

How to Dis/articulate a system: repetition and difference in the work of Maria Lucia Cattani

The discourse of art during the past two decades has been connected with the issue of difference. Presented as the prerogative of postmodernism, difference came to signify the opposite to the unified, stabilized subject of modernism. The dichotomy between the modern subject and its consequent dissolution is one of the founding fantasies of postmodernism as a cultural milieu.

The work of Maria Lucia Cattani addresses the limits of this fantasy by investigating the boundaries of repetition, by playing across the illusion of absolute identification and by constructing difference as a series of subtle yet visible variations registered upon the grid. The works are constructed as a symbolic refusal to reduce the complex play of sameness and difference into two clearly defined and oppositional concepts. On the contrary, the signs elaborated in the works reconfigure repetition and difference as two possibly overlapping territories in the space of art. The emergent pictographs are ordered by the artist to emphasise a constant negotiation of these two elements.

Yet this negotiation is not a forced statement of the artwork. The artist has provided the visual means for the negotiation to take place but the final parameter is the consciousness of the viewer. Cattani has succeeded in proving that a powerful visual presence should not always be identified with an aggressiveness of the image. The works are suggestive rather than self-evident and in their approximation of a language they require a different kind of engagement from that demanded by a typically postmodern work which deliberately loses its viewer in a random juxtaposition of signs. The visual language

developed by Cattani takes in charge something of this randomness and transcribes it into the possibility and uncertainty of a code which may never be broken.

The interplay (or even unclear distinction?) between repetition and difference, between unity and rupture, finitude and infinite variation suggest not only the multiplicity of possibilities frequently denied by the fixity of cultural paradigms but also a certain inadequacy of language when dealing with borderline processes like that from which the works in this exhibition emerge. In this way, despite the fact that the works evoke the vicissitudes of writing as the sedimentation of the energies of the psyche, they remain self-consciously visual. The aesthetic deconstruction of the difference/repetition couple mobilized by Cattani seems to confirm Michael Baxandall's belief that "language is not very well equipped to offer a notation of a particular picture ... the repertory of concepts it offers for describing a plane surface bearing an array of subtly differentiated and ordered shapes and colours is rather crude and remote".¹

The process of the work, unfolding in time, is an integral part of the balance the works seek to establish or challenge. It demands concentration, persistence and day by day it acquires the quality of a ritual. The artist selects her material carefully. She carves her marks on small, manageable blocks of pliable matter like rubber, rather than the more traditional but far less flexible block of wood. The marks are imprinted upon the transparency of the delicate Chinese paper. Following the rotation of the block, the image changes. Sometimes the marks of a different block are imposed upon the marks of the first. The colour slowly fades until it becomes the shadow of what it once was. Then new ink is added and the game starts again. Yet what is this game?

It is the game of signmaking. Signmaking is the prime process of culturemaking. Cattani creates visual environments of signs with the subtle irony characteristic of a postmodern cultural worker. She creates contexts. She sets up rules which are occasionally denied the power to finally define the taxonomy of images. The emergent work is simultaneously predictable and unpredictable. The moment of freedom, the moment of inscribing her marks onto the not-so-hard, not-so soft material is followed by a deliberate denunciation of that freedom into the relatively limited set of decisions which constitute the procedure from which the work emerges. Significantly, this original moment of freedom was also once conceived as the moment when authorship was established. Once, as in an era different from our own. Once, as in modernism. For in these works, the artist has subverted the marks of her authorship in a formidable way. It is impossible to decide whether these works constitute a process of writing or a process of gradual silencing, of erasure. The rules of the game are there and yet they are constantly broken: colours fading and then renewed, vivid marks and mere traces of marks provide the ambiguities of the semantic chain confronting the viewer. At any one moment, the viewer is confronted by both the / of the creative subject and the non-subject of chance.

It is unclear if, along with the work, a sense of identity also emerges. According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, it is repetition which establishes identity. But the kind of repetition facing the viewer in these works, is never fully accomplished as such because of the interference of variations. The moment these divergences are taken into account the concretization of identity is denied to the viewer as much as to the artist. From there on the story gets personal and interpretation is what matters. Some viewers will choose to ignore the variations and will focus on the work as an incorporating, self-asserting totality, an issue of symmetry.

Others will not be able to grasp the work as a closed system because they will be able to see the cracks in that system, the nearly imperceptible asymmetries which prevent the work from being concluded. The reproduction of this dilemma, so schematically expressed here, is what situates the work culturally and what grants it its historicity. The work is constructed as a commentary on the production of aesthetics in postmodernism. It deploys a dialectics of polysemy and reveals the division between perfect order and the presumably chaotic nature of the sign in a world crowded with media-imagery as profoundly problematic.

Yet there is another twist in the plot. The locality of the postmodern is counteracted by the form of the sign which, as already stated, recalls a kind of writing, a kind of transcribed anxiety which previously defined a not fully intelligible speech, a word that has risen to the status of a fetish, standing for an unidentifiable absence. The serial repetition of the image does not manage to fill this gap. But it compensates by constructing, through repetition again, its own narrativity. This model of narrativity bears scarce resemblance to traditional models such as those frequently associated with conventional understandings of realism. The marks on the rotating block(s) suggest that what is perceived as the 'reality' of the work is produced by the illusion (the non-reality) of a repetition. The physicality of the marks is never offered unmediated to the viewer. It is mediated by the viewer's response to the simultaneous operation of an illusion. The marks are real but there are several equally valid ways to approach their 'reality' and this brings us back to Lacan who argued that "the human subject has not direct access to reality" ². The way in which the real is inscribed in Cattani's work is of great importance for the understanding of the difference between this kind of work and much postmodern work. Based on the traditions of pop art, the surface of the postmodern work, appears perpetually stupefied by the velocity and

persistence of the image which travels the globe, as if there is not enough time for the postmodern artist to elaborate patterns of disaffirmation. But the images in this exhibition do not seem at all overwhelmed. On the contrary they seem exploratory. Cattani proceeds through the discontinuities of repetition and difference, through the subtleties of her ambivalent engagement with the image which is never overtly emotional nor overtly cerebral: incorporating the small into the big, extending or cutting off the frame, striving to offer the iconography of a system and at the same time transgressing the norms of the system as a matter of course. At the interface of all these elements lies the self-reflexivity of her art.

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1998

1 Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven and London, 1985), p. 3.

2 Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History", *The Art Bulletin*, (June 1991), p199.