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A one-way dialogue between artists of different generations, in which the young testify to the influence of the old

Riccardo Previdi on the work of Antonio Catelani

I met Antonio Catelani only a few years ago at a group exhibition at the Italian Embassy in Berlin.

Peculiar – though later we will see that it was not so strange – that to get to know Antonio and his work it was necessary to bring about a meeting of Italian artists based in the German capital. Although the initial response to the invitation to an exhibition (whose main purpose appeared to be the desire for approval) was lukewarm, most of us ended up accepting, thereby initiating relations that had not been possible in Italy.

The reasons for such caution, if not diffidence, were varied – some valid, others less so. A particular insidiously one brings to mind the Groucho Marx quote with which Woody Allen opens his first monologue in *Annie Hall*: “I would never want to belong to any club that would have someone like me for a member.”

This is where certain unresolved issues of the Italian art world, which Diego Perrone also discussed in his article on Mario Airò (NERO, n° 27, Fall 2011), rear their heads: lack of context, xenophilia and – I would add – a heavy dose of provincialism.

In 1998 Antonio Catelani was co-founder in Florence of one of the most interesting not-for-profit spaces in Italy, “BASE PROGETTI PER L’ARTE.” Antonio was concerned not only with his own work, but also with other people’s. Unlike many artists of his generation, he avoided isolation and privileged debate over subjective, introspective practice.

Despite knowing that one often plays on an uneven playing field, he was not averse to taking part in international debates. For those like him, the “Controlled Designation of Origin”/“Typical Geographical Indication” labels are not sufficient to guarantee the quality of art production. This awareness must have been present when he produced pieces like the series *Modelli* (1987) – lightweight wall-installed paper sculptures – or *Ordinare* (1985-86) – a group of small, tin-plated sculptures, in the style of architectural scale models, placed on the ground. These pieces stand as a real statement on the years in which they were made. Behind their apparent weakness hides the seed of a cultural climate that, in practice, would screen the work of artists of the previous generation for almost two decades. With these pieces Antonio Catelani opposed lightness and precariousness to the excesses of the Transavanguardia and of all of its transnational expressions.

To the recovery of tradition and regionalism of the Transavanguardia, Antonio Catelani responded with work that was not afraid to look forward (almost predicting the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ensuing unification of Europe). If artists of the Transavanguardia needed an uproar to abandon the mechanisms of orthodoxy that preceded them, this was no longer necessary for A.C.’s generation. It was finally possible to engage with the issues connected to art without feeling either guilt or the need to impersonate the romantic role of “genius and insanity.” Excess made way for a newfound balance.

Antonio Catelani’s art leaves nothing to chance and instead elevates causality to the determining factor in the process of artistic production. It excludes the dogmatism of the 1970s, but does not indulge the formal whims and exuberance of the early 80s. The will to redeem art – and with it, the artist – is not in question, but at the same time the rejection of all simplification is recognizable starting from the very first pieces. For A.C., things are not to be “put in order” as if Duchamp and the historic avant-gardes had never existed.

It was not by chance that in 1986 Corrado Levi invited the young Antonio Catelani to take part in *IL CANGIANTE*. This was an important exhibition at Pac in Milan, in which young Italian artists (Stefano Arienti, Alberto Garutti, Amedeo Martegani, Mario Della Vedova and Bruno Zanichelli among them) mixed with Italian and international artists of different

generations (Carla Accardi, Alighiero e Boetti, Otto Dix, Peter Halley, Jeff Koons and Carol Rama). The protagonist was not a supposedly “new emerging scene,” but art itself. In itself, and without simplification. Not shut in on itself, and not boxed off by historical periods or geographical areas.

Antonio Catelani exhibited a chalk sculpture, *Eccelso statico* (1986: a square base on whose corners rest four irregular solids that vaguely recall houses (the shapes anticipate those of Herzog & De Meuron’s meta-modernism by more than ten years). The minimal text by Corrado Levi, which accompanies/comments each work/artist in the show’s catalog, simply states: “Scultura/Sculpture.”

Antonio Catelani’s early production is somehow in synch with the “Six Memos for the Next Millennium” written by Italo Calvino for his American Lectures. Particularly the first three: lightness, quickness, exactitude. A.C.’s lightness should not be mistaken for futility: rather, to use Calvino’s words, “a thoughtful lightness can make frivolity seem dull and heavy.”

