

Traces of Identity

Living in the city, catching a bus, walking, looking around and examining the graffiti on the walls, noticing how much of it there is and how beautiful some of it is: examining it again, more attentively, as though searching for meaning. A thought, an idea, an elaboration, many photos, instant sketches on a cigarette packet. Interest is suddenly aroused for these anonymous, silent, nocturnal traces, these signs of life. Writing, therefore a trace of existence which, in the future, will become a testimony of the actual present, just as the graffiti or symbols of a distant past are still a cause of knowledge and fascination. The signs of communication of today and yesterday, jumbled up in a Babel of languages and of silent and enigmatic meanings. All of this has become an idea, study, work.

Maddalena Barletta, Parma, 10 December 2003

Leaving a trace, a sign of communication, a hypothesis of identity means making an impression upon the surrounding area, upon society, marking a fleeting moment of presence as it is happening together with the code of its transition. Capturing this moment on a wall means giving it memory, vibration and intensity, away from the rules of a distinct alphabet, on a surface which retains every mark over the course of time, for as long as time is willing. An archaeologist of this emotion, Maddalena Barletta feels the urgency to recover these messages which, now that they are the subject of her painstaking labour, are no longer anonymous: conservation of the present and its possible identification.

They are letters from a no-man's-land, stories from the street which represent their restlessness to communicate on the street. The ephemeral quality of the writing on a wall becomes a story, it surpasses the simple hedonistic and casual graphic transition and presents itself as a trace or a presence that is to be put back into the memory. If, in fact, art travels through its own vast catalogue of things and a reality which alternates between significant and significance, metropolitan *graffitismo* produces a 'counter art' which represents this reality in both murals with political protest messages and in the synthesis of those fragments, everyday artefacts and signs of transition which are the coded writings that mark the concrete, the travelling wheels and the placards of the world's cities.

Our own time has left phonetic writing in the street, favouring an ideographical form of writing which tends towards icons and its own independent meaning: almost an automatic *grafismo* which becomes a gesture in the pure state. And Maddalena Barletta profoundly feels the fascination of these **testimonies of presence**, of this *fil rouge* which connects the anonymous stories to which she is endeavouring to give a face and a heart. It is no coincidence, in fact, that the lettering, the calligrammes of graffiti find the counter melody of old papers in her work, of writings which are collated and move over time, and which in time will vanish.

Nothing, therefore, of the sumptuousness or the blasphemy of a metropolitan, external and popular painting of the heroic generation. Maddalena's journey pervades private life, it lives on intimate, hidden and mysterious emotions. She retains the aniconic from these wall writings, the image that is lost in the writing phase or which, more precisely, becomes writing. Writing that is certainly stereotypical and repetitive, which does not aspire to become art and which remains a mere complement to time and place, the witness of a transition, the proof of existence. The artist is attracted to this planetarium of signs, he

makes it his own, he modifies it with an almost scholarly love, he returns it to its correct harmonic and compositional proportions, he puts it back into the framework and - like a surreal aesthetic disorientation of the fragment and of the casual recomposition of the signs – makes it co-exist with parchments, unlikely correspondences, painting themes and materials, primitive archetypes. The same care used by an archaeologist who delicately cleans an artefact, allowing it to re-emerge from history, reconstructing it to provide a testimony.

It is in this way that forms, symbols and alphabets become traces, suggestions, the hypothesis of a work in creation. The graffiti which produces them is atemporal, it emerges from the night of the memory or of a collective unconscious for which the work is always open, abrupt, measured, essential in the mystery of the sign as a relic or simplification. Like Montecristo in his cell, the scratches on the wall end up representing a time, they became the synthesis of it, they tell its story, of the urgency to communicate, to leave a trace of existence.

In conclusion, Maddalena Barletta's artistic method is refined and elegant. It is the pleasure of painting to guide the composition, together with the proportions and the use of unusual materials, which are tracked down and employed with the patience, creativity and tenacity of the researcher. When viewed directly and in the depths of the material, the documents, words, signs and graphemes acquire their own evocative, mysterious and secret force. In Tapies, the trace was the body; in Burri, burning and twine bind the burlap, in Vedova there are the mournful and dramatic qualities of the sign; in Fontana, the cut and the hole signify space; in Celiberti, hearts and obliteration become a memory of the extermination. In Barletta, the element of continuity and originality – and therefore of her personal testimony – is an inappropriate sign which lives by principles that are neither casual nor founded on pretexts, but are certainly contemporary, and which confirm, for the artist, the constant in a search for burning identity aimed, as it is for Klee, not at reproducing that which is visible but at making that which cannot always be seen visible.

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Bologna, 9 February 2004