

FRANCESCO SOMAINI. MATRIXES AND EVOLVING MARKS

The work of Francesco Somaini certainly does not lack deep, passionate, and emotionally involved critical analysis. These analysis are in some cases excessively emphatic, overwhelmed with symbolic references and psychoanalytical interpretations, that spring from the firm belief in the necessity of “digging deep” in order to discover and highlight the very real meanings and the first roots of artistic research. Even though the above-described critical research largely stresses the importance of “substance”, it may underestimate in many ways the specific nature of a work of art, which is, above all, a formal fact, a linguistic structure that is well grounded in the autonomous dimension of the figurative space. Nevertheless, the strong and explicitly antropomorphic characterization of Somaini’s organic imagery produces in the spectator intense influences and reflections connected to the main questions concerning man’s primary existentialism; but we should not forget that Somaini’s work is full of aesthetic tensions in that they are plastic organisms, more or less similar to the work of a geometric abstractionist for example (even though the outcomes are clearly different). In other words, the quality, the qualitative value, of a work of art is measured by the artist’s capacity to act on the material in a way that transforms his actual experience into a moulded physique, his inner life, his personal spirituality, his reaction to the historical-cultural context, his ideals, his design vision, etc. Of course, the intention, here, is not at all to defend sterile formalist points of view: the scope is to make a contribution that will help to reach a better understanding of the sense of Somaini’s sculpture (and, in particular, the theme of evolving marks; in so doing, it will be useful to recall some suggestions put forward by Luigi Pareyson’s theory of formativity¹ - concerning in particular the concepts of shape and material- that avoid old misunderstandings regarding the relationships between shape-substance and shape-material. Pareyson opposes the idealistic solution that considers art work as a “vision” a concept of art as “shape”, where the word shape means organism, a moulded physique, that has its own independent life and works according to its rules; to the concept of expression he is against the rule of production, meant as shaping action. The latter develops through a collision, a tight and continuous dialogue with the material. The artwork rises as a concrete exercise on the physique of the material, whose resistance offers hints, obstacles and suggestions to the shaping action. It is worth explaining that the material considered here, is the whole of the elements of the external reality on which the artist works: materials and technical tools, linguistic elements and cultural influences, spatial conditions of existence, the themes eventually imposed by the buyer, the artist’s creative intentions, etc.

In this way, the artist as such, specifically thinks and acts in order to shape. Constantly trying to define his own identity through new ways of shaping, the artist carries out his own creative process by shaping his artwork. They resemble uncompleted structures (a starting point, a seed not yet formally matured) and new beginnings into new possible undiscovered developments, but necessarily coherent with an autonomous logic of language: that of the specific shaping form with which the artist dialectically interacts. If the artist passively accepts the levels reached by the internal laws of his own language he may come to a standstill, into mannerisms and his own academicism; whereas, if he takes up and stimulates the innovative elements – a productive break down, then the favourable conditions for the birth and growth of new plastic organisms can be put into place.

From this point of view, it is clear that Somaini’s antropomorphic and dynamic organism is not simply a matter of content, but is strictly correlated with the articulation of concrete and “organic” structures of the plastic language.

It is through continuous experimentation, a profound “quest of the material” that Somaini, in the long run, has kept his creative tension so alive. It is worth mentioning the following quote by the artist, which agrees with what has been said above:

“The choice of the means, the executive technique, the plastic language, the connection of results, the style. A profound and underground relationship links the means and the results. The syntaxes already constitute the meaning of the speech, by which the message itself is affected. The hazards of a new technique stretch the creative path.”

Our duty, here, is to try to explain, mostly through the analysis of the inner reasons of the artist’s path, the linguistic and technical methods and the development of the senses that characterise the work concerning matrixes and marks. Keeping in mind that every plastic invention (and, in this case, it is unpublished, even though some possible references can be found) has a margin of inexplicability that, from an aesthetic point of view, represents the peculiar components of surprise and of emotional suggestion. A suggestion that, in this case, acts in a particularly involved manner because these works of art very clearly exhibit the process through which they have been developed, where a profound congeniality of the artistic work emerges with the natural laws of shape and with the specific characteristics of the material (where the shaping intention of the artist does not go against the fundamental characteristics of natural shapes, but uses them in an

autonomous and self-built dimension). The aesthetic enjoyment of the spectator is a dynamic and active consideration that runs over and over again in the process that gave birth to the shape. The work of art, in other words, is the narration of the complex dialect of its making: it appears as a present memory and constant re-evocation of the productive tension that generated it. In this sense, the interpretative act tends to coincide, in some ways, with the creative act or, if preferred, with the shaping practice of the artist (moreover, it is only in this way, in a specific operative way, that the artist may project himself into the work of art). The artist himself gives the clearest definition of these works. It is worth, then, quoting it in full:

