

Interview with Marc Le Blanc (2011)

MLB: Your *Archivio Zarathustra* (2009) began with two similar images, one of Friedrich Nietzsche, the other of art historian Aby Warburg. Each writer takes a similar pose, one that you later connect to the pose of the genius in Dürer's *Melencolia I* (1514). Why was it important to start by connecting these iconic compositions?

PC: *Archivio Zarathustra* was constructed to create a connection between Aby Warburg and Friedrich Nietzsche, starting from my personal perspective on Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1885). The project develops in different steps and could be approached in two different ways. According with tradition of art, it can be considered in its single elements or its totality, referring in this case to the aesthetic value of the macrostructure generated by the various steps. The aesthetic pleasure comes from the diagnosis of the perfection of the circle, according with Aby Warburg's idea of knowledge and to Nietzsche's *eternal return*. The viewer has to accept the impossibility of capturing the entire project in detail, delegating memory to the capacity to reconstruct the illusion of aesthetic pleasure.

Basically *Archivio Zarathustra* – but all my work in general – refers to the possibility of creating a shape that reflects upon the significant processes undergone in contemporary culture. The process of signification moves through different levels of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction. My work presents itself to the audience as a fragment and an erosion of my cognitive process. I build ruins as the oblivion of my thought. In the archive the shape generated by the fusion of Aby Warburg's pose and Nietzsche's pose is Dürer's *Melencolia I* (1514). It is also referred to "Saturn and Melancholy", an essay by Warburg's close friends Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl. Starting from the geometrical solid in *Melencolia I*, I created a chain of images surfing from Escher's square to Nietzsche's stone in Engadina, eventually reaching the perfect shape – a submerged stone obtained from the iron of the archive and containing the ashes of its original documents.

- 1) The first step of the project was to construct 48 tables measuring 100 x 70 cm. The tables are composed of images, drawings, inkjet prints, and other documents mounted on black panels.
- 2) I asked the official archive photographer of the Uffizi museum of Florence, Serge Domangie, to take black and white archival images of all the 48 tables, as per Aby Warburg's experience. The images are now actually part of the Uffizi's archive documents.
- 3) During a performance in Frankfurt am Main I showed the completed archive, composed of a wood and iron structure containing the 48 original tables. In the performance, I burned the archive using gasoline. The archive's ashes at the end of the burn settled on the iron structure and actually came to form a cube – 6 sides with 1 meter square.
- 4) Four days later in Prague, I imploded the iron structure into a shape that contains the archive's ashes.
- 5) The complete series of black and white archive photos was published as an artist book edited by Onestar Press.

MLB: One of my favorite books addressing the proliferation of iconic forms throughout literature and art history is Morse Peckham's *Man's Rage For Chaos* (1965). One of Peckham's central claims promotes the valuing of "observable similarities" in forms over the "definitional categories" traditionally used in art history. Would you explain how your work expresses different approaches to the construction of knowledge?

PC: I'm interested in developing an idea of tools that differ with regard to the traditional way one uses or chooses a modality of expression. In *Archivio Zarathustra*, the main point is to accept the modality of someone else's work. Aby Warburg developed an idea of knowledge that refers to the tragedy of pathos. Here we are not talking about a Kantian idea of developing knowledge in a safe situation. Warburg is referring to Nietzsche but also in accordance with Georg Didi-Huberman's point of view, where the process of knowledge promotes the verticality experience of pathos in the contemporary culture. This objective intuition – objective because it is demonstrable through the analogy; intuitive because it is at first invisible – is constructed from an idea of similarity. I accept the possibility of making my choice, forcing myself to deal with the experience of Warburg's modality of research. In *Archivio Zarathustra* the main thesis is that when approaching culture, our knowledge could be developed through association or analogy (such as the archive photos taken by Uffizi Museum) or we can have a memory complex represented by the iron sculpture that contains the ashes. But this is not a complete vision of all the elements represented by the archive structure as it was shown in

Frankfurt, because these elements are dealing with a critical relationship to the viewer with respect to a history based on the degeneration and erosion of meaning over time.

MLB: As the archive builds, the images that are introduced may not be entirely related to Nietzsche's novel, but looking at each image the compositional similarities between them become apparent. It is as though you are constructing an associative map built as much on intuition as on information or content. In his essay for your exhibition 'Unter Freiem Himmel' (2009) at Marta Herford, Carson Chan wrote about how the archive resembles the internet in that it flattens distinctions that were previously paradigmatic. Was this online proliferation of images influential for you when you made the work?

