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Giuseppe Di Liberti

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“SCULPTURE IS MATTER MATTERING.” SPATIALIZATION OF MATTER AND VISUAL POETRY IN CARL ANDRE

GIUSEPPE DI LIBERTI

In a 1996 interview with Tim Malow published in *Tate Magazine*, Andre said: “Sculpture, you might say, is matter mattering. We compliment a painter when we call him a colorist. My vocation is to be a matterist” (Andre 2010, 140). This parallel between the function of color in painting and the function of matter in sculpture often returns in Andre interviews, at times in a quite explicit and articulate manner, as in 1980 with Sutinen:

The periodic table of elements is for me what the color spectrum is for a painter. My ambition as an artist is to be the “Turner of matter.” As Turner severed color from depiction, I attempt to sever matter from depiction. Copper is more profoundly different from aluminum than green is from red (Andre 2005, 146).

These two quotes raise two questions, which may function as a common thread through all of Carl Andre’s work. The former quote may appear to be quite anodyne: what meaning can we attribute to the expression “matter mattering”? On one hand, it is “the matter which makes matter,” not so much in the sense of “forming matter” but in the sense of matter which reveals its materiality. On the other hand, we could interpret this expression in the sense of “questioning matter,” thereby revealing the double sense of matter in English, a double sense, which Andre – I am sure – was well aware of.

The second question relates to the function taken on within Andre’s work by Mendeleev’s periodic table of elements, which Andre uses in certain posters for his first exhibitions.¹ For sure, the comparison with the visible spectrum, which Andre makes in the first passage quoted above, is valid. But Andre’s interest is not just in matter in itself but in the very scheme of the periodic table, the modular organization (valid to the point of predicting elements not yet discovered) founded on the atomic mass of the elements. The fact that a regular periodic trend for the atomic number could be used to classify electronic configurations, which could determine the chemical properties of the elements or that, in other words, the qualities of the matter could be organized on a quantitative basis, is perhaps at the root of Andre’s visual fascination with the periodic table. “To sever matter from depiction”, we can definitely pass through the scheme of the periodic table of elements, but it is also necessary that this scheme becomes an autonomous field of tension. The scheme – to sever, that is, matter from depiction – must become a place, just as the map must become a territory to be experienced.

But how does a scheme become a project, a place, an experience? This is perhaps the crucial question for an understanding of Andre’s work. One possible way to answer this question – the one we are following here and one certainly among the most common within the current Carl Andre’s criticism – is by looking into the profound continuity between the poetic quest and sculptural quest of the artist, continuity which makes Andre virtually unique in the sculpture of the late 20th Century. To demonstrate this continuity, I have decided to first briefly indicate certain crucial passages within Andre’s very earliest works and then to conclude with five conceptual pairs, which can help to analyze Andre’s work overall.

Born in 1935, Andre only exhibits his first sculpture in 1964 and his first experiences in sculpture, inspired by the shocking discovery of Constantin Brancusi, date to 1959. These are experiences, which will be quite isolated, with the exception of limited production between 1962 and 1963. Andre’s years of formation, on the other hand, clearly focus on his poetry.

In 1951, at the age of sixteen, Andre obtains a scholarship to study at the Phillips Academy in Andover, where he meets two singular classmates who will profoundly influence his work: Hollis Frampton, who will become one of the most significant film directors of the New York avant-garde with whom Andre will develop intense dialogue over the years, this becoming one of the main testimonies to his work,² and Frank Stella, with whom Andre will

¹ The announcement poster for *Carl Andre’s Periodic Table*, an exhibition at the Dwan Gallery, New York, in December 1967; and the announcement poster for *Carl Andre Clastic*, an exhibition at the Wide White Space Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium, 1968.

² Before starting his own cinema work, which will begin in 1962 with the lost *Clouds Like White Sheep* and which will be most successful with the *Hapax Legomena* cycle of the 1970’s, Hollis Frampton, in 1959, develops

then share the studio in New York. As early as 1953, Andre leaves the school to go on a long trip in Europe, but the two years at the Phillips Academy allow him to come into contact with European and North American Modernist poetry. His first attempts at poetry (almost all destroyed) will reveal this precise influence, with a tendency towards an “impressionist and fragmentary” (Rider 2009) lyricism. In 1957, Andre moves to New York, where he first works as an assistant at a school manual publisher’s; then attempts his own editorial adventure (which failed) and, finally, is employed as a railroad freight brakeman for the Pennsylvania Railroad. Also thanks to Frampton and Stella, Andre’s circle of friends extends to Michael Chapman (later a film director and, above all, an important director of photography for Scorsese and Kaufman) and Barbara Rose (an art historian and later Stella’s wife).

