

GIORGIO VERZOTTI Günter Umberg

When looking at the reproduction of his works in the catalogues of the exhibitions where they appear, we may note that Günter Umberg often pays special attention not only to relating the work to the exhibition space, but also to the way it relates to the wall where it is displayed.

In a number of close-ups we can see how the picture is attached to metal hooks that distance it from the wall, causing it to be tilted. Other shots dwell on the sides of the works, which are often raised because the picture consists of a thick wooden base to which the paint is applied. Thus the artist allows us to sense the materiality of the work, its physicalness, its existence as a thing among concrete things and the relationship it creates with real space. We see how the picture becomes materially part of the wall and how it protrudes from it. In metaphorical terms, we could say that the work possesses energy that emanates from its body until it is shifted from the flat dimension of the wall and is driven towards space, changing the very characteristics of its setting.

We know, in fact, that Umberg does not hesitate to change the morphology of the exhibition rooms, getting walls to be added, smaller rooms to be built in the existing ones, or walls to be placed diagonally thus diverting entrance through a door. He also covers areas of the walls with a surface of light wood so that they actively interact with the colour of the pictures placed above, or under; or beside them. This great freedom in the arrangement of the space and the positioning of the works is the result of this concept of the picture as the centre of radiating energy and the driving force behind spatial relations, whether they be effective, realized, tangible or purely virtual.

Whether hanging low down, high up, on its own or in a pair or series, projecting or flat, the picture seeks a meaningful encounter with the spectator that takes place at a psychophysical level, not just a mental one. For Umberg 'mental' is a term that indicates only one of the dimensions that his work is intended to have: the purely noetic dimension and what, as a consequence, accompanies it in the work of art, does not exhaust the scope of his message. It is interesting to note that this position emerges from a specific painterly practice that has always been based on the extreme hypothesis of the monochrome surface: in other words, the most radical point of abstract painting, as the history of Western art has recognized.

In a long conversation with the critic Jan Thorn-Prikker published in the catalogue of his exhibitions at the Städtische Galerie Karlsruhe, and at the Haus Konstruktiv, Zurich, in 2006, Umberg makes two important points regarding Kasimir Maleevich and Ad Reinhardt, the great forerunners who are always mentioned with reference to monochrome. Umberg quotes a statement Maleevich made in 1920 to the effect that the brush is a tool that is not precise enough to create and convey thoughts (on the relationship between painting and reality), while the pen is more appropriate: painting makes way for the word, which Maleevich confirms is superior; thus placing his work at the very heart of the West's most classical cultural tradition, extending from Plato to Hegel. Hence the zero grade - the Suprematist square - seems to serve as a necessary farewell to painting as such, because it is a system of signification, not only a referential limit. This is because the contents of painting, its referents - which in the work are only alluded to and given inadequately and inaccurately - can only be clarified by words, the direct expression of thought.

With regard to Reinhardt, Umberg notes a contradiction between his statements and his works, which may be perceived also through the emotional power of colour (including black). In particular he rejects the American artist's rigour (or his rigorism?): intent on drawing up a list of what is and what is not painting and only interested in constructing a totally negative system, Reinhardt creates a hermetic work that turns its back on the observer avoiding any contact with the outside world.

Evidently Umberg distances himself from these positions, even though he shares the same genealogy. His paintings - he says it explicitly himself - have the same characteristics as God according to Bernard of Clairvaux: that is, they have length, width, height and depth, features that belong to this world and put them in the world of things. They are things among things, even though they bear the signs of transcendence and even though they are related with the immateriality of the pure idea.

It is no coincidence that Umberg feels the only artist he has anything in common with is Yves Klein:

Klein perceived and expressed existence as such - an existence in need of transcendence, that does not reject materiality as a value, that senses its vital energy, which it feeds into the work. His blue represents infinity, but, at the same time, it is closely related to the finiteness of the existent, and the latter is beauty, energy and vitality (again these are the words Umberg uses and, as we can see, they are clear and precise). Nonetheless, Klein's ultramarine blue is a symbol: it is the sign of elsewhere, presentified in the here and now of the materially perceptible work, but referring to something else, just as the symbol does (or other figures of speech, such as the metonym or synecdoche: as in Manzoni's 'achromes', the ultramarine blue represents an infinite totality that may only be perceived through thought).

