

## PAOLO BOLPAGNI Günter Umberg. Painting as Body and Thought

The encounter with Günter Umberg's painting is a demanding one. It demands commitment. It is not simply a question of seeing or *looking* but it's necessarily to prepare oneself to carry out an experience, a term that often recurs in the artist's discussions. The poetic which he has developed from the 1970s until today is rich in philosophical implications that require to be carefully examined with the aim of arriving at a fuller understanding of his works. However to begin a correct analysis it is necessary to start out from the data, from the tangible and observable elements.

Umberg works on the monochrome. The (non-)colour his research concentrates on most is black (or perhaps it would be better to say the *blacks*, given the sometimes considerably variable degrees of opaqueness they take on). Although there are also the greens, the blues and also, in denying his apparent use of only primary and secondary colours, a singular orange tone that we could compare to yellow ochre. With the exception of a series of works carried out between 1973 and 1976 on transparent paper with wax and paraffin (on exhibit in this exhibition), the support that is mainly used is board - in wood, MDF and polyvinyl - and the form he favours most is the rectangle although quite often with minimum size differences between the base and its height. Even when the painting is vertically developed, implicitly suggesting the modularity of the double square (one on top of the other), one actually has the confirmation of the remaining presence of a slight deviation inasmuch as the long side usually measures little more or little less than the short side multiplied by two. And it is here that one already sees Umberg's tendency to frustrate the 'taken for granted'.

The board is often bevelled on its inside edges in such a way as to produce the effect of distancing the profiled surface from the wall. The edges of the work, that is, do not 'adhere' to the underlying wall but are raised and projecting because the rear area of the support which comes into contact with the wall is smaller - although concentric - with respect to the work's 'face' on which the pigment is painted.

Typical of Umberg are the reduced sizes of the individual works. This answers the two-fold objective of aiding the establishing of a relationship with the spaces, which in this way prove to be *activated* rather than *occupied*, and of augmenting the sense of concentration. It is as if by reducing the extension of the painted surface one increased its density. In this respect the artist gives the example of the small Flemish devotional tablets of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth centuries whose expressive force is inversely proportional to their reduced size. Moreover, Umberg's monochrome panels can remain isolated and unrelated, configured in their intense unicity although often they are arranged on the wall in installations that take on the appearance of real 'archipelagoes' of quadrangular forms which in being distanced according to well-calculated intervals - and always based on ordered orthogonal scissions - create authentic 'spaces of perceptive experience'. In order to designate such interventions, at one and the same time pictorial and architectural, the artist uses the Latin term 'territorium' which refers to an almost topographical idea. These are works that are grouped in relation to a place or a precise context in such a way as to generate an organism that is open and rich in resonance that constructs the room/space and defines it. In this way a series of dialogical connections takes on form which bear upon the individual 'pieces', the entire installation with respect to the surrounding space and the spectator and also the possible co-presence of more than one *Territorium* in the same room, perhaps on flanking walls or ones opposite each other. One must specify that the paintings which compose each of these 'organisms' do not necessarily have to be created *ex novo*. In fact, they are frequently preexistent and also date to different years: they 'meet' for a specific exhibition occasion, they create a *Territorium* (that at times can be unrepeatable and tied to fundamental connotations of the place in question) and then they separate, once again acquiring their respective individuality. And with the prospect - and why not? - of successively forming part of another different rassemblement on the basis of further specific solicitations of a new environment. One should pay

attention, however. We are not talking about a combinatory game, about mere assembly and deconstruction but always about a dialectical conformation correlated to the environment. One could conclude that Umberg's individual works - irrespective of their particular essence - latently live the possibility of being constitutive substance of a *Territorium* which, however is an open and dynamic reality, one of subjective characterisation of a space but with the rejection of whatever idea of delimitation, of diaphragm (and perhaps one can also say of appropriation given that Umberg supplies the example of the cat that 'marks' its territory).