Thanks to Frampton, a relentless reader of Pound with whom, in fact, he had started to correspond in 1956, Andre reads the *Cantos* and the poet’s essays on Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and Constantin Brancusi (Pound 1921), who, then, will inspire Andre’s first sculptures. The re-working and the incorporation of the pedestal in Brancusi’s sculptures especially attract Andre. In these years, he first works on a comic novel, *Billy Builder*, writing fifty or so pages, and a series of short stories, sometimes just a few lines long. At the same time, he continues to write poems which move ever further away from the early Modernist experiments, focusing now on the visual rhythm of the organization of the words, on the spatial and visual relations which gradually replace the syntactic relations and, ultimately, on a relative semantic autonomy of the words as graphic signs.³

The work of the early 1960’s finds form in an epic poem of forty-three pages on which Andre works over the first six months of 1963. The title is *America Drill* and it is organized into three parts: *red cut*, *white cut* and *blue cut*. The text consists completely of quotes from five books: *Red cut* from a 1878 text on the history of the Wampanoag Tribe (*Indian History and Genealogy pertaining to the good Sachem Massasoit of the Wampanoag Tribe and his Descendants* by Ebenezer W. Pierce); *white cut* from *Indian History and Genealogy Journal* by Edward Waldo Emerson; *blue cut* from *We* by the aviator Charles A Lindbergh (1927) and *The Hero Charles A Lindbergh and the American Dream* by Kenneth S. Davis (1959). The poem ends with a quote from *The Great Gatsby*. Andre considered *America Drill* as:

A long poem the subject of which is tree racial tragedies - the tragedy of territory as property - the tragedy of person as property - the tragedy of everything as property (Kotaji pp. Didier 2003, 3).

Andre raises many questions about the national American identity, the construction of historical reference⁴ and territorial politics. The conception of sculpture as a place of experience and recording of historical change is declaredly political in Andre’s mind. I will focus here on just a few compositional elements, which clearly emerge from the very pagination of *America Drill*. The *drill* of the title in the railroad slang of Andre who was employed in those years by the Pennsylvania Railroad, as emphasized by Vera Kotaji, the editor of a recent re-edition of *America Drill* for the Michèle Didier Gallery, “refers to the act of tracing a way in a station of sorting, of connecting two coaches of train between them. Basically it refers to the link between two elements” (Kotaji pp. Didier 2003, 3). Andre copies the texts with the typewriter, then cuts them into strips and glues them back on other sheets of the same paper, systematically following a sequence of prime numbers (a “Gödelisation”). The texts are without punctuation and the visual rhythm of the pages is mainly created by the spaces between the words (and now also by the yellowing of the adhesive).

The incorporation of quotations of various origins within the poetic text in order to attack or at least re-process the idea of verse was already quite common in the American poetry of the 1950’s and 1960’s (think, for example, of *The Tennis Court Oath* by John Ashbery in 1962), which here too is influenced by the Modernist lesson (whether Pound’s *Cantos*, the classical text quotations in Eliot or the “textes trouvés” included in William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*). But *American Drill* may be considered as a very rare case of a long poem consisting exclusively of quotations put together with an automatic treatment of the text with a strong prevalence of the visual rhythm over the sound rhythm (something which clearly distances him from Modernism). To sum up, Andre treats the words

a series of photographs, *Ways of Lurity*, dedicated to Andre’s first sculptures; between 1962 and 1963, along with Rosemarie Castoro, he will also develop a series of dialogues with Carl Andre.

³ Of approximately 1500 poems, very few were published in volumes, because of Andre’s decision to reproduce them in carbon copy or as photocopies and to distribute them directly. Tate is currently carrying out a research project to bring together the many dispersed texts and publish a complete collection of Andre’s poems (<http://www.tate.org.uk/about/projects/carl-andre-complete-poems>). While we wait for this collection, then, the body of work on which we can work is quite limited.

