



antonio pauciulo
nell'aperto

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 Maire
Tecnimont

The springing force of Antonio Pauciulo's compositions

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In an overview of the rising career of Antonio Pauciulo, his works exhibited in Paris in 2004 at the Maison Heinrich Heine, stand out: a series of paintings that could be defined abstract-informal, to use a much abused label for the genre. Each one, however, contains the same motif of the human body with arms outstretched, that is to say, the archetypal form of the cross. Moreover, most of these works are entitled *nudo interno* [interior nude], where the apparently ambiguous use of the adjective 'interior' points to an interpretation that is, perhaps, impossible to pin down, but to which all aspects of the painting inexorably lead us: the chaotic marks across a field of light shades, even white, from which raw areas of red paint abruptly emerge, as if inflamed, to clash with bordering swaths of intense, brutal black. The barely discernible human figure in each work seems to explode from its own core, or 'interior', as the artist's title for the series overtly suggests.

At times it seems we are in the presence of actual crucifixions, metaphors for a harrowing human condition, to which the title *Kreuz* [Cross] explicitly refers, and which is also addressed, and not coincidentally it would appear in a painting that ideally completes another series entitled *Mietshaus - Eine Therapie* [Rental House - A Therapy]. Here the crossbeam of the cross to which the arms are nailed is clearly recognizable, while the head, no more than a red and black blot, seems to droop over a body that dissolves in a downward rush of liquid colours.

The *nudo interno* series discussed above appear side by side with more tranquil works that replace the dramatic explosion of their neighbours with an airy lightness of curved or even circular lines, from which pattern emerges a human face, akin to a sudden, ample clearing of the sky on a cloudy day: *viso aria* [air face]; *viso aria sorriso* [air face smile]; or *viso aria bacio*, [air face kiss]; *viso aria verde* [air face green]; *viso aria arancio* [air face orange]; all of these works were painted in 2004, and all feature those fast turning circles that recall a human face whose expression is blurred by being traced twice, in red and black. The artist's investigation, therefore, of human shapes, which captures seesawing moods, while the series *Mietshaus - Eine Therapie* (Pauciulo has divided his time between Berlin and Sant'Agello, Naples, for seven years), seems to line up man's everyday activities side by side, emerging as they do from a background of uniform colours that are nonetheless profoundly modulated by the artist's use of light. Those works include *Rauchen* [Smoking] with its dark interiors, and *Rasieren* [Shaving]; *Duschen 1* and *2* [Showering], with their pink and brown nudes; then there are the brilliant whites against glowing pinks of *Lieben 1* [Loving], followed by the use of the same white palette plunged into a tangle of shadows in *Lieben 2*; *Schlafen* [Sleeping] has a ponderous corporeity; *Pinkeln* [Urinating] is more of a glimpse of shadows; and *Malen* [Painting] reiterates its theme of the arm reaching toward the canvas three times. Lastly, *Kreuz* comes as a surprise: in its background, where the colours are thickly painted to depict varying degrees of light, one can almost discern a phoenix burning on its pyre (a promise of resurrection?) The paintings of *Mietshaus* are juxtaposed three-dimensionally, in blocks that anticipate the arrangement conceived for the project *nell'aperto* [in the open].

Another series of works exhibited at the Italian embassy in Berlin in 2005 but painted a year earlier, is entitled *Martha* and consists of eight portraits of the same girl. On this occasion the artist displays all his sophistication and virtuosity with colour: the velvety blacks harmonize with the pinks and whites, until they all bleed together into pure light; or smiling faces dissolve in a field of blue, while their eyes—laughing

eyes—emerge, shaded blue themselves. Conversely, other shapes recede into shadow, against which a pair of red lips springs out dramatically; the depiction of a head may be either emphatic or blurs altogether, ending up transfigured as a mask, rather than a face, with all its ambiguous, intense, milky brightness, whitened after the manner of a Japanese ritual. *Incorpore* (2006), which was exhibited at the Berliner Kunstsalon the same year is a powerful fragment of a male nude, in which the plastic expansion of the physical forms is accompanied by a ferment of chiaroscuro. Lastly, *David* (2006) consists of a series of what I feel are three self-portraits, in which, for the second time, the head of Goliath is replaced by that of the subject portrayed, in an act of fierce and severe introspection. Which brings us to the last series: *Stille* [Silence], painted in 2006-2007. It features a number of different figures [Rossi, Esther, Christian&Louis], as well as *Angestellter* [employee], and *Ibrido* [hybrid]; they are all easily recognizable, by means of a plasticism that is simple, compact and expressive.

Pauciulo is currently at work on the aforementioned installation *nell'aperto*, a work which reveals the unique qualities—unique in both form and content—of the artist and his concept for the project: a striking plasticism, an expressive wielding of light and colour, as well as a remarkable depth and clarity of ideas and meanings contained in the artwork.

