

Claudio Costa

Evoluzione-Involuzione

A cura di Stefano Castelli

In collaborazione con l'Archivio Claudio Costa

Each work by Claudio Costa inaugurates a new, autonomous world, a free territory asserting itself as an alternative to the status quo. In his 'unthinkable' creations, the 'repressed' of mass society takes concrete form and demonstrates, with the weapons of aesthetics, the possibility of experiencing modernity¹ in a different way. The utopian and contestatory dimension that is created appears credible and realisable precisely because reality is the starting matter: common objects, more factual than artistic materials, geometries and anatomies already experienced in everyday life, but which are here completely transfigured by a lateral gaze, immune to the dominant ways of thinking.

Costa's position is actually decentralised with regard to the predetermined trajectory of progress. His research draws on marginalised spheres such as peasant culture and that of peoples defined as 'primitive' at the time², or on spheres theoretically excluded from the intrinsically rationalist dimension of contemporary art, such as the transcendent dimension. All this, however, should not be misunderstood: his idea of 'work in regress' is by no means a *passatist* attitude, but an alternative (and therefore authentic) manner of outlining a progressive and avant-garde path.

The expression 'Evolution-Involution', revived for this exhibition from the title of a theoretical text that he wrote in 1972, encapsulates all these apparent contradictions. Progress derives from an open gaze, which reorganises the existing situation rather than simply registering it, making it open to change, to revision, to shared rethinking. Evolution is also 'involution' because a coexistence of temporal planes (past, present, future) and individual and collective self-awareness cannot be ignored. In short, the gaze must also be introspective, that is, aware of internal origins and logics, of the weave of history and epochs that constitutes the fabric of the present (which truly constitutes it, even if removed in terms of superstructures)³. In short, Costa is the opposite of a *passatist*: his research can instead be included in the illustrious tradition of the great 'anti-modernists', with nothing reactionary at all.

Within this horizon of meaning, the expressive force of Costa's *œuvre* then bursts, since the works are accessed via rational codes only to be overwhelmed by uncanny sensations. This happens because in his works bare life breaks through, freed from superstructures, yet perfectly contextualised in structures created anew, so perfect although precarious and potentially revisable. Form and content find an almost undreamt-of union, so that the artistic vision affects the subsequent everyday one, transfiguring the banal. The methodical study of disciplines like anthropology and alchemy becomes the initial cue required for the absolute sincerity of the work, which is then transformed into an effective and actual aesthetic creation, avoiding the risk of the *thesis artwork* embedded in concept art.

Bringing together a range of works spanning the whole of Costa's career phases, as is the case of the present exhibition, allows us to see the overall range of his project. Only apparently episodic, his journey through forms, materials and expressive worlds ultimately finds the absolute and manifest coherence of the recurring constants. New corollaries are gradually added to the premises, but experience in the field⁴ confirms the basic structure.

¹ Apart from the various specific connotations that the term *modernity* has gradually taken on, it is used here as a synonym for mass society/advanced capitalist society, with a meaning valid both at the time when Costa produced his work and today.

² Peoples no longer considered backward, but simply 'other', following the breakaway from Eurocentric thinking, partially realised today and invoked by Costa with an anticipatory glance.

³ This conception bears similarities with the concept of 'language that pre-exists itself' developed by Michel Foucault at the same time as Costa was fine-tuning his research.

⁴ This is to be understood in the sense of a long and established artistic practice, but also with reference to Costa's study of specific disciplines and his many travels, during which he applies the anthropological idea of fieldwork.

The works of the early years tend towards an absolute revolution of artistic canons, without, however, running into discourses that are merely meta-artistic. With *Spine* (Thorns) of 1968, the idea of sculpture is undermined at the base, in an even more radical way than in contemporary experiences⁵. The weight of the slate becomes volatile thanks to the aerial placement. The object is imposing but completely anti-monumental, provisional and contingent. The work is both territorial, due to the presence of a mineral connected to material culture⁶, and 'absolute' on a conceptual level.

An experimentation area, considerably similar for many reasons, can then be found in *Tela acida* (Acid Canvas) and *Colla di pesce* (Isinglass), both from 1970. The canvas, a symbol of painting by itself, is "mistreated" with extra-artistic materials like acid and isinglass, yet exalted because it is turned into an organic, living object. Specifically in the former work, the acidification of the canvas and even more that of copper plates, effectively introduces the transmutation-of-materials concept that will be decisive in all subsequent periods⁷.

With *Il meno per dividere il più il più per dividere il meno* (The Less to Split the More the More to Split the Less, 1977) we enter the realm of Costa's best-known style, with its works in showcase that look like ethnographic museum exhibits for an instant and then unleash their free associations of elements, references and origins. Peasant culture, mass culture and tribal cultures collide in the assemblages of this time to give rise to a free treatment on the concept of Human and to reflect on alternative destinies to those massified society was moving towards with great strides.