PC: Of course we have the ability to reconstruct the puzzle of history however we like. It is like surfing between different eras. If we google the history of art, we get the feeling that knowledge is something based on a horizontal line. Paolo Uccello has the same platform as recent artists do; we lose the idea of time in a way and also the idea of original, one of the big problems of our culture is this practice concerning translation. The problem of translation – especially when talking about practices that have to do with historical knowledge and document research – is a pretty interesting topic. The proliferation of images creates dispersion but at the same time recreates the necessity of discovering the power of the image and the need to revisit art. I mean we have a thousand possible colors for *Las Meninas* but it is only when we go to Madrid that we are able to have the critical perspective to first of all understand Velasquez's painting and second, the beauty of translation in our contemporary times. History is a starting point for creating a process of deconstruction and afterward the construction of a shape. I'm interested in the possibility of investigating the aesthetic practice of these different modalities, of reaching a shape as a canvas or a sculpture. In *Condensed Heidegger's Hut*, for example I've made a monochrome painting on canvas using the ashes of the hut, and the hut made with paper and wood became a kind of preparatorial study for the painting. Another example would be *Black Gash*, where the painting is made from the traces of three other differences paintings. In this practice, the idea of 'show' is also redefined because the exhibition became a moment of the possible transformation of ideas.

MLB: 'Unter Freiem Himmel' takes landscape as its subject matter, not only because the viewer is led through a constructed mountain and into a forest clearing, but topologically where you relate the idea of a landscape's surface to the way we construct knowledge.

PC: Yes. In the MARTa Herford museum I reconstructed a vision of landscape, a big walk-in installation, a kind of painting-sculpture made with 60 liters of oil paint to create a large Giotto's mountain and a forest. The mountain was the utopia of reconstructing a landscape inside an architectural structure. The show was created starting from the viewer's ability to perceive and experience art in different way. The mountain invites the viewer to walk into the installation, to smell the oil paint, to search with their eyes for the top of the mountain. The daylight accompanied the viewer through the mountain, changing the perception of the canvas surface. The forest, however, was only an illusion, a trompe l'oeil in which the viewer needs only their eyes to perceive the sunset light for a fixed moment of contemplation. It was important also to define the structure of the 'Unter Freiem Himmel' show in accordance with the museum's Frank Gehry architecture. In the show, the complexity of Gehry's postmodern style is developed by gluing different works together, like fragments of different stories that find a new life and new sense from the link they establish with each other.

MLB: With your series of works entitled *The Origin Of Black Brain* (2008), you leave the construction of *Archivio Zarathustra* behind. You rolled the first painting *Black Brain I* (2008) into a steel cylinder, so that as much as I might want to see its contents, it is inaccessible and I only see myself.

PC: The main idea here is that with art, we need to have a relationship based on trust because we can never grasp the totality of one project. Our approach to culture is always something critical, as is our relationship with present, past, and future monumental history. Georges Didi-Huberman noted that images often have a better memory and more of an idea of the future than the viewer does. *The Origin of Black Brain* is constructed as a means of defining a degeneration of meaning that corresponds with the de-potentialization of the author. Starting with the construction of the painting over seven months in the studio, the first exhibition of the painting was in Rome. It was later shown again at Massimo Minini Gallery in Brescia, after the canvas' implosion into a steel cylinder. The minimal sculpture created with the first degeneration of *Black Brain I* is based on the minimal propaganda where the interior is not considered an important part of the work, but only an industrially

created surface that protects the secret of the painting. *Black Brain* reveals the problematics of possession and seduction in art practice, because it delegates the responsibility of the work's statement to the viewer. The artwork relies on the viewers' acceptance because the cylinder is closed and would need to be destroyed to release the painting. In this case, the work is considered a painting, but then again it could be the minimal sculpture accepting the permanent loss of the author's hand. Especially when you consider that there is no longer any image of the final painting, only a work in progress published in the catalogue for the Quadriennale in Rome. In light of these different prospects of approach, we can have art that is congruent with the different definition of things. We can interpret the paradigm of *Black Brain* as a performance that accepts that all that remains is a relic, a painting that became a sculpture and finished as a repositioning of sculpture as language in that the artist Robert Barry decided on the way minimal art should be showed today.