Before moving on to the more strictly hermeneutic phase of my discussion (from the theme to the development, if I am permitted the musical metaphor), it is still necessary to add a fundamental datum regarding the very original technique elaborated by the artist to create his paintings. The effect of extraordinary density, compactness and saturation of Umberg's monochromes in fact results from the peculiar process of his treatment of the colour. On a resin base - and sometimes with a preparation of Armenian bole, a clay normally used for gilding - the pigments are applied directly by means of broad brushes in many distinct and superimposed layers, alternating horizontal and vertical gestures. The colour materials used are organic. Regarding the black, the special substance used - applied in a meticulous fashion - allows obtaining an absorption percentage of light that is extremely high which gives the pictorial surface a sense of absolute depth, together with physical, tactile and plastic consistency. The works therefore appear like small rectangles that open themselves on a wall, taking on the rank of impenetrable vortices in which the eye sinks and disappears. The ability to capture the luminous radiation - but also to attract psychic tension, one should add - by way of analogy refers to the astrophysical entity known as the *black hole* which attracts everything to itself with its invincible gravitational field in which the *res extenso* is annulled or sublimed. Remaining with the similitude, Umberg's paintings are passes that open to another dimension, thresholds opened onto the unknown and the indeterminate. Their surface corresponds to what in general relativity is defined as event *horizon*: a frontier beyond which density is such as to let nothing escape. Not fortuitously especially when talking about the black monochromes, they produce the impression of penetrating the wall on which they are placed, in this way creating an effect of breaking-through and a sense of giddiness and falling. In the same way as space-time tunnels, they connect the here and the beyond and activate a singular dynamic, above all of a perceptive nature between attraction and expansion, *back* and *forth*, establishing "a flow towards the outside and towards the inside." This takes place because Umberg's work is an extremely concentrated nucleus of irradiating energy and also a sort of magnetic fulcrum that absorbs and sucks in, capable of conveying attention in an almost hypnotic manner. The result is that the surface of the painting loses whatever form of staticness, in the form of vibration going to meet the eye of the spectator, fusing with an osmotic mechanism. Furthermore, it projects itself into the environment, altering its arrangement and connotations. In fact, so much so that when the single panels are composed in a *Territorium* a new system of axial coordinates comes to be generated, a configuration of the space strengthened by the new references given rise to by the corporeal presence of the artistic object (and with all the proxemical, psychological, perceptive and also spiritual implications that result from this). The action of Umberg's monochromes can in this sense be compared to that of various sources of musical sound - organised, that is - interacting in the same room: beatings, harmonics and reverberations gradually create an interconnected *continuum* based on the principle of *resonance* (the same as when during the execution of a piece on the piano some keys of the instrument are kept down with the consequence of raising the dampers and leaving the relative chords free to vibrate by way of 'empathy', solicited by those effectively struck by the hammers).

Let us now try to understand Günter Umberg's thought with respect to the theme of colour and, especially as adopted by him in the monochrome. Firstly it should be said that the radicalness of this choice - as is instead true for other artists - should not be understood in the perspective of zeroing, of

the reduction of painting to the zero degree. There is no minimalist temptation, no analytical intention or approach, no serial and objective neutrality. And equally extraneous to his *Kunstwollen* is the gestural component or the intention to transmit the sense of the process of the work in its being created. For Umberg the monochrome is living and pulsating energy, the condition and place of infinite possibilities: it is like the point that contains everything *in nuce* and potency, an original - *ursprünglich* - a-dimensional entity where, however totality is already present. It is not something casual that he likes citing an episode from the life of Bernard of Clairvaux who on being asked about the concept he had of God replied: "Height, length, width, depth". With this there is no intention to affirm that in Umberg there are necessarily transcendent or metaphysical 'traits' but, if anything, that the characteristics in which the medieval saint summed up the idea of the Supreme Being are the same nucleus of the notion of painting developed by him. A painting that in the monochrome has its fulfillment, its completion and its *raison d'être*.