The series *Tipologie* (1988-1991) – structures produced with light wooden rods and shapes taken from the world of architectural drawings, within which, as if imprisoned, lie half-wrapped, large cardboard sheets – dates back to these years. They are flexible surfaces that “work” by pushing on the construction lines of possible architectures (this series makes me think of *Tecle*, the construction-site city described by Marco Polo to Kublai Khan in Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*).

After the 1980s something changed. Perhaps because the Goliath of the Transavanguardia had been torn down, or maybe just because the first explorations in Northern Europe had begun – a key moment in the development of A.C.’s work is represented by his artist residency in Stuttgart in 1995. In a more international context he developed a series of works which unfolded in a vast environmental installation at the Akademie Schloss Solitude. Clearly, without betraying the premises of his research, something had substantially changed.

Lightness, quickness, exactitude no longer seemed to be enough. Perhaps because the new millennium was approaching or because the fall of the Berlin wall did not so much answer as open up a season of new questions; in any case, A.C.'s art seemed to change direction. From a deconstructive attitude, one of relief of burden, he moved to a phase of reconciliation with the act of constructing, drawing/designing, of closure – if only temporarily. From the model he moved to the original. From project to realization.

In the five sculptures titled *Il corpo del colore* (1995), produced for an exhibition in Stuttgart, aluminum staples hold together the individual parts. However, one shouldn't be deceived by the precariousness of the result. These pieces are not the representation of something about to fall into pieces, but rather the courageous attempt to rebuild something from ruins.

This process is radicalized in the series of pieces titled *Madreforma* (1997-99), in which a series of colored card-boards, oil-painted in uniform and flat color backgrounds, are superimposed inside a rectangular wooden box-frame resting on its lower side, collapsing under the "will" of gravity. If it's true that these works still speak of the precariousness of form and of a practical process, it is also true that, ahead of their time, they rehabilitate the form of the picture and thus of painting.

It is not by chance that a few years later we see the emergence of his first frame-mounted oils on canvas. *Trapezio* (2000) and *Talea* (2002) are part of a series of abstract paintings in a particular technique used by Antonio Catelani, in which a serigraph loom is used as a filter to "cool down" the pictorial gesture.

Although the shapes of A.C.'s artistic work are unstable and changeable, and it could seem at a first glance as if its direction is fluctuating and discontinuous, in reality a more careful examination reveals that the whole "game" is played on the sloping plane of a "distracted" surface. The effort – and this might indeed have Italian reasons and roots – is to try and rehabilitate the specific qualities of artistic practice – returning painting to its privileged role – in conditions of low visibility, of precarious

balance, gracefully accepting the effort that this task demands. Conscious that a fall can often generate more surprising results than when everything goes according to plan.

Last November, at the Künstlerhaus Palais Thurn und Taxis in Bregenz, Antonio Catelani, as curator, invited me to take part in the exhibition *Distracting Surface*. In the press release he states: “(...) *the ‘sign’ which qualifies (the “distracted” surface) becomes not exclusively that produced by the artist, but also that which through different events and different realities, through a relation of “causality” conditions its final result.*” Olafur Eliasson, Matt Mullican, Giulio Paolini, Karin Sander, Sara Sizer and Sophie Tottie were also invited to take part in the exhibition. Returning to the discussion on the Italian context and its deficiencies, it is clear that Diego Perrone’s effort to shorten the distance separating the generations before and after him is not only admirable but also useful. To shed light on a process that favors the conditions for a credible Italian context to take shape is something I both understand and share. But it is not enough. What makes our context fragile, almost cancels it out, is the lack of a chronicle, of a critical reading and a layering. Where are our works?! In which collections? Are these public, and therefore accessible, or are they private? In which catalogs are our efforts documented, and in which publications are they discussed with continuity, authority and awareness?

Riccardo Previdi (1974) lives and works in Berlin. His work delves into the processes of production, post-production and reproduction of the image, questioning its current condition through an endless series of evolutions. He has had solo exhibitions at Francesca Minini, Kunstverein Arnsberg, De Vleeshal Middelburg, and Sommer and Kohl, and has participated in Manifesta 7, 1st Moscow Biennale and T1-Torino Triennale.