

Pointing in The Very Act of Pointing Somewhere Else

by Federica Martini

"It is the rhetorical code that sets the tone that [...] most completely orients the map in its culture (in its sets of values), pointing in the very act of pointing somewhere else (to the globe), to itself, to its..... author, the society that produced it [...]" [1]

Denis Wood

Models and Cabinets

In "The Science of the Concrete", Claude Lévi-Strauss defines a work of art as a miniature or scale model, because the representation of a particular section of reality entails the loss of a dimension.[2]

With respect to their referents in reality, a painting loses its volume, a sculpture its color, and both lose the notion of time. But the principal quality of a model, Lévi- Strauss continues, is its ability to make up for the loss of a physical dimension with a conceptual one.

The model of Lévi-Strauss is not an object for contemplation, but rather a "thought machine,"[3] a "place for the mind" analogous in many ways to a Renaissance cabinet. A laic meditation space that unites the religious function of a place of worship with an archive, a library and a treasure all in one [4] the cabinet can be thought of as a place in which different ideas of the world are shaped, for metonymy and for metaphor, through the accumulation of books, images, and instruments of reading and of measuring time and space.

Often identified as the modern fore- runner of the museum, from the point of view of Marco Fedele di Catrano's work the cabinet is more properly defined by the term sculpture. This is because, in the first place, they both deal with the exchange between private and public imagination, between collective memory and individual performance.

Secondly, the principle of mapping from reality at work in a cabinet, the transcription of the mundane to the architectural space, is declined in Fedele di Catrano's work in his choice of materials. The words are, literally, nails, as in the portrait of the artist Gülsün Karamustafa, photographed in 2009. The design of the intersection between the plan of Fedele di Catrano's home studio and that of the public exhibition space is a wall of gasbeton in North South Ovest East (2007). The stars of the European flag are detached from the plaster, removed layer by layer from the wall of the American Academy of Rome in Exchange (2008). In the video-projection Perpetuum Mobile (2007), the spatial and temporal measurements of the architecture are defined by the oscillating movement of a basketball bouncing against the exhibition's walls.

Furthermore, the site-specific relationship with the exhibition space takes in installations that function simultaneously as both device and object. The projection of a basketball in *Perpetuum Mobile*, alternating periodically between black and white and color, represents the solvent function typical of memory, but it is also, in actual fact, a pop object on the scale of 1:1.

In choosing to use the real dimensions of certain elements, to transfer them to another context, and in seeking the three-dimensional nature of photography, Fedele di Catrano's work seems to function as a model. But the position, orientation and materials employed in the work bring into question the relationship between the referent and its representation. This principle underlies the installation *Paravento* (2010), composed of a series of frames gathered from the outskirts of Rome, whose arrangement brings to mind that of an ordinary screen. Placed in the center of the Cappella dei Principi in Genazzano, the installation functions as a visual filter which encompasses and at the same time distorts the perception of the frescoes painted by Marzio Ganassini in the seventeenth century.

By their physical presence, the frames and the glass plates draw attention to the window which is, according to Leon Battista Alberti's well-known definition, a metaphor for painting. [5] Nevertheless the re-framing of the painting by means of an additional window diminishes the illusion of reality, revealing the perspective leap from the dimensions of 1:1 in the lower parts of the frescoes to the miniaturization of the figures in the upper part. Thus, in the very act of pointing, Marco Fedele di Catrano's work is pointing somewhere else. The focus on the evangelical stories of the frescoes reveals the chronological confusion of the altar and its incongruous position, which blocks the view of the whole. The inferior materials of the installation destabilize the central position of the painting. The sense of traditional reading and interpretation within the hall, which follows the linear narration of the cycles of the frescoes, is interrupted by the movement of the installation, activated by an electric motor. Struck by vibrations, the glass structure becomes an unstable lens which brings to mind the image of a movable architecture, permeable to the stimulus of other structures and visions.