In Umberg's work, however there are no symbols: there is reality that is only intended to refer to itself, or at least catch the spectator's attention starting from this reality (from this thingness of the painted work). Moreover, his painting - and here I, too, am proceeding by negation - is conceived and realized in order not to be explained with words and has no basis apart from the aforementioned thingness and the process that has constituted it. As a consequence the picture does not turn its back on the public, nor does it withdraw into any alleged self-sufficiency but, as we have seen, it requires a response from its surroundings even before it gets one from the observer. It should be added - to continue with the negation - that the artist does not even engage in the reflective detachment of the analytic forms of painting: his working method is not based on analysis, but rather on synthesis; he does not dissect the body of painting, but rather he constructs it, preparing the paint and then patiently applying to the support every time this is necessary to proceed from the paint to the picture - that is, the finished work.

I shall now say something that, although it is obvious, needs to be said: in order to appreciate the spirit of Umberg's work and to understand his works as best we can, it is necessary to actually see them because, even though a photograph may show the spatial relationships, it is never adequate. It is certainly true that the same can be said for the majority of artists, but, in the case of most other painters - here I am referring to the exponents of radical abstraction and/or monochrome painting - often photographs can be helpful, especially for understanding, the significant value of colour. A painting on a wooden panel by Ettore Spalletti - or even, thanks to the intensity of the colour a group of his works photographed in the gallery space - already conveys a great deal due the excellent documentation. Even Klein is intelligible with his bright blue, while a good colour photograph of a work by Reinhardt allows us to note the different directions of the black brushstrokes on a black surface, from right to left, from left to right...

On the other hand, a painting by Umberg has to be seen: its thingness only communicates and functions when we become a thing among things and if we look at these surfaces as if they were very special worlds of meaning. Black is his colour: in nearly all his works, black predominates, while a few exceptions are made for green and orange, which, with their brightness, are evidently allowed as anomalies in the system. The artist makes his own paint, starting from the pigments, which he mixes with resins. In the early years, the pigment mainly consisted of graphite, which was then replaced by substances obtained from carbonized organic matter; both of plant origin and animal bones. Naturally, the choice of materials determines a series of different tones for the black of the surface, from dark grey to black with brown or bluish highlights, while the graphite produced dark grey with silver highlights. The different tones are particularly important for the artist because they make the picture and its relationship with space slightly iridescent, and they express the vitality of painting.

Above all, the organic origin of the carbonized materials and their relationship with fossils reveal the ontological depth of matter of which the finished picture becomes, in a way the representation. Organic matter transformed by the action of the soil that has contained it for a long time, this store of ancestral memory becomes paint that the artist handles with simple repeated actions. The quadrangular support - never square, it is nearly always wooden - is saturated with paint, using alternate vertical and horizontal brushstrokes, until the thickness the artist considers to be right has been reached. This is the amount sufficient for the somewhat magic event to take place: unforeseeable and indescribable, it governs the realization of the work. The process finishes when the artist no longer has superimposed layers of paint before his eyes, but 'a painting'. In order to describe this moment more clearly Umberg says that the operation finishes when he has the impression that he

is looking at another body that is independent with its complete alterity.

The same applies to the spectators, who only by looking at the work can establish its thickness and recognize it as something other than themselves that is open to an encounter between fellow beings. In a physical sense, the work consists of thicknesses because it has been constructed in the way I have described and, in a metaphorical sense, because it bears within itself the memory of the soil, because its iridescent black symbolizes depth. The specificity of Umberg's monochrome lies in this physicalness that is able to resonate with metaphorical values, in these surfaces that catch one's attention as if they were in unfathomable depths, in these black structures that contain many other colours and in the pictures laden with paint that seem to radiate enough energy to modify the spaces where they are located.

The monochrome is, after all, a statement of totality: in the application of a single colour we traditionally see everything possible and everything expressible - that is, when we do not see mystical meaning - especially if we are guided by the artist's explanatory words, but, as I have already mentioned, this is not Umberg's case.

Instead, in the spaces it occupies, this 'everything' offers itself as a moment of suspension with regard to the commotion of the world, which comments on and confirms what dwells in these spaces. This always happens at Umberg's exhibitions, especially when the artist becomes the curator of new museum installations in which his works engage in a dialogue with those that he has selected from the permanent collection. A work by Warhol, charged with worldly significance, an abstract gestural painting, or an installation by Jessica Stockholder are juxtaposed with a small and silent black composition. They are, in other words, close to this 'everything' that is repeated on each occasion and they take on new meanings that are just hinted at, but are very intriguing: a space for reflection, the monochrome thus expresses the concept of the matrix and the origin, the irradiating force that creates and around which everything revolves...

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