Landscape: art and ecological thinking

Never more than at the present time, so fraught with difficulty, has the question of man’s relationship with nature been so topical. A complex, dynamic relationship in which the progressive technical emancipation of man has accompanied a growing need for nature to be safeguarded, preserved and protected – the result of an inexorable inversion of roles which has seen man move from being the victim of uncontrollable forces to the principal destroyer of the earth which nourishes him, and of the ecosystem of which he is an integral part.

It is through his sensibility (and obvious partiality) that the artist – in the broadest sense of the word – has portrayed, and continues to portray, this gradual shift of perspective, this sea-change transforming man’s perception of nature and thus of landscape. And it is landscape above all that lends itself to figurative representation, that perceptual dimension of nature which is acquired, as Raffaele Milani\(^1\) rightly notes, as something separate, distinct from the scientific concept of nature and the political concept of territory. Landscape is precisely that aspect of nature which affects us emotionally and which we submit to a subjective work of interpretation and imagination.

\(^1\) R. MILANI, Art of the Landscape, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, CANADA 2009, p. xi.
The great age of the Romantic landscape severs us once and for all from the reassuring, untroubled dimension of myth and the orderly dreamy spirit of the preceding centuries, to show us the extraordinary beauty of the sudden and unpredictable in which the divine manifests itself. Thus in The Wreck of Hope, the title at once ambiguous and emblematic of a work by Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) housed in the Kunsthalle in Hamburg, the great German artist depicts an enormous heap of jagged ice – the true subject of the painting – which has engulfed a ship, barely distinguishable and relegated to the middle distance on the right of the composition. It is a portrayal of the overwhelming power of Nature to which the artifices of man-the-intruder are destined ignominiously to succumb, and it gives breath and substance to that sense of the Sublime which Kant and Schopenhauer had theorized some years earlier.

The awareness of what, adopting Paul Crutzen’s felicitous term, we now almost unanimously refer to as Anthropocene – to denote the epoch in which mankind has interfered with the environment on a global scale and for the worse – was to prove one of the driving forces behind artistic developments in the second part of the twentieth century which altered our very perception of the artist, transforming him from someone who portrays and feels amazement to someone who feels the need to intervene. It marks a new ecological consciousness, expressed from the 1960s onwards through Land Art (in which landscape serves as a stage but is also a component of the work itself) and Arte Povera (in which nature is a source to draw on for new
artistic materials) and through the poetics of Joseph Beuys, perhaps one of the most cogent examples, whose work turns on the search for a new harmony between man and the environment.²

The poetics that can be summed up in Land Art, in its various forms and meanings (Earth Works, Earth Art, Ecological Art), constitute the turning point in reflections on the relationship/”debate” between art and nature, and distance themselves sharply from the aesthetic and metaphysical sense of the Sublime in order to return to a human dimension which concerns itself with the environment, exploitation of resources and sustainability.³ Hence a new sort of attention which led to a number of ventures which have gained a place in art history: from Michael Heizer (b. 1944) who, in 1970, dug Double Negative, a 457-metre trench in Nevada (USA), gouged out with dynamite and bulldozers, to Robert Smithson (1938-1973) who, in the same year, brought his art to bear on the Great Salt Lake in Utah (USA). In a sense, Smithson vindicated a territory which had been exploited, compromised and then abandoned by man, choosing it as the location for his Spiral Jetty, made of basalt, algae and salt crystals, all natural elements available in situ which the artist reorganized aesthetically. If these two examples can

be considered permanent – making allowance for the inevitable wear from being exposed to the forces of nature, a state integral to the works – other artists have chosen to operate less invasively. They have created artwork that can only be enjoyed for a limited period, like Christo (1935–2020) and Jeanne-Claude (1935–2009) whose Surrounded Islands project (1980–1983) swathed eleven islands in Biscayne Bay, Miami (SA) in a floating pink fabric for eleven days, covering parts of the beach and the surrounding sea, in a memorable artistic venture which enhanced the landscape without allowing the aesthetic magnificence to impair the ethical soundness of the operation since a preliminary assessment of the environmental impact on the islands was an integral part of the project.

All are examples of direct intervention, whether permanent or ephemeral, motivated by the need to act directly and decisively on the landscape, altering its morphology in line with a predetermined aesthetic.

If we accept landscape – that part of nature which above all can be represented figuratively – as a symbolic space, it is one that appears as an extraordinary repository of collective memories to which the artistic sensibility has been and remains a privileged witness. Such is the case of Mario Giacomelli (1925–2000) who throughout his long career recounts with extraordinary lyricism the work of the fields, rural life, the landscape, the land transfigured into abstract elements by those almost absolute whites and blacks which make his work so unique and fascinating. But as well as the artistic
merit, the sheer brilliance and uniqueness of the shot and the sensitivity of the development, there is the documentary value of his work: his personal, fully conscious testimony to the morphological changes which “his” landscapes had undergone over time. Emblematic from this point of view is the small series of photographs which the economics historian, Sergio Anselmi (1924-2003), published with a commentary in 1978, to accompany his article Paesaggio agrario e territorio: la distruzione di una collina in nove fotografie di Mario Giacomelli. 1955-1977 [Landscape and Territory: the destruction of a hill in nine photographs by Mario Giacomelli. 1955-1957] («Proposte e ricerche» n.2, 1978). Today these photographs are housed in the Museo di Storia della Mezzadria “Sergio Anselmi” [Museum of the History of Sharecropping] in Senigallia and bear witness to the changes which the hill was subjected to over the course of 22 years. “Here Mario Giacomelli’s photographs are a powerful reminder that land is a non-reproducible resource, and Giacomelli entrusted them to his friend Anselmi in the knowledge that through his art he, Giacomelli, had already distilled the argument that the historian would present; but he wants his photographs to act as the narrating voice, almost prompting the narrative itself.”

As the new millennium gets underway, new generations of artists are following in the footsteps of these earlier masters in feeling a social duty to place nature, the environment, and

---

landscape at the centre of their work, focusing on the oἰκος, on their own habitat. Oikos is also family, home, the basic unit of a society, and it is around the oikos that the poetics of Giovanni Gaggia (b. 1977) revolve. His oikos is a farmhouse in the hills above Pergola. Since 2008 it has been a meeting point for artists, performers, critics, writers, or simply art lovers. But the house, “CasaSponge”, is really an artistic meta-project, an amphibious collector of ideas: a house which is lived in, but at the same time opens itself up to the outdoors, hosting projects which are conceived, developed and carried through jointly, and designed to live in the memory and to make their mark on the house and the surrounding landscape.

What is interesting is that this metaproject stems from a profound inner transformation on the part of the artist, since the 2008 performance which marked the opening of CasaSponge, How Saint Francis healed a Leper – an act of purification inspired by chapter XXV of The Little Flowers of Saint Francis, in which the artist, digging at the root of a tree, draws out a re-stitched heart, and washes it.

It is the landscape, the natural environment, that conjures the emotions which determine our deep attachment to our roots, to the places of our paternal grandparents. A physical bond with the land and with the landscape around the home.