Headquartered in Milan, *Maire Tecnimont* is a group of companies that operates on an international scale. Pauciulo is interested in making the portrait of the personnel, facilities, and building sites of *Maire Tecnimont* in the course of the company's everyday activities. In order to coordinate the various aspects involved, Pauciulo subdivides the company activities into two basic groups: the planning that takes place inside the offices and the realization of the projects in a wide range of settings and spaces (open-air, hence 'outdoor' locations) scattered all over the world. The result is a dialectic between 'inside' and 'outside', 'internal' and 'external', and 'interior' and 'exterior', which the artist has chosen to express in a physical form: a large painting installation consisting of four panels that form an open cube, suspended in the space in such a way that both the inside and outside are visible. Each panel, therefore, is paired with its double: it has an inside and an outside, or interior and exterior, if you may (in a return to the notion of 'interior' that was earlier explored in the *nudo interno* series). The inside—the side which is a 'closed' space—corresponds to the planning phase of *Maire Tecnimont's* engineering activities, while the outside is the side that is 'open' to and represents the actual physical sites in which the company's projects are turned into reality. Interior-inside-closed / exterior-outside-open. *Nell'aperto* (in the open) is the title that Pauciulo has chosen for his painting installation, indicating with this choice a balanced universe that underpins the free spaces to which mankind aspires. 'The project *nell'aperto* — the artist explains — is a metaphor for the human world: a world in which every single thing is definite and distinct, yet at the same time yearns for open spaces.' And he goes on to quote Rainer Maria Rilke: 'The creature sees the open with all its eyes.' Indeed, we have already seen that the *nudo interno* series may be perceived as a sort of explosive release of that which is locked 'inside', channelled through the cross, which is open in every direction. Moreover, it is very likely that the form of the cross continues to resonate in Pauciulo's imagination. In support of this hypothesis, we may turn to the most significant research concerning symbols, in which France has long taken the lead, starting with Bachelard and Durand. According to G. de Champeaux and S. Sterckx (in their milestone study, *Introduction au monde des symboles*), the cross, the linchpin of all directional schemes, both 'human' (that is, concerning mankind in relation to itself) and spatial (in relation to the earth's cardinal points), is one of the four fundamental symbols, along with the centre, the circle, and the square. These symbols, in turn, are interconnected, and it is precisely the cross that establishes the connection between centre, circle and square. 'Centripete, sa puissance est aussi centrifuge. Elle est diffusion, aussi rassemblement, recapitulation. [...] La symbolique chinoise nous a réappris à ne jamais considérer les quatre côtes du carré ou les quatre bras de la croix hors de leur relation nécessaire au centre de la croix ou au point d'intersection de

ses bras.' And according to Chevalier and Gheerbrant in the *Dictionnaire des symboles*: 'La symbolique du quatre se rattache en grande partie a celle de la croix, mais surtout en ce qu'elle designe un certain jeu de relations a l'interieur du quatre et du carré par intersection de ses deux droites qui coincide avec le centre, la croix ouvre celui-ci sur l'exterieur.'

This accounts for Pauciulo's decision to open his cube at the top and bottom, the finishing touch, as he ideally sees it, to his installation, and which he also hopes to accomplish in the exhibition space as well. The cube's opening from the inside to the outside is a measure of the cross expansive action. Even if the artist is aware of these mechanisms, because their archetypal foundation they are working mostly unconsciously in his imagination. That the figures of the cross and the square are intimately related and interdependent is confirmed by the most widely accepted symbols associated with the earth. The four arms of the cross 'symbolisent les quatre elements, l'ensemble de l'humanite attiree des quatre parties du monde'. 'Dans toutes les traditions astrologiques le carre represente la terre'. 'Le symbole supreme de l'Islam la Ka'ba, est un bloc carré: it exprime le nombre quatre, qui est celui de la stabilité. Le mausolée cubique représente la terre avec ses quatre éléments'.

Earth is, of course, the world. The number four is the number that stands for the full, final stage of the divine manifestation. Four is, once more according to Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 'le symbole du monde stabilisé. Le développement s'effectue, à partir du centre immobile, selon la croix des directions cardinales. La croix dans le carré c'est l'expression dynamique du quaternaire. La manifestation solidifiée s'exprime par le seul carré [...] La terre, mesurée par ses quatres horizons, est carré'. However, 'le cube est, plus encore que le carré, le symbole de la solidification, de la stabilité, car it détermine et fixe l'espace en ses trois dimensions'.

In Pauciulo's words, Maire Tecnimont and its working environment which make up 'a complex cross section of what I have called the human world'. The artist's appraisal takes into consideration not only the company's field of operations and the socio cultural context in which it can be placed, but also the 'geographical and spatial reality (its physical environments)'. As the artist explains, 'The conception of project and planning phase takes place in closed spaces as a norm: offices and laboratories. The projects are then realized in the outside world, and often in contact with nature: from the city to the desert, or even the steppe. That is to say, in the world. [...]'. The persons involved in the execution of those projects belong to diverse cultures and ethnic groups, and live in very different parts of the world. 'The human world - Pauciulo continues - will be seen with the eyes of the painting. With the aim to create a unitary artwork I am planning to realize an original polyptych. [...] in this Multipiano (Multilevel) the individual paintings are independent entities and at the same time they are connected by a strictly spatial and iconographic interdependency'.

