

THE UNHAPPY CONSCIENCE

Tiziana Conti

In 1964, the philosopher of the 'negative Utopia', Herbert Marcuse, published his fundamental work *The One-Dimensional Man*, in which he examined the individual's life in terms of its reduction to the need to produce and consume, subservient to an instrumental society. Thirty years later, the American critic and art historian Jeffrey Deitch referred to this rather pessimistic worldview when he stripped bare the epoch-making disorientation in which the individual is subjected to the excesses of technological power and coined the definition of the *Post-Human Age*. The years that separate the two works are marked by a progressive, inexorable 'substitution' of values by a manipulation of the individual, with grievous results: alienation, an existential quality lost in 'care' for things, with the consequence of a loss of the meaning of 'being', as the crucial categories of existence became temporariness, vertigo and the difficulty of accepting anything and anyone different from ourselves.

These troubled and troubling signs have been detected perspicaciously in thirty years of research by Federico Piccari, who penetrates into the crevices of reality to grasp its fissures, its ambivalences and its losses of meaning. Nothing is as it seems. Diversified in the areas of sculpture, painting, photography, video and site-specific installations, his works always lead back to the impenetrable reality that lies concealed behind appearances, the ontic fragility that is so typical a characteristic of today's human dimension, defining its enigmatic quality. Man: is he a person or a personality? This is a question that the artist explores in many directions: Piccari is convinced that the artist "has on his side the force of thought that combines innovation, form, balance and thinking to create the work that bears witness to his times and has the potential to go beyond them. The strength of a work is that it delivers mankind up to reflection, overcoming finiteness and developing an anticipatory quality". So he attributes a fundamental cathartic value to art, with its ability to infuse balance where otherwise confusion reigns.

The mould from which the articulations of his work set out is one and one alone, which takes the form of a hermeneutic questioning about the nature of identity in an interplay of interchangeable faces. One premise is fundamental: his materials constitute an assertive, intrinsic element of his work, making their presence felt on the content and binding themselves to it symbiotically. The balance of the finished work is always the result of tension and precariousness. And it is that very osmosis between material and concept that brings about the problem of 'being'. The material breathes life into a strong action designed to generate turmoil, even irritation: the finished work is the completion and achievement of a slow, extenuated process, reiterated and insisted in the gesture. Think of the portraits he has made using hair of the body, of the head and of human beards: of the individual, we recognise the organic element that bears witness to his physical presence and conjures it up, although the identity of that individual remains mysteriously impenetrable. Think of the foetuses that float unstably, so *Suspended* in their temporariness, in a vacuum, destined to a fall that seems to be inexorable. Think of Carpets, used in the East since ancient times as a veritable 'living space', while being seen in the Western world primarily as a function of their dimension as ornamentation. In Piccari's work, they are metamorphic elements, ready to incorporate multiple values: carpets of shoes that suggest aimless wandering, carpets of stones that convey a metaphor of pain, and imaginative flying carpets or prayer rugs that communicate their charge of inner tension.

The artist's aim in experimenting with techniques is to give efficacy to a message of 'painful' synthesis of structural elements: his infinite, infinitesimal scraping away at the surface of his painting suggests the obsession of the gesture, while the wax or the silicon that penetrates through the paper conjures up the contrast between opacity and transparency and the stamp applies his mark indelibly, compulsively. Then there is the patina of such costly materials as gold, silver and copper that covers asbestos, suggesting the conflictual relationship between precious materials and those that are harbingers of death. Reality is constructed on the continuous, inexhaustible redefinability of the elements: a cut, a slash or a scrape raise questions about the nature of beauty, whether it might not contain within itself the stigmata of pain, of suffering and of instability, rather than suggesting absolute perfection. "My research involves the focal nature of mankind, considering the need to reappraise his position at the centre of the universe". So we feel we are justified in saying that a revelatory intention is intrinsic to all his works.

A long-abandoned place, a desolate relic of a disused industrial factory, suffering the decay of time that seems to be in limbo, uncontaminated by human hand since time immemorial, becomes for Piccari the "place par excellence" for experimenting with placing works of different kinds, almost as though he intended to codify them, making them into pawns to move in accordance with a design that has nothing random about it. His idea is to leave the place as it is, a blanket of dust, a broken floor, piles of paper, bottles, rags, broken glass, heaps of stones and a mess everywhere, and to arrange his works strategically, so that they establish perceptive and symbolic relationships together with the space. In this way, he generates a series of intersections that produce a sequential rhythm. And there is also one apparently marginal notable element: the absence of human intervention in the space has not stopped a tiny plant from growing and thriving, in its own way stressing the indomitable force of nature.

It is from such considerations that the *Amen* project was born. The word's Hebrew root stresses his awareness of a profession of faith, highlighting a phase that opens up to otherness and focuses on the importance of the moment when a very short word is transmitted, one whose brevity does nothing to detract from its wealth of symbolic nuances. The project's title is reiterated in the video of the same name, in which acephalous people, with no recognisable identity, belonging to different ethnic groups, recite the verses of the *Lord's Prayer*: is this a mantra addressed to transcendence or a lament for a world that lost its transcendence a long time ago? All we hear is the voices. The word is the edge of a universal language, the confession of an inner dimension; the prayer implies an invocation, the passage over a threshold, the exposure of thought that seeks an intangible dimension and rises to the status of spirituality. Religion is referred to in *Bees*, a sequence of three photographs in which dead bees (ever since antiquity, the bee has been a symbol of the eternal renewal of nature) are arranged in such a way as to reproduce the symbols of the three monotheistic religions: the cross, the crescent and the

