EXPERIENCE

Between Fabro's arrival in Milan in 1959 when he encountered Fontana, Manzoni and Lo Savio's respective work – the first stage of an essential change for him in the definition of what could be the creation of form – and his death in 2007, art and the world have evolved considerably. A key aspect of this evolution is the work of the generation of artists to which Fabro belonged. In 1965 in his first personal exhibition at the Vismara gallery in Milan, Fabro showed a mirror that was rendered partially transparent. *Buco (Hole, 1963)* (p. 176, 177) is quite obviously a reflection

14. "Manifesto Blanco" announces: "We continue the evolution of art." It retraces the art history, explaining the coming of an "art based on the unity of time and space" and announces the dissolution of form into color and sound into movement. It was edited by a group of artists around Fontana that had settled in Argentina during the war years. Fontana would then re-edit this manifesto in Milan. Translated in Italian and English, it was widely distributed. This undated version that I recovered from the cellar of Fontana's ex-studio, has two groups of signatures on the back cover: Bernardo Arias, Horacio Cazeneuve, Marcos Fridman and then Pablo Arias, Rodolfo Burgos, Enrique Benito, César Bernal, Luis Coll, Alfredo Hansen and Jorge Racamonte followed by the words "Color – Sonido – Movimento", in original language on all the translated versions.

on Fontana's cut. But something fundamental is produced by the creation of this "hole". The relation between the reflecting part of space where the viewer stands and the one that is transparent behind the pane of glass, no longer opens onto an undetermined space, a place of conceptual projection, like it did in Fontana's case. The two spaces both refer us back to the real places where we find ourselves when we look at the piece. The historical "here" of the artistic act and the conceptual "there" that form can open are revealed to the spectator as a spatial dialectic tension to be tried out and experimented with personally. To use Benjamin's model, if in the modern world, experience as a structure that allows us to comprehend reality and elaborate a form of language, has disappeared, these artists, contrary to the postwar generations, made the reception of the artwork a moment of experience for the viewer. The work of art produces the experimental conditions that put the complexity of reality within the spectator's reach. Art seems to have invented something absolutely extraordinary during this period of economic and social renaissance in the West, the possibility of experimenting with the world through artwork. A reinvention of experience through manufactured and cultural objects that have left the incessant flow of time and what Benjamin called "the inexorable wind of progress". Art now creates a situation where the individual becomes aware of reality.

The extraordinary expansion of contemporary art throughout Luciano Fabro's lifetime, its growth in economic value and popularity, can be interpreted as an acknowledgement of that experimental space. This explains the need to build immense structures like the Centre Pompidou or to make art available everywhere, to all audiences. Art is now part of the lifestyle of Western society; it was the place during the sixties and the seventies where contact was made with reality and where the possibility of experience was confirmed. The art market followed that evolution until today, it has become immensely rich, but it is now just the place of exchange of symbolic value and no longer where inventions and complex experiences of temporality are confronted and compared.

9 - APRIL 26TH, 1986

By 1986, art was in the process of becoming commonplace; its form was a contemporary style, its price a fluctuation of demand. The work of art could no longer create a place capable of accommodating our experience of reality. It had become a product to be distributed to the largest possible public. As a young artist, I myself struggled with this new situation, telling all who would listen that the perception of an artwork could only be active. Along with other young artists, I tried to respond to the advances in postmodern thought that had made its entrance in the art market at the beginning of the 1980s in the form of "citationniste" painting. This was the name of a group of painters who assembled figures taken from other works. Everything became a reference and the viewer was no longer called on to experience reality, contenting him or herself with verifying its existence through symbols.¹⁵

15. Today we have lost sight of these artists. The Italian Carlo Maria Mariani, who started his painting career with a personal exhibition at Paul Maenz in Cologne in 1978, is the most prominent of them. His neoclassic painting opened the way to a return of art about itself, making the citation the most simple element of artistic language and a formal scheme that denies History.

When Fabro created the connection between that day in 1986 and his own visual work, he came back to an essential element of artistic elaboration. He asserted that the time of the artistic act was not insignificant. The day of the explosion at the Chernobyl plant became a precise moment in the life of the artist. The change in scale that this disaster induced permitted him to give a voice to what he felt were the most dangerous effects of this new condition: the loss of the humanist unit of measure. His works and exhibitions of the late 1980s and the beginning of the next decade were dedicated, like *Ovaie* (*Ovaries*, 1988) (p. 178), to the theme of procreation, and to the problem of perception and measurement, like *Prometeo* (*Prometheus*, 1986) (p. 179). Fabro pursued his reflection on time and the importance of generations. The artistic act which is not grounded in history, deprives the author of the paternity of his actions, takes from the works the responsibility of defining how to construct a relation with reality. For Fabro, the interruption of transmission deprives the artist of his autonomy. Excluded from belonging to a generation, he is no longer capable of a dialogue beyond time. Only the definition of a territory allows us to rethink work completed by our fathers and to guarantee the evolution of form and its dialectic power¹⁶. Fabro fought against the loss of what seemed to him essential: the grounding of action in a personal journey which is experienced, accepted and signed. Fabro understood that form can no longer be a dialectic agent if individual perspective is drowned in generic and generalized history where all production becomes interchangeable. An interchangeable artwork is the exact opposite of one based on a form that can be contested, and therefore changed. The artist's autonomy ensures the renewal of forms, as well as their survival as agents that reconnect us with the experience of reality.

LIST OF WORKS

- Page 160:** *Io (l'uovo)* (*I [The Egg]*), 1978. Bronze. Installation on bread dough.
Page 161 top: Lucio Fontana, *Concetto spaziale, Natura* (*Spatial Concept, Nature*), 1959-1960. Six elements in bronze.
Page 161 bottom: Lucio Fontana in his Corso Monforte studio in Milan, letting himself be photographed in the act of making a *Concetto spaziale, Natura* (*Spatial Concept, Nature*), around 1960.
Page 165: *C'est la vie* (*That's Life*), 1986. Cotton. Variable dimensions. Photograph with Lara de Keyser. Exhibition *Chambres d'amis*, Ghent, 1986.
Page 173: Piero Manzoni, photograph documenting the action *Nutrimenti d'arte di Piero Manzoni. Consumazione dell'arte dinamica del pubblico divorare l'arte* (*Art Foods by Piero Manzoni. Consumption of Art, Dynamic of Public Devoring Art*) which took place at the Azimuth Gallery in Milan on 21 July 1960.
Page 176, 177: *Buco* (*Hole*), 1963. Reflective and transparent crystal. 120 x 80 cm.
Page 178: *Ovaie* (*Ovaires*), 1988. Marble, steel. Two elements, 1000 cm each.
Page 179: *Prometeo* (*Prometheus*), 1986. Marble, survey rods, poles. 500 x 250 cm.

16. In the exhibition "Computers di Luciano Fabro, caramelle di Nadezda Mandel'stam" at the Christian Stein gallery in Milan in 1990, Fabro created an astonishing relation between "Computers" (created since 1988), forms in metal in an unstable balance, and the marble weights of Nadezda (1990), in which balance is assured by the dairies of Nadezda Mandel'stam that the marble crushes. On the opening day, Fabro's students distributed candy with fragments of her husband's (*Ossip Mandel'stam*) poetry, that Nadezda learned by heart to save from destruction after his disappearance in a Siberian camp in 1938. A passage of direct testimony, an action of communion through which Fabro vehemently affirmed his concept of timescale and individual responsibility.