

SYMMETRY VERSUS HIERARCHY

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Publications: Ventura Nico (1996) *Lo spazio del moto Disegno e progetto* Bari-Roma, Laterza .

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Abstract: *The essay considers the relationships between symmetry and hierarchy, when symmetry 'the same measure', presents itself as equality between the parts and, consequently, tends towards egalitarianism both on the formal-perceptive level and in its possible social effects. Starting from research in the figurative arts in the Minimalism of the '60s., in particular of Frank Stella and Donald Judd (on the basis of the studies of Frances Colpitt) to arrive at Bruce Nauman of Square Depression and the Sculpture Projects Munster 07. The translation into architecture is proposed for the social reflections generated applied more properly to the expectations of democracy. The works of Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and J.J. Pieter Oud are used to verify the theory proposed.*

1 ART AND SAMENESS

At the end of the '50s. Frank Stella with *Black Paintings* inaugurates a line of research which adopts symmetry to render a 'non-relational' dimension of art. The topic is dealt with clearly by Frances Colpitt (1990) who high-lights precedents, procedures and objectives. In synthesis, Stella tends to go beyond the compositional balance of western figurative art based on two dimensions, on the left to right direction of writing, and in depth, on perspective. Colpitt points out that the same anti-prospective revolution of Cubism and the abstract reductionism of Mondrian maintain a dimension of 'balance', even though both vary compared to traditional composition. For that matter, Kandinsky in *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche* (1926) launches into a sort of manual which proposes the different expressive specificity of forms and their layout on the canvas. According to Rosalind Krauss (1977) a point of discontinuity is found in the work of Brancusi. Donald Judd himself, who works parallel with Stella, recognises explicitly the reference to Brancusi and Duchamp whose the "objects are also seen at once and not part by part." (1965).

Thus, two registers are declared: the first, a distancing from the European tradition – a constant, this, in the American culture of the '900s. – and relative contestation of the 'principle of authority' towards new dimensions of expressive liberty; the second denounces "the analogy (expressionistic ndr.) between the inaccessible character of illusory space and the intensity of experience of the individual ego" and "illusionism as a metaphor of a privileged psychological moment (because it is private)" (R. Krauss. 1981). It is a matter, namely, in line with Mondrian (1932) of reduction of emotivity, of illusion and the sub-conscious towards "a disinterested love for physical reality." (Kenneth Baker, 1989). The fact is that then the paradigm, either in the logic of 'one thing after another' of Judd, or in the tautology of 'what you see is what you see' of Stella, proposes an 'objective' vision of reality, in the sense that it is not the product of a personalistic choice. Always according to Colpitt, "one of the reasons for systematic ordering was the resulting mechanical – as opposed to idiosyncratic or expressionistic – appearance."

Now the *Staks* of Judd propose the iteration as a segment realised with a series of discrete elements alternated with empty spaces of the same dimension, from here the equivalence of empty and full. Such a series has neither beginning nor end; it proposes, that is, the indeterminate continuity for metonymy, and so abolishes itself with a double movement which goes from low to high and visa-versa, in any hypothesis whatsoever of hierarchy. So much so that the number of elements is always even: there is no central element. In *Black Paintings* Stella is not afraid of the 'centre': in *Jill* (1959), the distension of the squares rotated 90° with respect to the axis of the canvas and propagated beyond its confines also produces a double movement from the centre to the periphery and visa-versa. So, the centre vanishes as a centraliser but becomes a sort of zero which the succession of squares, also here for metonymy, leads towards the infinite.

The research of Judd and Stella develop, as is known, in the 60s. with a movement which takes the name Minimalism. Always according to Colpitt, Minimalism as an artistic movement can be terminated with the *earthworks* of Michael Heizer. But the influence of this research, which remains in the parenthesis of the '70s and '80s. begins to re-appear in the '90s. and is reflected, although partially attenuated and referred to functional reasons, in architecture and in industrial design. Nowadays it is revived again by *Square Depression* by Bruce Nauman, and can be considered the masterpiece of the 'Sculpture Projects Munster 07'. The success with the public and the critics does not seem to give particular importance to the date of the project which goes back to 1977, namely to the First Edition of 'Sculpture Projects'.

It is a square with sides of about 30 metres to the height of the green level which is drawn towards the depth by four inclined triangles: a sort of upside-down pyramid. The triangles in spread cement are distinguished by flutes, clear and well-visible, which converge towards the top.