“A Matrix, a hoard of possible shapes, from the object comes the design keeping intact its physical, tactile identity and a beauty impossible to forgo, is instrumental in sculpture. A work of art designing other works of art, a symbiosis of meanings, marks, complementary to its own matrix, is a narrative amplification of the initial starting point. The unwrapping of a wrapped and contracted shape engraves progressions of itself along a space, through time. Fossil tearing that scratches a furrow, engraves a message, integrating action where nests the difference, the interpretation, of others. Every one represents a difference, opening up possibilities of development.”

Crispoliti has rightly observed that evolving marks are the necessary development of the elaborate and demanding urban planning of the Seventies, when Somaini's effort tends to go beyond the limits imposed by the tradition that has attributed only monumental function to sculpture; Somaini wants to react in a polemic and vivid way to the alienation of the present urban context, characterized by a cold constructive rationalism that annuls man's values and memories, in the name of a cynical idea of functionality and productive efficiency (Lang's film *Metropolis* still represents, also in the artist's opinion, an extreme version of this nightmare-like concept); therefore, he creates and experiments with a dynamic setting of his plastic organism within the spatial structure of the city. In Somaini's opinion, the humanization of the city will be reached through the expansion of big organic anthropomorphic plastic elements in their growth from sculptures to urban landscapes. In the interventions mentioned in *Urban urgencies* (1972), utopiacy, the solution of the evolving mark does not yet appear in an explicit way, but we can already talk about a sculptural dimension that overflows from a body closed in on itself in the space-environment leaving an evolving mark, a print of itself, as a permanent plastic event. In the “Operazione Acervia” project (at the end of 1975), then in the “Controprogetto per la Königstrasse” of Duisburg (1978-79) and in the project presented in the competition for the site of the Grundgens Platz in Düsseldorf (1980), marks and matrixes, represented by sculptures called *Antropoammoniti*, become the base elements. The Acevia project resembles, in many ways, an operation of *land art*, but (leaving aside the specific problems of the relationship between city and nature) the artist's use of “his own way”, and thus of sculpture, puts this work of art on a completely new and different plain. Somaini writes:

“Antropoammonite, a story of the body, rotates with a progressive movement leaving a deep evolving mark in the humid soil: a continuous bass-relief: a memory of a body print which sinks into and is rooted in the ground, in the landscape.”

The sculpture, in this case, impresses its message in the ground: a plastic configuration that coincides with the unwrapping of its shape in the external space: a moulding shape that puts in action its virtual organic and vital energy. This energy is transmitted, through modulations and plastic hollows, to the water that flows in the evolving marks created for Duisburg and Düsseldorf (“fountains-rivers” in which sculpture and flowing water formally react together). This energy is shaped, in a different way, in the event created the following year in the Botanical Garden of Lucca (1980), where a big *Antropoammonite* marks its furrows like a plough in soil sown with grass, that, once grown, will cover the flowing shapes of the marks with a green coat. With this “plastic manipulation of the grass”, the artist reaches the limit of the identification between nature and sculpture, opening up the possibility of further developments:

“The sown evolving mark, in bloom with stalks, presents itself as an immense sculpture which becomes a place, a real landscape, an anthropomorphic park for a non-imaginary city.”

Thus, Somaini's invention of the evolving mark was stimulated by the necessity of finding a new and dynamic solution to the problem of the relationship between sculpture and environmental and urban spaces; now, a more complex question needs to be clarified. Precisely, how, in the successive developments of his plastic language, the artist has created sculptures, the *Antropoammoniti*, with formal sculpture “wrapped” ready to be “unwrapped” in a mark. In other words, how he could carve “matrixes” (1975) before he has considered using them to produce evolving marks, to create complementary shapes organically connected and independent at the same time, (carrying out the transformation of “soma” into “topos”, as the artist

himself writes). The *Antropoammoniti* have actually been thought of as independent works of art even after they have generated evolving marks: they can be exhibited by themselves or together with their mark; similarly the evolving mark has an autonomous life of its own as a work of art.

The morphology of the *Antropoammoniti* is intriguing and ambiguously enigmatic, articulate spherical blocks between fossil and organic. Some formal roots may be found in Somaini's works of the Fifties and Sixties, for what concerns movements and dynamic twisting of the material and developments of expressive organic hollows. Somaini's interest in bone structure and shape dates back to the late Forties: the series of *Crani di cavallo* (1948) is much more than a theme reflecting Picasso's influence, as may be true for many Italian artists of the Forties. Indicative in this sense is Somaini's interest in Henry Moore and for the organic architecture of Rudolf Steiner (an interest that emerges with greater evidence in the projects of urban intervention of the Seventies).