Every symbolic and denotative reference is forbidden: a blue does not refer to the sky or the sea, black is not the emblem of night or nothingness. Colour is not a *signifier*. Or better, it is the *signified* of itself. And yet it decidedly rejects an explanation in mere materialistic terms, in the same way it is immune to interpretations in an emotive or psychological key. Rather one perceives the derivation from an existentialist matrix, albeit elaborated with autonomous originality Günter Umberg is an erudite and shrewd artist, aware of the implications of his work. Its reading in speculative terms, therefore, should not be considered a sort of abstract superfluous addition but is instead consubstantial to it. I mean that his work is not created in a spontaneous and unreflected way, only to subsequently take on meanings and 'characteristics' which the spectator and exegete - or the artist himself - grasps *a posteriori*. Instead it can be considered a form of philosophical reflection made concrete in the matter capable of expressing what eludes the word. Giovanni Maria Accame had already noted Umberg's intention to "lead his painting where what is verified is not reachable by verbal description."<sup>2</sup> For Umberg the work of art is neither conceptualisation nor the manifestation of an expressive content: it is *happening*, apparition and phenomenon. It is tangible presence and is experience, the fruit of a vibrant and 'sensitive' relationship with the 'breath' of the matter. And it is also the fundamental meeting with the spectator who actively contributes to making it live:

"I don't conceive the space between the work and who enjoys it as being made up by the distance between the two. Rather the painting is in relation with our corporeal presence, it is not only an object in its own right"<sup>3</sup>.

And this interconnection is also established on a much broader scale:

"The surface of the painting, the dimensions of its support, are not the limits of the painting. A painting does not have borders. It is a whole that relates to the totality of the world."<sup>4</sup>

In this sense one understands the extent to which the creation of these monochromes for Umberg is an existential and 'holistic' act, a questioning himself and, in conclusion, an opening up to the infinite being able-being that takes on substance. The colour comes to be configured as the physiological development of the matter, and the form as the organisational and conceptual indicator which defines and circumscribes it, arriving at becoming a modality of it to the point of coinciding with it, naturally recomposing a dichotomy that reveals itself as being artificial.

What Umberg transmits with his painting is a philosophical knowledge. Not an abstract system but an awareness, a *sophía* rooted in experience. The approach is not ontological but phenomenological because it does not aim at being but at being there. It doesn't pretend or claim to offer the knowledge

of absolute and aprioristic *noumeni* but ventures into the *hic et nunc*, into the *Dasein*. It is therefore an art that presupposes the other, that does not live independently from the subject (which, moreover is not exhausted in this 'meeting', freeing itself from an ultimate introjection to continuously defer to the ulterior). From the spectator it demands intense willingness for 'contact', for a psychophysical sensorial process which shows a certain kinship with that *Einführung* that has played such an important role in German aesthetic thought, made up of identification, empathy and participation. However and as already stated, Umberg rejects its emotive component so that the reference to the *Phenomenology of Perception* by Merleau-Ponty will appear much more fitting, evidenced with ample argumentation by Christian Besson in a splendid essay of 1996<sup>5</sup>.

The identification of the painter and the spectator with the body of painting, in the depth (*Tiefe*) of the monochrome, and the achievement in this way of lost unity: this is Günter Umberg's objective. This is his Utopia.

<sup>1</sup> Günter Umberg, "Scritti", in *Günter Umberg*, exhibition catalogue, curated by Massimo Dona, A arte Studio Invernizzi, Milan, 2004, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Giovanni Maria Accame, "La pittura come sostanza e come apparizione", in *Günter Umberg*, exhibition catalogue, curated by Giovanni Maria Accame, texts by Giovanni Maria Accame, Michael Engelhard. A arte Studio Invernizzi, Milan, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Günter Umberg, "Scritti", in *Günter Umberg*, exhibition catalogue, curated by Massimo Dona, A arte Studio Invernizzi, Milan, 2004, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Christian Besson, "Günter Umberg avec Merleau-Ponty. Propylées pour une topologie du spectateur", in *Devant et derrière la lumière*, exhibition catalogue, Espace de l'Art Concret, Mouans-Sartoux, 1996, pp. 16-18.

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