Incidentally, the presence in the exhibition of *Il meno per dividere il più il più per dividere il meno* aims to represent a period of fundamental importance: the idea of the "availability of the finds" manifested in these works found a seal at the time in the creation of the Museum of Active Anthropology in Monteghirfo, in 1975: it was a question of ideally opening up the cultural heritage studied, collected by the artist, to the community instead of maintaining a memory only - and at the same time the artist's creative process was made open, available and democratic too. The crates of the *Resurrected Anthropology* realised in 1977 then constituted a further seal of Costa's anthropological/paleontological period, symbolically validating the artefacts he used, through the operation of burial and discovery.

By contrast, the works from the 1980s selected for the exhibition testify to the irruption of new themes and areas of reflection, which are grafted onto the previous ones without contradicting them: the study of alchemy not as an esoteric discipline but as a cue for an anti-materialist transformation, a 'return to painting' even if partial and *sui generis*, the interest toward African culture, that we find expressed in the exhibition in an almost always indirect but nevertheless clearly perceptible way, the symbolic and formal reflection on the human brain - the seat of rationality but also a numinous element of illuminations, drives, connections and coincidences.

This latter theme is perfectly visualised by the *Untitled* from the 1980s, where the figure of the human brain is multiplied in different, either more or less mediated forms - here, too, the formal completeness of the work precisely derives from its precariousness, in particular from its entirely 'occasional' yet perfect wooden support.

The *Macchina alchemica* (Alchemical Machine) of 1985 is then an excellent example of how Costa's aesthetic 'incorrectness', by stopping a moment before the overflow, achieves results of extraordinary and paradoxical exactitude. And this work also demonstrates how the 'return to painting' that even Costa has pursued is once again alien to any dominant trend: tar and wood used to delineate the figure result in a concrete presence that is both perturbing and parodistic, a being in whose presence one finds oneself surprised and questioned,

⁵ For comparison, one can think of a landmark exhibition such as *When attitudes become form* (Kunsthalle Bern, 1969, curated by Harald Szeemann) - but Costa goes even further in his deconstruction operation.

⁶ And it cannot be overlooked that slate is a material that characterises Liguria. Another point to emphasise is how the use of materials linked to the concrete experience of individuals is an element he shares with Arte Povera, as well as the fact that he uses chemical transformations to evoke a transmutation of the way of thinking and living. But the affinities with Arte Povera stop there, Costa is only tangentially linked to it.

⁷ In his retrospective text *millenovecentosessantotto millenovecentosettantotto (indicazioni su una metodologia di lavoro)* it is Costa himself who speaks, with regard to the use of acids in the early 1970s, of "a sort of alchemy of the profound transformation of certain materials". The text is contained in Claudio Costa, *Materiale e metamorfico - Sintomatologie sul work in regress*, Unimedia, Genoa, 1979.

a figure that, in its roughness, appears more credible to today's eye than the savageries prevalent in the 1980s. The empowered being represented in this work is 'alchemical' for its transformation potential, for the enhancement of its anatomy that is not afraid to open up chasms of uncertainty or even disturbance and fear. Thus, this work embodies the perfect combination between pleasure principle and death drive, and between iconoclastic and constructive dimension that characterises all the artist's research.

The same combination returns forcefully in the unusual *Saltafossi* (Ditches Jumper, 1989), with its fusion of rational equilibrium (represented by the tripod, an element of stability that also evokes the will to measure, to understand the world in a rational mapping) and absolute precariousness (represented by the overhanging part, even though monumental in its own way too). The rural, tribal and intellectual dimensions come to a complete mediation.

In the *Capanna Animale* (Animal Hut, 1988), the ethnographic/anthropological approach returns, revised in the light of later experiences. The sampling of materials from concrete reality is of the most direct kind, with the assemblage seemingly freshly made or rather on the verge of falling apart. Nonetheless, risking repetitions, it must be said even here that the exactness of the geometries and relationships gives the work a dimension of perennality. The mental and physical gesture of the artist⁸ in creating the work coincides with the mental gesture of the viewer (actually, it *continues to coincide*).

Finally, the two works from the 1990s exhibited here are the perfect closing of the loop (although research such as Costa's is inexhaustible in principle). *La casa dello sguardo impossibile (Lo sguardo di Dioniso)* (The House of the Impossible Gaze (Dionysus's Gaze), 1992) returns to the rationality of the 1970s showcases, but introduces more marked expressive impulses. The symbol – decentralised with respect to its canonical axis – of an ancestral fertility, elements of popular culture, hints of classical culture – mediated by photographic reproduction – compose a sort of effective visual calembour, endowed with great expressive synthesis.

In *Terre emerse* (Landmasses, 1993), finally, the objects are immersed in a substance that is a sort of primordial soup but also an agent of alchemical transmutation; the utensils are rusted, not because they are musealised or belong to the past, but because they are subject to transmutation too, and therefore still *in progress* and ideally usable. Lastly, minerals, which appear *new* rather than ancestral, are perhaps the element that has reached the most advanced stage of the life-giving transformation taking place.

Stefano Castelli

⁸ Another of the most striking features of Costa's work is precisely the fact that each of his gestures is 'foundational', precisely because, as mentioned, each of his works inaugurates a world.