# Christianity, spirituality and the body

Irene Biolchini

The Mdina Biennale, opening next week on 13 November, will exhibit the works of more than 100 artists. These works are characterised by the adoption of different media and also of different techniques and processes: walking through the city one will be encounter sculptures, paintings, ceramics, installations, video. When visiting the exhibition, the spectator will be able to notice that the idea of spirituality has mainly been examined by means of two main contrasting approaches: some artists have attempted to underline spirituality by opposing it to matter (both artistic and natural matter); other artists, on the other hand, have linked spirituality to abstract concepts (as formal manifestations of thoughts and symbols).

The 'creational realism' which characterises, according to Auerbach's analysis, Judeo-Christian artistic production, is central to the research of the first group, as may be seen in the works presented by Vince Briffa, Salvatore Calì and Monika Grycko.

Vince Briffa has appropriated the image of the reliquary, but he did so by subverting the traditional idea of the object itself. If the sacred power of the relics is obtained by their intrinsic definition of being a part of the body of a sacred person, the title of Briffa's work, No one's reliquary, reveals a contradiction. Briffa's approach of not indicating a specific body or person goes against the object-driven idea of the relic itself. And what is intriguing is the absence of the corpse, the impossibility of attributing a part to the whole. The sacred body is not the body of a saint, but it is neither the body of the artist (a contemporary creator). Briffa is simultaneously negating two traditions: he is refusing the idea of the sacredness of the body of the saint, but he is also contesting the representation of the contemporary artist's body as something that produces life. A trend which can be traced in Miquel Barceló's representation of Christ (which was done by the Catalan artist as a self- portrait), or even in Marina Abramovic's *The artistispresent* (a performance lasting three months during which the spectator met directly with the artist, influencing the life of the spectator; the artist made her body the instrument of communicating values and hopes). In Briffa's work there are no saints, there are no demiurges and there are no shamans. No one can transmit health and hope. The spectator can't find anything in the object: the only thing that he can see is a part of a body. The relicis representing no one's body and therefore everyone's at the same time. Human kind is our goal, the fragmentation of the soul of the individual, of each individual, is the only representation which we are called to testify. And the individual, and, more particularly, his body is also debated in Salvatore Calì's research. Calì's performance (digitally documented) was based on his act of standing still at the centre of a landscape scene, holding the handkerchief which his mother gave him before her death. His act of standing is a form of resistance, it sounds like a declaration on the importance of being an artist in our world, of finding the meaning of the whole in the individual spiritual research. The handkerchief represents the spiritual connection with his mother: his gesture of holding it reveals his roots and his newfound life in Malta. At the same time, the object, being exposed to the wind, is manipulated according to the breeze. This is a volatile object, but its shapes are also giving form to air. In this way the artist, with his presence and his gesture, is allowing the spectator to see something invisible: the passage of air. He is the instrument through which the forces of nature are passing in order to reach us. In this performance Calì, like a shaman, is bringing the metaphysical world to us, he is directing the invisible towards our visible world.

Salvatore Calì, Airshapes/*Goodbye Mother*, 2014-15, Photography, 125x190cm, detail, Courtesy Artegiro Contemporay Art.

Monika Grycko, *GURE*, 2015 - ongoing, Ceramic, plastic and assorted objects, Variable dimensions.

Vince Briffa, *No one's Reliquary*, 1997, Mixed media reliefs,human hair mounted in wooden cases, 32x27cm (each)

The evanescence and the spirituality of Calì's work finds its counterpart in Monika Grycko's work. The white ceramic organs, obtained in series with the use of a mould, are reproductions of human organs, but their aseptic colour creates a contrast with the objects that they want to imitate, producing in the spectator a sense of displacement. This otherworldly feeling is amplified by the structure of the installation. Floating above the spectator, like an Alexander Calder mobile, the organs are mixed with daily objects, negating any form of relation with the real world. The distance from our physical world is not just symbolic since the objects, because they are suspended from the ceiling, do not touch the ground. Any reference to matter, or to the real organ, is therefore negated by the intervention of the artist: the spectator is lost in front of the work, contemplating the visibility of human body parts suspended, disconnected from our reality, but at the same time alien to every form of established symbolism. As in Briffa's work, in which relics were not associated to a specific body, even these multiple reproductions of organs are not connected to a specific individual, but their weight hangs over us, a contemporary memento mori. The only form of spirituality which we can maintain in our society (the same society which is irrupting in the works through the adoption of daily objects) is the reflection upon our transience; the body is the last horizon which we can perceive.

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