

Incontri Internazionali d'Arte, Roma
Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna, Spoleto

artedomani

1990 punto di vista

a cura di:
Cecilia Casorati - Cornelia Lauf - Tatjana Salzirn

Per Barclay
Jessica Diamond
Joan Duran
Aldo Ferrara
Felix Gonzalez-Torres
Anna Muskardin
Anton Olshvang
Alfredo Romano
Maria Serebrjakova
Alexey Shulgin
Anatolij Shuravljev
Lincoln Tobier
Christopher Williams
Eduard Winklhofer

Fabbri Editori

carismatici pompati dal mercato: questi sono i valori di Diamond, Gonzalez-Torres, Tobier e Williams. Risuscitare la nozione di credo non porta necessariamente con sé una rinnovata fede nella trascendenza.

NOTE

1. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, Milano Garzanti, 1974, p. 11.
2. Si potrebbero confrontare i tentativi in America di tatuare o imprigionare i portatori di virus HIV con i marchi colorati degli ebrei e degli omosessuali durante il Terzo Reich. Per materiale attinente alla peste, si veda in particolare Philip Zeigler, *The Black Death*, London, Readers Union Collins, 1969; Carlo M. Cipolla, *Faith, Reason, and the Plague in 17th Century Italy*, Madison The University of Wisconsin, 1981; Robert S. Gottfried, *The Black Death, Natural and Human Disaster*, London, The Free Press, 1987; Giulia Calvi, *Histories of a Plague Year: the Social and the Imaginary in Baroque Florence*, trad. di Dario Biocca e Bryant T. Reagan, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989.
3. Per una brillante analisi della Morte nera del quattordicesimo secolo, si veda Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1951. Meiss vide la peste come una forza che strappò alla Toscana i suoi artisti più eminenti, ma la condusse verso innovazioni iconografiche (un'iconografia di carattere funesto) e a far spazio a nuove generazioni di artisti.
4. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, New York, Vintage Books, 1973.
5. Quest'immagine è l'ultima di un gruppo di 27 fotografie di modelli botanici realizzati da Leopold e Rudolf Blaschka tra il 1887 e il 1936 a Dresda. I modelli si trovano oggi nel Botanical Museum dell'Università di Harvard. Esaminando un elenco di 36 paesi, identificati in un rapporto sul terrorismo come stati in cui si pratica la spazzatura delle persone, e accostandoli alle etichette dei modelli di vetro di Harvard, Williams scopri 27 paesi che si sovrapponevano tra i due sistemi di indicizzazione. Insieme i titoli dei fiori e i nomi dei paesi costituiscono un insieme totalmente differente di letture relative al terrorismo, colonialismo e propaganda da *A Forest of Signs. Art in the Crisis of Representation*, Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art, 1989.

In the area of Tuscany where the medieval remains of San Matteo are located, the bubonic plague of 1348 raged violently, though to lesser literary effect than in the neighboring region of Tuscany. There, the records of the local health magistrates combine with Giovanni Boccaccio's introduction to *The Decameron* to form a portrait of the plague unrivalled for its precision and vividness. Between March and July of 1348, twenty thousand people lost their lives in Florence alone and it is said that Siena never recovered from the plague, its state of arrest captured in the permanent abandonment of the Cathedral's completion. Recent studies supplement the nineteenth century view of the Black Death as the major turning point from medieval to modern Europe with ecological, economic or epidemiological perspectives but historians still basically concur with Boccaccio's description:

But what made this pestilence even more severe was that whenever those suffering from it mixed with people who were still unaffected, it would rush with the speed of a fire racing through dry or oily substances that happened to be placed within its reach. Nor was this the full extent of its evil, for not only did it infect healthy persons who conversed or had any dealings with the sick, making them ill or visiting an equally horrible death upon them, but it also seemed to transfer the sickness to anyone touching the clothes or other objects which had been handled or used by its victims.¹

As Giulia Calvi's (1987) magisterial study of the 14th century epidemic controls has shown, the rapidity with which social controls were imposed often threatened to outstrip the speed of the disease itself. The story of Spoleto surfaces in this regard: during a brief efflorescence of the virus in 1484, its citizens were forbidden to receive prostitutes. Legislation to inhibit undesirable segments of the population was an inevitable side effect of the pest and it was not uncommon to brand prostitutes, madmen, or lepers with yellow-colored markers.²