At the time I started writing this essay Pauciulo had already finished four panels, two sides of the cube.

Two of the large canvases allude to the interior—the 'inside', the 'closed space': they portray a series of figures painted with that concise plasticism we had earlier admired in the series *Stille* of 2006-07.

In the first composition, whose subject is the company's subsidiary in India, we see a mythological scene: six human figures seated in the presence of an elephant headed Indian divinity. Seven figures in all. And there are seven figures in the second composition as well, this time both male and female. The first seven are seated on supports that are not visible but are positioned in the space at even intervals and in a semi circle. Suspended against a clear green background, as insubstantial as stained glass through which light is filtered, the semi-circle forms a sort of floating gallery that easily bears the weight of the figures pared down physicality creating the effect of a harmonious ensemble of colours, both stirring and soothing at once: blues, tawny browns, off-whites, reds, shadows, and that sort of raised dais that extends from the second figure on the left towards the elephantine idol. Both intimate and expansive at the same time, the space seems to share the characteristics of the central, open armed figure placed at the midpoint of the

semi-circle, which also marks the starting point of an axis that slides forward across the space to end at the monk like figure seated in the oriental fashion in the foreground. This axis 'crosses' the row of the other figures (that classic form of the cross, once again!) The other 'internal' panel, whose subject is the company's offices in Milan, also features seven figures, connected by dynamic, horizontal swaths of colour that reveal a heightened plasticism hinging on the contrast between darker and lighter colour fields. An empty chair stands in the right corner; the mock-up of a project is visible on the left. The figures are arranged as if around a large tilted table with sharp corners, the middle of which is painted a luminous red that radiates outward to illuminate the entire scene, like a light source, generating a play of shadows within its core. The first of the two large 'external' panels is crowded with Turin workers enclosed in a fiery circle, the fumigant shapes and the raised arm of the figure in the middle (here again, a central vertical axis intersecting with a horizontal one) seem to vent the swell of the mighty effort of the workers in an upward direction, along with the pressure they generate, which appears to collect and cloud inside the circle like steam. The other 'external' panel is a canvas that Pauciulo painted and then chose to rework. In the earlier version, and much like the canvas just mentioned, the upstretched arm of the overseer coordinating the construction on the right points to the other side of the scene, where four figures are arranged squarely around a machine and one of them is protected by a sort of mask; only his eyes are visible, piercing the surface. What Pauciulo has done is to strip the composition, freeing it with the aid of a fluid spatiality that consists of a more rarefied atmosphere. All that is left of the masked face is the eye, vigorous mark across the red core of the background. The simplified composition now does effectively assume the form of a cross, which seems to have sprung from the earlier square defined by the four workers. Stripped down in this way, the composition becomes much more powerful. Pauciulo thus rests the innate strength of the composition on the universal, archetypal structure of an implicit geometry. The last panels to be created converge in a shape that is not exactly cubic, but parallelepipedal, for reasons related to the size of the exhibition space, which is smaller. The panels are rectangles are suspended at a height at which, in any case, the tension between the extremes generates, as before, the explosion of the 'earthbound' container, in search of the 'horizon', that is to say, the 'open air'. In one of the paintings, the form of the cross is once again apparent in the composition: three figures are twisted around each other along the ascending axis, as if on a hinge that incarnates the 'negritude' so dear to alchemy; while the horizontal axis is wrapped in a blue whirl that denotes the circular motion of the 'rota', again, borrowed from alchemy, cosmogonic and painfully procreative. Indeed, what Pauciulo envisions for the completed installation is the creation of a great cosmogony, woven by the artist himself, since, as he says, 'this coexistence of figures in the space is explosive.' Pauciulo, however, does not seek the explosion in itself; he is out to find the horizon: 'The horizon - he says- is the answer. Smash the figures and keep only what is needed and what is left.' The horizon in question is thus that engendered by an explosion in which matter is not dispelled but condensed, if anything; then it dries and releases light. 'I look for that empty space where a little light may get in and light up the entire scene,' Pauciulo claims. Not surprisingly, Mario Bertin has observed that Pauciulo's figures are like 'light fished for in the dark'. It is clear that Pauciulo's pictorial principles lead him to search for fullness in that very void: fullness as the tension and the echo of the impact. Painting, with its density, refined on the one hand, brutal on the other, and with its leanness, infiltrated by layers of meaning, still dominates its field, it does indeed fill that void. This is why, therefore, a 'pictorial thought' is a thought that nourishes painting instead of starving it into anorexia, the latter being the fate reserved to conceptual art: 'childless delivery!' as Pauciulo so acutely defines and from which he consistently manages to steer away.