MLB: It's important to note that the majority of your gravity paintings also continue your interest in making abstract works. They often resemble the horizon of a sunset or a dawn, like those you would find in paintings by Caspar David Friedrich. How do you understand the relationship between the idea of boundless abstraction and painting as a material and finite thing?

PC: I'm mostly interested in the possibility of investigating abstract art as a drift. The tradition of abstract art starts from the idea of reflection on the logical content of languages or it refers to the mystic dimension of purity. The point was to try to find a new way of achieving abstract results, to sidestep the idea of tautology as a direction and acknowledge the fact that European culture is not analytic but considers history an important part of the possible content. Accepting this cultural attitude, I reached the abstract 'surface' as a relic, in other words the idea of 'art' was not the model of reference. A good example of this would be *The Fog* (2010), where the main problem is the idea of landscape. The intensification provided by the added layer of paraffin over an oil painting showing a sky dealt with the idea of the course of nature, recalling fog but reaching the white monochrome, referring to the monochromatic tradition as an end result.

MLB: One can easily infer a relationship between your work and the history of institutional critique. But rather than taking the institution as an initial subject matter, your work focuses on the ontology framing the construction of history or rational knowledge. So when you make an exhibition, your exhibition at Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Bologna for example, how do you perceive the institution's role in your preexisting investigation of how contemporary culture creates knowledge?

PC: The institution was used as a moment of contemplation and had in this sense been related to the idea of death. I approach the value of the institution from a different perspective. Starting from the idea that the institution gives work its official status as being 'art', I can actively pervert this relationship between artist and public by trying to position the exhibition platform as a moment of life in which the work is not only shipped and judged and contemplated, but also generated. That means including institutions in the artwork's construction process. Using the authority of process given by the institutions, I developed projects in different steps, avoiding the obligation to show the final artwork and employing the exhibition format as a moment of collective experience where the viewer is invited to experience the work's production, not only this moment of death or the end. I'm writing a little essay titled "The horizon after commodity, notes on perversion" where I develop an idea of an "Institutional Responsibility" in which I try to define a new perspective after the master/slave dialectic of institutional critique.

MLB: You've also in the past couple of years started to create what you call Gravity Paintings. Pouring large pools of paint directly onto the floor, you've been able to address the role gravity plays in representation, not just in art, but in our perception of the world. Where an artist of a different generation may have given primacy to space, your work suggests that understanding the role of gravity may ultimately be more valuable for art. How do you understand the role gravity has in making art and then it being exhibited in an institution?

PC: In my practice, this direct relationship with space has worked towards an overcoming of the confines of the support. In *Gravity Painting* (2010), gravity gives the painting form through its relationship with the space that takes it in. The format is independent from the subjectivity of the auteur as it is a consequence of gravity unfiltered by subject, but rather defined in objective terms by the machine that pours the colour. Through the lesson imparted by Pollock, it reinvents dripping as a

possible new way of overcoming the subjective. Later on, painting returns to the paradigms of representation through the image which moves away from the minimalist tradition of painting. The spatial nature of *Gravity Painting* is later shaped by the institution that shows the work, thus reintroducing time and experience into the absoluteness of the image. The signs of the previous installations remain as deforming scars that record the life of the work and its direct relationship with the space.

MLB: Like much of your work, your recent project *Rotes Schauspielhaus* (2010) will also undergo a transformative process. Made of large pieces of Styrofoam and other basic industrial materials, the work resembles a toppled 'light column' from the interior of Hans Poelzig's long destroyed Großes Schauspielhaus (1919-88) in Berlin. In your terms, you will 'accelerate gravity' by using turpentine to melt the Styrofoam; the residue created will then be cast as a painting, a medium with a greater gravity, and held indefinitely in a glass vitrine. What is the relationship of gravity to the creation of history in the work, especially considering the fact that your subject matter is now one that only exists in memory and images?

PC: In the process of *Rotes Schauspielhaus*, gravity is a moment of translation in two steps.

The first step is the public sculpture. It is developed not in monumental terms but in focusing on the unmonumentality and fragility of the materials, proposing a reconstruction of history into the field of scenography, underscoring sculpture's limited capacity for representing history. The second step considers the disintegration of the sculpture, accelerating gravity through the use of turpentine, a tool in painting, thus introducing the painting as a superior medium for evoking history and its narration. In this work, it is also important to consider the relationship of trust between parties: I promise a painting but at the same time the production of the painting depends on the ruins and the transformation of the pieces during the public platform of the 1st act.