Labyrinths and Maps "On the Scale of a Mile to the Mile"

The notion of losing oneself in a known or recognizable space in order to see it differently, and the willingness to embrace multiple points of view, are key elements in the work of Fedele di Catrano. This disorientation, physical or metaphorical, often originates from a reflection on architectural excesses. An example of this is the labyrinth of the City of the Immortals, described by Jorge Luis Borges:

A labyrinth is a structure compounded to confuse men [...] In the palace I imperfectly explored, the architecture lacked any such finality. It abounded in dead-end corridors, high unattainable windows, portentous doors which led to a cell or pit, incredible inverted stairways whose steps and balustrades hung downwards. Other stairways, clinging airily to the side of a monumental wall, would die without leading anywhere, after making two or three turns in the lofty darkness of the cupolas...[6]

Read from a contemporary perspective, the Frankenstein-esque architecture of Borges' labyrinth evokes memories of dilapidated buildings and other urban nightmares. An example of this is the Corviale complex in Rome, a public housing unit created under the auspices of the urban utopia movement of the 1970s. The building eventually became a symbol of the failed meeting between the imagined function of the architectural project and the concrete individuality of those who in that project must live. Fedele di Catrano often dwells with the collision of these fragments of imagination with material reality. In 2004 he juxtaposed two series of slides, presenting on one side the insides of houses, and on the other side maps and plans of two large Roman architectural complexes, the Corviale and the Laurentino 38. In this work, the distance separating the day-to-day domestic sphere from urban utopia transforms architecture into symbol. The flip-side of this process, however, is also true. Its starting point is, in many ways, an imaginary map-making, where the illusory dimension derives from an excess of rationality. It removes a frontier that answers to a cultural, historical and political code though contradicting any logic of habitation, as in the case of the Corviale. In this sense, Fedele di Catrano's decision to work on a scale of 1:1 is not synonymous with real dimensions. Lewis Carroll explains this difference in his novel *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, where he writes about a new map made "on the scale of a mile to the mile", so big that the country itself was used as its own map.[7] Approximately one century later, Julian Barnes, in his novel *England, England*, lays out a project for creating a miniature duplicate of England on the Isle of Wight, giving life to a theme park that contains all the elements of the true essence of the "English genius", like a museum of national history.[8] Paradoxically, the effective dimensions of Carroll's map "on the scale of a mile to the mile" and the emotional dimensions of Barnes' theme park both end up disorienting because of their repositioning. Thus, the transposition of Fedele di Catrano's house to various exhibition sites in Berlin, Rome and Lausanne neither explains the function of the initial space nor, despite its scale of 1:1, reproduces the entire original architecture. It is in fact in the reorienting of the original plan of the home studio along the cardinal points that the long wall of gasbeton gives substance to the fragility of the architecture, showing its limits, dangers and possible areas of resistance.

1. Denis Wood, *The Power of Maps*, The Guilford Press, New York 1992, pp. 113-114.
2. "The model encloses a section or isolates a dimension of reality upon which we wish to concentrate our attention, and it frees it of distracting irrelevance." Claude Lévi- Strauss, "La science du Concret", in *La Pensée sauvage*, Plon, Paris 1962; Eng. tran. "The Science of the Concrete", in *The Savage Mind*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1968.
3. See Boris Wiseman, *Lévi-Strauss: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007.
4. Adalgisa Lugli, *Naturalia et Mirabilia. Il collezionismo enciclopedico nelle Wunderkammern d'Europa*, Mazzotta, Milano 1983, p. 43.
5. Leon Battista Alberti denied painting as "a transparent window through which we look out into a section of the visible world." Leon Battista Alberti, *De Pictura* (1435), Libro II, critical edition by Luigi Mallé, Sansoni, Firenze 1950, p. 70.
6. Jorge Luis Borges, "El inmortal", in *El Aleph*, Losada, Buenos Aires 1949; Eng. tran. "The Immortal", in *Aleph*, publ. in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, New Directions Publishing, New York 1964, pp. 110-111.
7. Lewis Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, MacMillan, London 1893, publ. in *Collected Works*, Classic Books, London 2000.
8. Julian Barnes, *England, England*, Jonathan Cape, London 1998