Square in the center of the refectory of San Matteo sits a light-blue stack of papers rimmed with a whitish-blue border. Felix Gonzalez-Torres *Untitled (Blue Mirror)* is an abstract answer to social controls and the historical use of color symbolism. In the past, he has been a member of Act-up, an advocacy group that, among other things, alerts people to the social consequences of the HIV virus through a logo, the infamous pink triangle used by Nazis to mark homosexuals and the motto Silence = Death. The American contingent of Artedomani comes to Spoleto bearing grim tidings. Although our 'plague' does not yet yield the same statistics as its 14th century forbear, its impact on certain segments of society, especially on the arts, has been equally catastrophic.³ The

medieval conviction that the plague was the result of God's wrath finds its corollary in right-wing contemporary attitudes. As insidious as the number of people dying has been the witch hunt in Washington where invectives against eroticism and obscenity conceal government inaction and criminally conventional notions of sexuality (if it was accepted that everyone is at risk, think how research or advertising would change). There is some irony in our participation in an exhibition that takes place in an ex-hospital: America, like South Africa, is the last industrialized nation to deny its citizens public health care irregardless of income (and hence gender and race).

The challenge presented by Artedomani was to address the historical and physical complexity of the site as well as the peculiar subjectivity of the most recent generation of American artists. Jessica Diamond, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Lincoln Tobier, and Christopher Williams are artists who should be situated after the reign of Reagan and a decade of greed. Unlike the art of the late 80's, which metastasized cynicism and a certain ambivalence toward the function of the artwork, their activity takes its moral position from the global political situation and is invested with belief. This, as well as certain strategies of production, groups them with the generation of '68. In the face of the health crisis or America's designation of China - one year after Tienanmen Square - as a most-favored trade nation, in light of its repeated support for right-wing dictatorships, gluttonous appetite for economic rather than intellectual exchange, and sanctimonious backslapping at the fall of Communism, it seems inconceivable to think of art, that is, meaning, without reference to context. Even a rejection of context and politics could be described as ideological, although this is not the case in the exhibition at San Matteo.

The pivot for the installation is a fresco of the Crucifixion located on the southern wall of the barrel-vaulted late Gothic refectory. Painted in the early 16th century by the School of Giovanni di Pietro, an ex-patriate Spaniard (nicknamed "Lo Spagna") and pupil of Perugino, the image serves as an extraordinary simile for the contemporary works. The artist (or artists) arrived at the scene to paint the mural with stock iconography in hand. The rendition of the Virgin and St. John, standing in poses of mourning and prayer at the foot of the cross, is deeply traditional. Like the work of the young Americans, this mural adapts its installation to the local situation through a minor adjustment. In the distance behind Golgotha is an Umbrian townscape bearing striking resemblance to Spoleto.

Being Necessitates Faith in Paper is the title of Jessica Diamond's wall drawing, situated to the left of Lo Spagna's mural and across from Gonzalez-Torres' stack of 'prints'. It

stands in linguistic counterpoint to both, an alternative to the pictorial code offered by the fresco and the corporeality of Untitled (Blue Mirror) The word "Being" shimmers in an iridescent hue that can only be seen against the black lettering of "Faith in Paper" when one transverses the work physically by walking past it. Whether it is simply an aphorism about the overwhelming trust placed in material forms of bureaucracy or a pronouncement on the modern condition itself, wherein pictorial (and above all religious) models of faith have been supplanted by faith in the written word, is left open. The phrasing of the piece, as well as the labor-intensive lettering, done with an overhead projector to give the appearance of industrial signage, are other elements that contrast a hand-crafted, home-spun philosophy with grander sentiments and presentation intents.

Like Diamond's piece, Gonzalez-Torres' work is deceptively simple: the thigh-high stack of papers functions as a mirror (and is thus well-named) onto which the viewer can project his or her intentions. But perhaps the very muteness of the piece, meant to be dissolved through physical dispersion (each sheet may freely be picked up and taken home as an individual work), renders the work proto-linguistic, what Foucault has described as "the greyness of things" before language.⁴ Perhaps more than an ingenious variation on the traditional distribution of the art-work, it is a metaphor for the way meaning itself is invested. Each sheet is both fragment and yet whole. The physical variations the stack takes as it dwindles to extinction give it an anthropomorphic character that is underscored by the use of the color blue, symbol of purity and hospital cleanliness, picked up in the celestial azure cloak of Lo Spagna's Virgin.