For example, works like *Verticale* and *Verticale (Assalonne)* 1959 or *Ordalia* 1963 show a structure that tends to fall into a spin producing an impression of rotation; here the dynamics of the work is given mainly by the internal concave and lucid surfaces animated by light reflexes. The extreme plasticity of rotary movement characterizes a series of very significant drawings from 1966, whose rounded shapes look like a nucleus of organic metamorphic developments.

In the sculptures named *Carnificazione di un'architettura* (1975), where anthropomorphic shapes are carved out of geometric blocks (recalling in some ways the *Prisoners* by Michelangelo), there are already the substantial structural elements of the *Antropoammoniti*, even though the plastic intention has a different scope. It would be impossible not to also mention the extraordinary sculpture *Palazzo del centauro* (1975), a strange wrinkled shape that tends to fall in a spin (maybe a reference to the nautilus shell), with a double meaning of masculine and feminine sexuality both at the same time, depending on the point of view; a concave and convex structure heavy with organic tension but also still and silent like a fossil.

The more relevant formal invention regarding the *Antropoammoniti* is, in my opinion, the metamorphosis of an unpublished, plastic rotating organism into a feminine womb representing both the bone structure and the genital system. In order to achieve this plastic synthesis, Somaini used another drawing of bones: the structure of the vertebra, whose shape is easy to roll. Again, it is worth highlighting the fact that the *Antropoammoniti* is a matrix of evolving marks (this works, as it has been already said, in a similar way to that of the ancient Assyrian-Babylonian cylindrical seals) that in many cases impress marks of a feminine matrix: a very tight connection, almost an identity, between the production process of formal values and of symbolic values.

Likewise, for what concerns the evolving mark, it is possible to find its formal roots in many previous works dating back to the Sixties. First of all it is important to mention the sculpture *La Fonte I* (1976) whose substantial characteristics are pointed out by the artist in the following quote:

"In the geometry of the block there is a shadow line that constitutes the central theme of the work of art: a great expressive cosy hollow in which soft volumes nest, that transparently allude to the maternal womb."

From this work springs the idea of a great complex of sculptures, a *Retablo* (made of eight elements, but which was never finished), among which there would have also been two *Impronte* (1967), very similar to grave stones placed on the ground and marked by anthropomorphic shapes impressed in the negative. "The whole *Retablo*", Somaini explains "is divided into the theme of positive-negative shapes, according to which the print's, emptiness, absence represents the meaningful void of death. The relationship between human shaped prints and death recalls the casts of the Pompei corpses, taken from the empty matrixes found in the lava. A reference to the prints of living models' bodies created a few years before by Yves Klein seem less relevant to me, because the aim of this project was rather different. In other very important works of art, as in the series *Caduta dell'uomo* (1967-69) and the big monumental sculpture *Discesa dello Spirito Santo* (created for the façade of the Bergamo church of the same name, 1968-72), the element of the evolving mark deeply influences the plastic organism, appearing in a dynamic shape like a ship's wake, a memory of a crossing, heavy with symbolic features. Here the visualization of the force of gravity stimulates the perceptive tension. The force of gravity comes actively into play as shaping energy of the marks in the Acervia project. Whereas in Lucca, it is human force that rolls the matrix creating the evolving marks (similarly the plough is pushed by human and animal force). The idea that the force of gravity is what makes the marks happen can also be found in the works on vertical marks.

Now we turn to the latter phase of Somaini's work on evolving marks. This is a phase that begins with the so-called *Anamorfoosi Bargellini* (1982-84): from the evolving marks made by the matrix not only formal developments of free organic inspiration emerge, but also clearly recognizable body shapes, floating in the plastic folds of the material. In order to get these results Somaini worked on the cylindrical matrixes carving in negative the figurative elements that will show positive on the marks. This process can be classified as an anamorphosis, even though the artist's technique is different from common classical techniques. We can call it anamorphosis because it produces in many ways similar effects.

Jurgis Baltrusaitis writes:

“L’anamorphose est bien une évasion mais qui comporte un retour. La destruction de la figure précède sa représentation. L’image engloutie dans un torrent ou dans un tourbillon confus émerge, semblable à elle-même [...] Ressuscitée de son chaos comme le Phénix de ses cendres, elle apparaît transfigurée par un mystère...”.

