

Comment

From Land art to the “global era”

Gaia Salvatori

In the globalisation era, arts have provided food for thought on “how latitudes became forms” (as anyone could see at *Fondazione Sandretto* in Turin in 2003), to stress again that now, at global level, one should no longer define art as a contemplation “space”, but as an “environment”, a place for experience. However, the total rejection of any hierarchic distinction between the media, between popular culture and “top-level” art, between tradition and modernity, and the rejection of alleged territorial leaderships have made their way since 1969, when Bern saw the inauguration of the historic exhibition entitled “When Attitudes became Forms”. People then realised that the problem was lying in the behaviour, in the attitude, of making arts towards the world. Basically, the formalistic concept of self-referentiality in a work of art was to be overcome, and attention was to be paid to procedures and contexts. Above all, it was a change in the point of view on reality that artistic experimentation was spurring, as demonstrated by the work by Piero Manzoni, *Socle du monde*, produced in Denmark in 1961 or by the actions of Joseph Beuys, related to the Fluxus movement.

In search of a new humanism in contact with the natural universe, Beuys believed that the change in the elements had a symbolic value, as demonstrated by the action *7000 Oaks* in Kassel in 1982 which was not only located – as the artist wrote himself – in the “necessity of the biosphere”, but it was meant to “draw attention on the change of life, of the entire society and of the entire ecological context”. Following prolific utopias, similar thoughts may have inspired also artists exploiting videos and electronic means, such as Nam June Paik, committed to “humanising” technology or Hans Haacke, of the Zero Group in Germany who, concentrated on the interaction between human and natural systems, produced since 1967 wind and water sculptures, believing the “fragile system” of art could be a natural medicine in the complex dynamics of our planet.

Even though there was someone as Pop artist Andy Warhol who, with a playful and detached attitude, in 1966 made polyester clouds filled with helium float in a gallery, nature was becoming a new artistic challenge for those who shared the new ecological awareness. Already in the late sixties in America, it was creating the need and the hope of a change in the environment, threatened by destruction after two centuries of industrial pollution. This was the direction taken by the works by Helen and Newton Harrison in California since the early seventies, committed in a research defined as “quasi scientific” that led, among other things, to the production of works on the issue of acid rain caused by atmospheric pollution. Particularly significant experiments along this path between art and science were carried out by Juan Navarro and Gyorgy Kepes at the M.I.T. (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and by the related Center of Advanced Visual Studies – since the late sixties –, using their force of imagination and technical skills to implement artistic projects aimed at the purification of the environment such as “water-purification plants” located in urban areas like new “public monuments turned to the future” (G. Kepes).

A M.I.T. research team was also the focus of the work by Alan Sonfist in 1973 after having presented, among other things, the *Crystal Monument* (1966-72): a globe containing crystals changing shape and position according to the temperature and the water currents of the surrounding atmosphere. With *Pool of Earth* (1973) and *Sun Monument* (1978), Sonfist fully implemented the idea of “natural phenomena as public monuments”. The world had already seen the international success of the Land Art in its different types of “manipulation” of the natural elements: from Long to Heizer, to the afore-mentioned Sonfist, up to the Minimal crossings by Smithson and De Maria.

Whereas the *Steam Pieces* by Robert Morris, since 1967, could be defined as a sort of “interface between nature and technology”, Robert Smithson, based on the dialectics “site/non-site”, rooted his research in the processes implying a change and a shift between urban contexts, geology and nature and chose as sites of his “earth art” anything that was “disrupted by industry, reckless urbanization or

nature's own devastation". So, the 1970 *Spiral Jetty* is 457 metres long and made of basalt and mud blocks penetrating, mixed with salt crystals, into the Great Salt Lake in Utah, designed to be swallowed by the lake when the water level rises up. On the other hand, an artistic "event" in itself is the atmospheric event contained in *Lighting Field* by Walter De Maria (1974-77), a permanent "work in progress" where steel posts evenly spread at a regular distance on a surface of the plateau of New Mexico are there to capture the lightings, embodying – as someone wrote – a "weird symbiosis between the steel technology and the primordial energy of a lighting".

Although it was mainly the American and North-European context – as explained – that inspired works linked to environmental characteristics, situations and problems, Italy also saw between the seventies and the eighties a gradual development of the awareness on this issue. First and foremost, the reference here is to some practices of *Arte Povera* (Italian for "Poor Art"), implemented by Mario Merz, for example, who in 1966 used neon for the series on the Fibonacci numbers, a sort of *trait-d'union* between nature and technology where – as the artist explained himself – "the sequence gets longer and longer but it also quickly enlarges, as does a living organism". Following the natural processes also Giuseppe Penone, who finds his place among the "poor art" artists, dealt with the problem of decay, as did Gilberto Zorio, whose works – still in the words of the artist himself – "want to be energy in themselves [...] which becomes real in a very physical way, in terms of a chemical reaction". Thus, his works feature changes in colours, density, etc. changing according the situation, as if they were alive.

A sort of climax of this kind of poetics, in conclusion, may be found in *Autoritratto* of Alighiero Boetti, presented at the Sonsbeek 93 exhibition of Arnhem, the Netherlands. A bronze casting made on the plaster mould of the artist himself holds, with his arm raised, a tube where water flows from, falling on the bronze head heated by an electrical mechanism: the heat emanated by his figure transforms the water into steam. The sculpture dips its feet in a heap of earth and apparently it implements, through its creative energy, a process of change embodying and resuming the four elements (earth, water, air, fire), always the keepers of the mysteries of nature and, when too many interferences do not alter some deep and fragile balances, still the regulators of our life on the planet.

Author

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