The act of faith, whereby an artwork is endowed with belief, when it receives personal, social or political meaning is also the topic of Lincoln Tobier's work. In Neighborhood (Detail), he presents the viewer with three plexiglass models he calls buildings. They are also clear references to the 70's love of this material for its novelty and non-art status. Like every new material, plexiglass was quickly devoured artistically and it is this consumption of form that Tobier takes issue with. For him, the skyscraper, architectural staple of the International Style, has become a form of tyranny. What was once a beacon of 'honest' design is now a blight on the international urban landscape, annihilating local architectural style and with it, cultural difference. Tobier questions the way in which physical parameters constitute the authority of the institution. His development of this issue within the hospital of San Matteo is not accidental - there, a building developed organically in response to changing human needs rather than abstract principles of design.

Christopher Williams' work, a tear-sheet cover of an Elle

magazine features an international bevy of beauties. Like Tobier's work, it addresses the erasure of cultural difference. In a Duchampian gesture distinguishing itself from the other artists, Williams simply frames the ready-made bouquet of women in a standard photographic frame accompanied by a silk-screened label 'neutrally' defining that which is seen (the dimensions of the piece, issue of the magazine and so forth). The work is actually a footnote to the larger series *Angola to Vietnam*.⁵ In the context of the exhibition the fragment becomes an index of its own set of meanings. The benign smiles of the girls, artfully posing beneath their sailors' caps labelled with the names of countries that bear no relation to the nationality of the faces below, turns into a sinister portrait of nationalism thanks to Williams' skilled détournement. Elle magazine no doubt meant to show the global nature of beauty. Why is the image so clever other than that one is surprised to see a Caucasian face, for example, rather than an Asian one under China's cap? Why should young women embody nations, as they have in fascist pageants and Miss Universe contests, other than in some latter day version of slave market and ritual virgin sacrifice? Where is Africa in this motley group of countries?

An apt metaphor for the difficulties of mounting a group show without recourse to national stereotype, Williams' work instantiates the challenge of Artedomani. We in the 'American' group are not even so much citizens (several of us were born in other countries) as we are aware of an American problematic. The idea of representing a nation, let alone filling a national pavilion with the technological wizardry or luxe materials of a superpower, would be anathema to these artists. Their means are spare, their models simple. A reconstituted sense of belief, an arbitrariness of volume and physical scale, a continued rejection of the auratic and expressionist attributes pushed by the market-place: these are the values of Diamond, Gonzalez-Torres, Tobier, and Williams. Resurrecting the notion of belief does not necessarily carry with it a renewed faith in transcendence.

FOOTNOTES

1. Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 51.

2. One might compare attempts in America to tattoo or imprison carriers of the HIV virus with the color-coding of Jews and gays during the Third Reich. For relevant material on the plague see especially Philip Zeigler, *The Black Death* (London: Readers Union Collins, 1969); Carlo M. Cipolla, *Faith, Reason, and the Plague in 17th Century Italy* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin, 1981); Robert S. Gottfried, *The Black Death, Natural*

and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe. (New York: Free Press; London: Collier Macmillan, 1983); Giulia Calvi, *Histories of a Plague-Year: the Social and the Imaginary in Baroque Florence*. Trans by Dario Biocca and Bryant T. Reagan, Jr. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

3. For a brilliant if dyspeptic analysis of the 14th century Black Death see Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951). Meiss saw the plague as a force that stripped Tuscany of its major artistic figures but led to iconographic innovations (an iconography of doom) and room for a new generation of artists.

4. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), xi.

5. This image is the last in a portfolio of 27 photographs of botanical models produced by Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka from 1887-1936 in Dresden. The models are housed in the Botanical Museum at Harvard University. Checking a list of 36 countries, identified in a report on terrorism as countries where disappearance is practiced, against 847 labels for the Harvard glass models, Williams discovered 27 overlapping countries between the two systems of indexing. Together the titles of the flowers and the names of the countries form an entirely different set of readings pertaining to terrorism, colonialism, and propaganda. (*A Forest of Signs. Art in the Crisis of Representation* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1989), 64).

Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Untitled Blue Mirror, 1990
carta blu con bordo controstampato in bianco
cm 58,4×73,6×91,4
Galleria Andrea Rosen, New York