Furthermore, Somaini himself wrote to Baltrusaitis explaining his work, and, on the question of whether he could use the definition of anamorphosis to define his work or not, he received a substantially affirmative answer. The following contains lines from Somaini’s letter to Baltrusaitis as quoted (December, 30th, 1983):

“Since last year, abstract matrixes have been giving birth to completely figurative evolving marks. The negative wrapped on itself unwraps and is decoded in an inverse way with respect to the cylindrical anamorphosis. If the anamorphosis is simply an accelerated perspective, then it would not be possible to talk about anamorphosis in relation to my present work; but if it is recognized that an anamorphosis is also an image that can be decoded only through an action such as a mirror or through an unwrapping of the image itself, if in sculpture the negative is tridimensional like a mirror [...] then the word anamorphosis can be applied or used in relation to this interpretation, this extrapolation.”

In Baltrusaitis’ reply (February 6th 1984) we find the following:

“Votre matrice cylindrique me semble correspondre à une grille ou la graticulation géométrique est remplacée par un désordre calculé des masses. C’est une exploration de formes tridimensionnelles qui correspond à des aspirations de notre temps”.²

It must be explained, however, that Somaini has no intention of producing marvellous and special effects. The use of this anamorphic procedure is a further way of trying to transmit to the material (or trying to carve out of the material, if you want) the mysterious and living sense of organic shapes. In short, to give birth, to be an artist-creator, to the material: naturally this is an utopian aspiration, but in so being lies the deep reason that feeds the energy in his research.

The result of this research, which required great effort from the artist is represented by the great anamorphic matrixes and the great evolving marks of *La nascita di Venere* (three versions 1985). On one side the matrixes are sculptures characterized by an intriguing and complicated articulation of emptiness and fullness: these works look abstract at first sight, but enclosed cryptically within themselves is the secret of their figurative potential. On the other side, the development of these wrapped plastic organisms gives birth (like butterflies coming out of the cocoon) to a sequence of sensually floating naked feminine bodies, whose vision is softly distorted in various ways according to the degree of pressure and direction that the artist has transmitted to the matrix. Along the marks, the same figure may appear more than once, but always in a different shape.

In these works and in others such as *Le baccanti nella foresta* (1988), the intense and dramatic energy of the previous years is unburdened in order to give space to images that recall figurative memories of a mythological nature, to formal sequences that (like ancient repetitive music) make the plastic material resound with metamorphic themes never changing but at the same time always different.

In conclusion, some brief reflections on this research phase of the artist (that will most probably go much further). It is important to highlight, here, the crisis of the concept of centrality that has always constituted the founding principle of classical body sculpture: a central idea which is linked to the idea of sculpture as statuary and, thus, as representation of the human body (which through the centuries has been identified in many ways with sculpture *tout court*). Somaini keeps somehow to the tradition since he also works on the human body, however he goes well beyond the accomplishment of simple interventions of stylization, deformation or abstraction (such as those carried out by cubist sculptors or Moore); he totally destroys the presence of the human shape as a unique form, and works on a split: the matrix as a plastic ossified nucleus full of generative potentialities; the evolving mark as “engraving” has a potential never ending development and is a surface that encloses and generates sculptural shapes at the same time, through space and time. It is worth adding that in these works Somaini seems to capture the very identity of shape, as is defined by Simmel (*Metafisica della morte*, 1910-11)³ in relation to the organic body:

“The shape that delimitates the inorganic body [...] is determined by the external space [...]. Whereas, the organic body creates its own shape from the inside: it stops growing when the moulding shapes that were born with it have reached their boundaries; and these (moulding shapes) keep regenerating its specific shape. The conditions of its essence are more or less those of its apparent shape, while, what concerns its organic body is on the

exterior of the body. The secret of the shape lies in the fact that it represent a boundary; it is the object itself and, at the same time, the end of the object itself, the circumscribed territory in which the Being and the Non-being of the object are united.”

From this point of view, it is possible to say that the essence of this work of art does not lie in the matrixes nor in the evolving marks, but in the reciprocal relationship (always variable in time and space).

Francesco Poli

¹ L. Pareyson, *Aesthetics, Theory of Formativity*, Torino, 1954; and also U. Eco, *The Aesthetics of the Formativity and The Concept of Interpretation*, in *The Definition of Art*, Milano, 1968.

² For what concerns Baltrusaitis' quote, refer to the catalog of the exhibition *Anamorphoses, jeux de perspective*, Musée des Arts Decoratifs, Paris, 1976.

³ Cfr. Georg Simmel, *Metafisica della Morte*, in *Arte e civiltà*, ISEDI, Milano 1976.