

Marignana
Arte

Maurizio Donzelli
The empty set

Just as a critical essay, like the present text, aims at giving an unfinished and never fully defined account of an artistic discourse, so the work of Maurizio Donzelli has the peculiar characteristic of not decisively and peremptorily settling into a given topic, but rather alluding, suggesting, indicating a path towards something more. Such difficulties and frustrations - which, in some cases, are miraculously circumvented- are outlined by the parallel between critical writing and aesthetic research, leading the typical grammars of both literary and visual texts to create concurrent movements, to circumvent meanings by emphasizing them in negative, through the use of lateral approaches. Donzelli's work is about perception and the complex experience of the world that is achieved through this perception: all these elements, which constitute the totality of existence, cannot be explained using rational and narrative motivations. Instead, what proves to be more useful is implementing the mechanism of seeing, understanding, and interpreting which is the basis of human life reality. As it often happens in describing and trying to firmly define a meaning, we could easily get the impression of creating the plots of a game that it would be better to play rather than learn in a detached way. Thus, Donzelli aims at an open suspension of contemplation and not at its conclusive definition, which could lead to the loss and irreparable destruction of the poetic device.

His filamentous and clear-cut paths, his geometric fields, his broken lines, his tapestries and their tactile surfaces, his iridescent shapes, poised between materiality and virtuality evoke questions that relate to previous experiences in the history of art. What do Paul Klee's fertile landscapes, Giorgio Morandi's bottles or Osvaldo Licini's geometries and elemental angels are about? What is their meaning? They probably mean nothing more than the simple but incredible encounter with their iconic and material substance, in a world that, just a moment before their realization, did not list them among the things of creation. It is about that kind of wonder which correspond to the always new and erratic discovery of themselves and ourselves in the moment we become aware of them: a zero level of the conventional meaning which, as in the Suprematist aesthetics, has the value of totality. In fact, these images mean nothing, they cannot be explained, they have no use; they are nothing in terms of content within which, however, the essence of our relationship with things is concealed, therefore they have a very broad scope.

This approach was endorsed by Kazimir Malevič with the paradoxical affirmation “0 = EVERYTHING”, bringing the methods of transmission of the Orthodox icons to the present and declaring that an almost empty space can be the intermediary of the absolute. Indeed, the Suprematist revolution lies precisely in the vigorous assumption that, in the finite world that we live in, the void is the *only* means to reach the absolute. More recently, philosopher Federico Ferrari developed a similar and even more evocative image to describe the particular status of certain kind of artistic statement. Such type of proposition is at the same time evanescent in opposing the silence of a form to our rationality and dense in allowing a full irruption for the experience. We refer to an *empty set*, that is, of “a paradoxical concept. It is, in fact, a whole that has no elements and is therefore composed of nothing, but which, as a whole, is something” [1]. By naming an inconsistent object as a group that contains nothing, we implement a contradictory procedure in which effective elements are reviewed, precisely because they are discussed. They are moreover equivalent to zero, an incredible number that is the perfect representation of this reasoning: a symbol that indicates an absence, but which nevertheless exists, thus eliciting a perceptual reaction. In fact, the interpretative aspect is also addressed by Ferrari, so “the gaze must be thought of as the empty set of the vision, like that horizon, open and closed at the same time, which is the basis of every possible vision” [2].

Donzelli has long embraced the flow of these paradoxes: open and closed visions, full and empty objects, presences that are made through absences and vice versa. For him, the empty set is the background, the margins, the decoration, the minor and applied arts, all those domains which are often disregarded with respect to the heroic centrality of the “things that matter” but which, on closer inspection, are the constituent elements of most of the human existence, in the same way that emptiness constitutes the architecture of a room much

more than its structural fullness. With his works, Donzelli sets up labyrinths that are perfect for the observer's gaze. These are often aniconic paths and motifs that have no particular focuses of interest but that homogeneously develop for a potentially infinite and substantially indifferent extent, continuing beyond limits of their framework. For example, the recent and unedited series of *Reds* remind the fake marbles used by Beato Angelico to frame his own pictorial cycles in San Marco convent in Florence. This reference, that may be perceived as arbitrary, can help to designate the nature of Donzelli's discourse. As in those fifteenth-century decorative and residual artistic texts, where images are functional to the narration of scenes depicting groups of saints and divinities (and in which Georges Didi-Huberman sees a precedent to Jackson Pollock's *drippings*), also in Donzelli's case the abstract shapes seem to have been part of an arabesque that welcomes the observer's gaze and thought to project it elsewhere, in the maze of perception, of the spirit and its infinite possibilities.

The artist often reveals his love for background and decoration. Those grey areas which are distant from the *climax*, which are regular and distributed on the edges of the viewer's retina and which, on a closer and deeper inspection, show their intrinsic duplicity and ambiguous imaginative productivity. Following this path and thanks to the expedient of iridescent films, the development of the *Mirrors* and *Alephs* series leads the gaze to a very eloquent definitional instability, which stimulates a continuous disorientation, re-orientation and re-calibration of the eye and the body, in an attempt to grasp something elusive. Reflecting a posteriori about the literary references that inspired the names of such sculptural productions, it is impossible not to think of Donzelli's boxes of wonders, crammed with suggestive shapes evoking natural, vegetal, and animal elements to give a representation to Jorge Luis Borges's *The Aleph*.