The title *Depression* suggested a figurative sense: "Depressive, helpless, to be at someone's mercy is how you feel when you stand at the centre of this sculpture" (Frank Frangenberg, 2007). If this interpretation is accentuated, the elementary actions of placement on the ground, taking away and replacing, displaying making note of what, to paraphrase Vittorio Gregotti, establish the 'modification', the measure which "transforms place into settlement" (1996), would be subject to a psychological expectation - what's more, negative, exactly depression - which alters the experience of simply enjoying "what you see is what you see." Now the minimalistic component no longer comes into the variegated research of Nauman. However, the grass used as a canvas tends to pass the

limit, the continuous variability of the point of view; and even more, the geometric rigour, the deliberate symmetry, the effect of double movement from low to high and visa-versa, and the same 'vanishing point' of Frangenberg which annuls the hierarchy of the centre, both because of the formal effect of the diagonal flutes and the same in depth, seem to lead towards direct frequentation rather than a metaphoric expectation.

For several hours I have tried observing the movements of the visitors: some play on the descents and ascents without particular attention to the centre, except as an element of the change of pace; others walk and exchange opinions; some solitary visitors seem to wonder and even lie down on the slopes. A blonde girl sat alone on the slopes, smiling, she seemed curious.



Figure 1: B. Nauman,
Square Depression, 2007.



Figure 2: R. Serra,
Double Eclipse, 1998.

It could be said that Nauman in alternating ascents and descents, works as Richard Serra in the evolution of convex and concave to question models of perception and behaviour. Serra wants "the spectator to have the strange impression that one wall goes 'faster' than the other, that the right and left side of his body are not synchronised." (Y.A. Bois, 1992) Is it possible that Nauman proposes an experimentation in the reciprocity of ascending and descending?

What seems unquestionable is the declared uniformity of the parts and the evanescence of the centre, as in Stella, to assume a state of zero, but here in the three-dimensional, in depth, it tends to cross inclinations, towards the ground and then towards the sky.

2 ARCHITECTURE AND DEMOCRACY

And can uniformity refer if not to democracy, at least to equality? From the parts, from the elements, and as a consequence, of the visitors called in their individuality to a common experience? Such an interpretation would lead this line of research to re-read some architectural proposals of the '900s. which for the social reflections generated apply more properly to the claims of democracy. At least two examples can be used on the formal level to support the theory: Ville Savoye near Paris (1931) by Le Corbusier and the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin (1968) by Mies van der Rohe.

At least from the outside, there is no grade of hierarchy between the facades, there is no front/rear, right/left order in what appears to be a perfectly symmetrical structure. Thus the traditional canons of the villa are up-turned. So much so, that the structure is not immobile but tends to rotate according to a movement of the 'nut' n its 'bolt'

If then at Poissy symmetry meets and clashes with asymmetry, in Berlin it remains perfect. Here the black square of Malevič compares itself to the city. More than a roof, it is a plane distanced from the ground to allow a glass dwelling which tends to annual any distinction whatsoever between inside and outside. The square, in its turn formed

of squares, outlined by the frame of the beams finds two central points of support for each side. It is the science of the constructions of Myron Goldsmith (the structuralist of Mies) to contribute with his principles of symmetry desired by Mies. It is well-known, in fact, that symmetrical structures are the most economical and therefore most suitable to engineering of the maximum objective with the minimum means. Thus, eight columns raise the roof of 64x64 m. by 8.5 m. So, the simplicity of the structural scheme interweaves with the formal simplicity of Mies.

If these examples are meaningful of research carried out on a formal level, they can lead to other experiences which refer more explicitly to the question of egalitarianism. Among these, the two most significant seem to be the Secretariat of Chandigarh (1951-63) of Le Corbusier at the level of the management of the public sphere and the terraced houses at Weissenhof of Stoccarda (1927) by J.J. Pieter Oud at the residential level.

The Secretariat has often been considered as a skyscraper (perhaps the one designed by Le Corbusier at Algiers) reclined on the ground, that is, placed horizontally. In the prospects, in particular, the one towards the outside (the one towards the esplanade meets exceptional monuments), the same element is repeated innumerable times. It is a sort of balcony which establishes a filter between the outside and inside of the building, a balcony people can frequent but which constitutes a type of *brise soleil* space. The repetition of such an element placed next to the successive one, along the various floors of the building is taken to such a length (240 m) as to seem to be a more or less indefinite succession. On the other hand, all the various offices are all the same and equal and, therefore, the functionaries are all on the same hierarchical level, representatives of the community on equal terms with each other, selected in the democracy of the Executive. It is exactly this frame of the façade and the inclinations of the ramps which tend, as Tafuri will say in 1984 to “break the solitude” of the Three Desideranti (Requires): the Secretariat, Parliament and the High Court of Justice.



Figure 3: Le Corbusier, Chandigarh, 1963.



Figure 4: J.J.P. Oud, Weissenhof, 1927.

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