six-pointed star. This reference to religion induces profound meditation: is it consolatory or repressive? Is it evocative of peace and brotherhood or of discord and struggle? Is the discourse about religion intimate, fideistic and common to different peoples or has it not in fact become a terrain of ideological conflict? *Prayers* are also moulds of concrete cast inside FFP2 anti-Covid face masks, modelled by the artist's own hands (to blend with the work), employing an act of union in a sort of silent, pressing call for help. The same attitude of invocation can be seen in *Rosary*: bones threaded one by one onto a wire core, inside a tangled mass of wires. Is this a reflection of the fact that time has transformed us into voracious consumers of material products? That it has led us to forget that the individual only exists in relation to others? That our age offers us precious little to console us? That Covid produced manipulations and suffocated our freedom, shutting us away in an isolation that destroys dialectic and empathy? Is it not possible that the act of prayer is an admission of cosmic pain? These are troubling questions. Just like the question about the Angel that Rilke, in his *Duino Elegies*, considers the link in the chain between immanence and transcendence and that Piccari transforms into a 'suspense' that tends towards a land unknown, pervaded by crucial doubt.

There is no let-up for the observer's perception, which is called upon peremptorily to take stock of 'realities' that seem to be asking to be rediscovered and re-evaluated. There is a chair in which only the frame remains complete. Our perception is driven irresistibly towards one leg, whose termination is the miniaturised cast of the artist himself, which becomes the fulcrum on which the object is supported, giving it life and soul. Here is a tank covered with a patina of the dirt that has been deposited in it over the years, its inside lined with gilded paint: goldfish swim in the water that fills it to the brim, stressing a strong contrast between life and death. Four cats arranged as the 'four cardinal points' are reduced to their carcasses, simulacra of the original animals: with snarling muzzles, they grasp the world in their mouths, in the shape of a small gilded ball. Piccari shows us the effect of infinite transformations, from beauty to transience. A contrast between opulence and misery, power and suffering. From a distance, his bronze casts look identical, but as you approach closer, your eye detects differences that are apparently infinitesimal, yet clearly evident, underscoring the uniqueness/unequivocality of being. And what reality is suggested by the fantastic figurines, the effect of endless interventions of the painting fabric so as to constitute a one-off piece that no longer allows us to distinguish the figurative from the abstract, within the perfect circular structure that contains them and encapsulates them like a monad? A soft *bag*, elongated in shape and made of a fabric soaked in blood: here and there a small stuffed toy. Approaching it, the observer may detect a deep split – maybe a wound that will never heal? – that displays the inside, crammed with all kinds of dolls: these childish toys constitute a cruel oxymoron with the brutality of the blood spilled in the merciless wars that castrate human innocence.

Multiform as they are, the works reveal a single unitary Leitmotiv, the need to overcome disorientation and ambiguity to recuperate humanity as an underlying element. If observers change their vantage point continuously, they can see for themselves that each thing refers to something other than itself, in a sequence that generates profound turmoil, sometimes even a disorienting irritation in an infinite concatenation of meanings. Everywhere you breathe a typical sign of contemporaneity: the chance with which Georges Bataille states that he "bursts in with divine passion". As is clearly evident in *Column*. For the ancients, a column was a reference to a triumph, to overcoming immanence in a thrust towards the divine. Piccari's is white, suggesting purity and light in the sense intended by Roberto Grossatesta, the light of the soul that influences the body, bringing about the beauty of the visible world. But 'today's' world offers us no inner illumination, only bewildered embraces, visualised emblematically through empty shells, clutched obsessively in disorientation and anxiety. Nevertheless, this estrangement offers a glimpse of the strong urge to share that saves. A Utopian bridge thrown across a chasm to create a harmony of intentions. The same intention that can be perceived in *Sharing*: what do the two busts set back to back and hanging in a precariously suspended position share? They seek each other without being able to look at each other: symbionts divided, yet desirous of a breath of shared life.

Existence is codified in the disposal to risk to which mankind is constantly exposed and the artist clarifies this concept by underlining the dualism between physical and metaphysical, nature and spirit, conflict and harmony, consonance and dissonance, holiness and cosmopolitanism. Wondering about the meaning of balance, precariousness, solidity and listening to others. His is a desire to be combative, to refuse to be oppressed by any force, be it technological, ideological or political. "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" wrote the poet T.S. Eliot. Fragments of an everyday life experienced not by standing in the wings, but by asking crucial questions. Not by averting our eyes, but by 'rediscovering'.

Piccari's research destructures so as to restructure through gradual metamorphic states, favouring lines of shadow. These are no longer the times of *Empty Dreams*, here today and gone tomorrow, more those for finding a communication that is not apodictic, but revealing. In the often disorienting versatility of his work – and in that sense the AMEN project is a very effective moment of synthesis – Piccari seems to be asking himself whether mankind is the origin of a process of cognition or the actor in a de-accumulated, ex-orbiting world. Chance must not be a danger, but a wager about the conquest of a form-giving experience, so as to escape – again in the words of Bataille – from the "narcissism of spilling over", preferring to choose to belong to our own choices.

All this so as to return to the centre of a universe where relationships can underscore the recuperation of a plenitude of experiential quality. To work in culture does not mean to put one's trust in erudition, but to build a sense of belonging to otherness.

To observe the works on display in this exhibition is thus tantamount to scrutinising reality, starting from the turmoil and the apprehension generated by our own inner self.