He explained that an Aleph is one of the points in space that contains all other points.

(...) "The Aleph?" I repeated.

"Yes, the only place on earth where all places are seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending [3].

In that single gigantic instant I saw millions of acts both delightful and awful; not one of them amazed me more than the fact that all of them occupied the same point in space, without overlapping or transparency [4].

The point in which all things are concentrated at the same time is the moment of multiplicity, another example of a space in which evanescence and density reach a compromise to show simultaneously in a concretely intangible art. These works have the advantage of never lapsing into the *optical* features or transforming into a curious toy, despite their constructive complexity. Instead, they preserve their graceful and magical peculiarities, as in Joseph Cornell's phantasmagorical boxes, but without the literary excess deriving from the American sculptor's surrealist background.

If, on the one hand, in works such as the *Alephs* series, the technical-formal approach is complex and sophisticated – made up of elements with a refined materiality – on the other hand in Donzelli's paintings and drawings a unique formal plainness, a factuality without frills, amazingly succeeds in eliciting the same polysemic effect played on openness, on the gaze into the invisible and on the stimulating chase of meaning. Apart from the programmatic perceptual sliding of *Mirrors*, what surprises the most is the ability to reach an excess, an elusive and unutterable dimension, continuously relaunched beyond, through very concrete and finished shapes. Compared to other aesthetics that aim at alluding to the unseen and to the evocative dimension with expedients that mirror their characteristics, Maurizio Donzelli uses almost primitive and minimal trends which, like ancient hieroglyphs, arouse a mystery with their clarity.

Likewise, the dimensions of emptiness, silence and absence cannot be obtained through the formal Calvinism of a cold zeroing, nor with a tabula rasa. As previously underlined, these are created by using everything that is marginal but which – just like in the empty set – while being very few, is still something. Thus, even the most recent series of *Reds* introduce further elements, adding connotations to the discourse. While recalling the imitation marble of the fifteenth-century decorations, they also have carnal colours, inserting a warm emotional temperature, almost anxiety-inducing, by virtue of their tendentially charged tones (even the backgrounds are never white but tend to "get dirty", taking on gilding, patinas, and ochre yellowing). Blood vessels, body paths, nerve ganglia, sensual and expressive. The connection may also tend towards certain proofs of early German expressionism of the first part of the twentieth century, where red, black, blue, yellow, and orange colours were expressions of a bright and vibrant vision of reality. However, their ability to look ahead towards an intangible dimension remains unchanged, placing them in that "realm of the almost" that is so dear to the author.

This can be by virtue of the ability to bring the artistic discourse back to a symbolic horizon, a territory in which things are not definitively taken for granted but, despite their materiality, refer to a further dimension, in which visible and invisible continually exchange roles. Elio Franzini address this matter with great suggestiveness:

The symbol shows the gap, the surplus, the excess that are present in the finitude of the world and in the perpetual renewal of its questioning. And, at the same time, it alludes to a complexity of cultural and spiritual systems which are the complex motivational horizon of this enigmatic and allusive reference [5].

....and he also reconnects the characteristics of this semantic field to the more properly perceptive element of the experience, declaring at the same time the impossibility to finish it, in a path resulting from forms that never reach a definitive conclusion but constantly negotiate its own ends and its own modalities:

Therefore, symbol as a query on the meaning of things and of cognitive functions, on the possibilities of gazes, on experiences and on the ways in which their stratification is represented. Symbol as a “game” which is not reduced to exchanges among linguistic signs and contingent forms of life, but which rather illustrates a path that opens up a foundation, on a quest for its own conditions of possibility [6].

Similarly, in the works of Maurizio Donzelli the artistic object is continually expressed in the gymnasium of a gaze that has an entire body behind it, with autonomous impressions and sensibilities. The outcome of this relational and always fluctuating relationship between artistic work and human being will never succeed in conclusively defining its elements, but will inexhaustibly search for them, finding in this quest the very characteristics of its own necessity.

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NOTES:

1. Federico Ferrari, *L'insieme vuoto. Per una pragmatica dell'immagine*, Monza, Johan & Levi, 2013, p. 20.
2. Ibidem.
3. Jorge Luis Borges, *L'Aleph*, p. 10, in Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933-1969*, New York, Bantam Books, 1971, p. 12.
4. Jorge Luis Borges, *L'Aleph*, op. cit., p. 13.
5. Elio Franzini, *I simboli e l'invisibile. Figure e forme del pensiero simbolico*, Milano, il Saggiatore, 2008, p. 68.
6. Elio Franzini, *I simboli e l'invisibile*, op. cit., p. 235.

Each extract has been translated into English by the translator of the present critical text.

