

## The GRAV's unstable works

(Monica Bonollo)

*Complexity is an ambivalent challenge, with two faces. On the one hand is the irruption of irreducible uncertainty into our awareness, with the crumbling of the myths of certainty, of completeness, of exhaustiveness and of the omniscience, which for centuries marked and regulated the path and finalities of modern science. But on the other hand it is not simply the indication of order which fails; it is also and above all the need and ineluctability of an investigation into the adventure of awareness, of a transformation of the questions and answers on which our knowledge is based, and of an aesthetic change (...). In this sense, the delineation of an "uncertain universe" is not so much a symptom of science in crisis but also and above all the indication of a deepening of our dialogue with the universe."*

(G. Bocchi and M. Ceruti, 1985)

If for centuries the scientific viewpoint has always been deemed, by definition, to be capable of discriminating between truth and falsity, of identifying the exception and the insignificant, and of discovering the universal laws of nature, at the moment in which indeterminacy bursts onto the scene, attention shifts to aspects and situations which had hitherto been considered marginal, impossible or insignificant.

"Disorder", "instability", "non equilibrium" and "pathology" assume a fundamental value, finally worthy of investigation, for it is precisely the irrational which helps us to understand the limits of our rationality, the assumptions and mechanisms of our awareness.

As the physicist and Nobel laureate, Ilya Prigogine, loves to declare jokingly, "matter is "blind" in the state of equilibrium; it only starts to "see" in the state of non equilibrium." It is only when it is in a state of instability that it acquires a certain "sensitivity" which places it in a transformative relationship with respect to the external environment.

Far from being the negation of stability, therefore, the simple absence of something, of a solid foundation on which to rest our "gaze" and our "mind", instability actually becomes potential. "Non equilibrium" plays a highly constructive role in contemporary physics while instability is understood as a potential for transformation in the culture of complexity, as an opportunity for the creation of new structures.

One of the twentieth century's great epistemological breakthroughs was realizing that situations which until then had been considered as limitations to knowledge now offered themselves as opportunities, opening up to possible new cultural worlds.

The challenge of complexity therefore translates into the transition from an epistemology of "representation" to an epistemology of "construction".

An implicit assumption of the epistemology of "representation" was the separate and autonomous existence of a "subject" and of an "object" along with the concept of "image" intended as representation, reproduction of the intrinsic characteristics of an object.

Complexity obliges us to reconsider previous categories of thought and rethink them globally.

There is no such thing as an "innocent eye" capable of establishing a direct and pristine relationship with the world, just as there is no absolute, non-mediated datum, which is reproducible beyond any mediation whatsoever. There is no objective world free from any constraint and complicity with the eye and brain. It is impossible to think of a clear distinction between a subject and an object which puts them in frontal opposition: of an objectum which is confronted with itself, opposed by itself, because a subjectum precedes and provides the foundation of the act of description of the world. The observer does not investigate the real in search of its "natural laws" with impossible detachment, from an external point of view. Instead he configures it starting from the structural limits of his position.

Having denied independence and stability to subject and object, perceived and perception, and image and representation, we must always consider these terms in combination. What is around us and what we feel immersed in assumes the quality of reality only through its practicability, only through an interaction which verifies the possibilities and conditions of its existence.

The image becomes the *medium* for all effects as it is the milieu, the element in which man and the world interact, reciprocally constructing each other.

How could we not trace the echoes of the crisis in the foundations of the sciences in the deep thrusts which have driven the main artistic movements of the last century? Artistic expression has always been provocative and destabilizing. Works so distant from the aspiration for truth are always fragile and highly complex at the same time, orphans of a stability which has lasted thousands of years: they display their own uncertainties, confuse the boundaries, play with ambiguity.

And it is precisely this context of absence of certainty, lack of equilibrium and of stability that Paris's Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV) fits into.

Speaking of his artistic research, Julio Le Parc has said: "I try to understand a highly attractive aspect of reality. The condition of instability" Furthermore, Jöel Stein tells us: "The superimposition of two tones of equal value creates an instability which positions itself in the vision, through the alternation of the perception of each of them followed by the apparition of a third uniform tone: as a result the eye becomes the motor which animates this surface. This unstable perception alters the form, and the colours themselves oscillate perpetually without it being possible to pin down a definite tone. At this point it is simply a question of multiplying the experiences and not of explaining their results."

Starting first of all as a group at the end of the fifties, and separately in more recent years, all the GRAV members – H. Garcia Rossi, J. Le Parc, F. Morellet, F. Sobrino, J. Stein, and Yvaral (J. P. Vasarely) – have tirelessly carried out their search for artistic practices which would put the relationship between the eye and the work in the forefront, and conceive the surface – the visual image – as an interface in this primary relationship.

Aware that our concept of stability of the world passes above all through the eye, they conceive the work of art as a programmed device for capturing the observer's eye and rendering it complicit, an active part of the work as already at the unconscious level of perception the eye's constructive action is accomplished through an act of interaction which is always at the basis of the stabilization of an image.

The GRAV's images and unstable works always require a responsible and participant eye to attribute a stable form to them even if it is only a transitory and contingent one, to animate the virtual movement which stirs them and to realize some of their infinite potential variations. It is only within this interactive relationship that the image is constructed in a reciprocal and ceaseless exchange of stabilities, played between the eye and visual reality, between the subject and the object, between man and the world.

Hence the need, as Stein says, not so much to explain the results obtained through artistic research, but to "multiply the experiences" until the world's intrinsic instability stabilizes through our gaze, and through us its virtuality becomes real in one of its infinite forms.