⁴ See Carl Andre’s typed poems, *Historical References* (1963). Forty hundred sixty-five pieces are in the collection of the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, and were donated by the artist.

as modules to be reorganized on the plane of the page in an attempt to bring out the plasticity and tactility of the words and to introduce new poetic relations created not by the meter or syntax but by the visual composition. Three short quotations, I think, can clarify three crucial cores of Andre's literary and sculptural poetics. Above all the plastic and constructivist dimension:

Let me indicate some shadow of what I mean by a Constructivist aesthetic. Frank Stella is a Constructivist. He makes paintings by combining identical, discrete units. Those units are not stripes, but brush strokes. We have both watched Frank Stella paint a picture. He fills in a pattern with uniform elements. His stripe designs are the result of the shape and limitation of his primary unit. A brick wall is a Constructivist execution. The various overall bond patterns are a result of the shape of the individual bricks. This definition would exclude Newman's work from the Constructivist aesthetic because he obviously uses many and various means to achieve an overall effect. My Constructivism is the generation of overall designs by the multiplication of the qualities of the individual constituent elements. May I suggest, furthermore, that Ezra Pound in the *Cantos* exploits the plastic and Constructivist quality of words, symbols and phrases. I grant that his purpose is not gained, but enhanced, by this method (Andre 2005, 162–163).

Secondly, an expressiveness peculiar to the word-object, which goes well beyond the author-subject: "In my poetry I do not try to find the words to express what I want to say. In my poetry I try to find ways to express what the words have to say."⁵

Finally, the formal autonomy of words treated as plastic elements:

I use words in units which are different from sentences, grammatical sentences, but of course words always connect when they are placed together if they are not nonsense words. I have attempted to write poetry in which the sentence is not the dominant form but the word is the dominant form.⁶

These three aspects can be summarized by the idea of modularity of the elements and their relative interchangeability, an aspect that will be decisive throughout all of Andre's work. As emphasized by Alistair Rider, perhaps the main scholar of Andre's poetry:

Andre's understanding of poetic writing as a set of interchangeable and permutable parts, selected largely from pre-existing sources, provides a very clear analogy with Andre's sculptures. After all, the sculptures are also composed of arrangements of separate and separable particles, and Andre never begins work as an artist until he has at his disposal a limited series of units which he can then aggregate (Rider 2009).

We must also recall that Andre (almost never) makes preparatory sketches for his sculptures, as his main interest is in the matter itself and its re-modulation in space.

The visual organization of the words on the page, the function of the layout/typesetting grid, the attention to the materiality of the word, the idea of the "automatic treatment" of the text and, in a certain sense, the very modularity of the elements, are strongly dependent on Andre's use of the typewriter, a matter to which the artist often returns in interviews, as in these two cases.

With regard to the grid, he says to Cummings:

The grid system for the poems comes from the fact that I was using a mechanical typewriter to write the poems, and as you know a mechanical typewriter has even letter spacing, as opposed to print which has justified lines with unequal letter spacing. A mechanical typewriter is essentially a grid and you cannot evade that (Andre 2005, 212).

Talking to Robert Morris, as well as confessing that he never learned to type, Andre focuses on the almost engraving dimension of writing:

I have used the typewriter as a machine or lathe or saw, to apply letters on the page. I really do feel very tactile using a typewriter. I never learnt to use a typewriter automatically. I can still only type with one finger but that made each operation of typing a very machine-like act. It was like actually embossing or applying physical impressions on to a page, almost as if I had a chisel and was making a cut or a dye and making a mark on metal (Andre 2005, 212).

Starting in 1967, Andre starts to frame and exhibit the typewritten pages or the carbon copies as independent works.

⁵ Transcription of the tape made by Carl Andre for the exhibition of his poems at the Lisson Gallery, London and the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, July 1975. Transcribed and edited by Lynda Morris.

⁶ *Ibid.*

The first opportunity to exhibit his sculptures comes in 1964 thanks to Eugene Goossen who invites him to take part in a collective at the Hudson River Museum with the simple title *8 Young Artists* (six painters, Walter Bannard, Robert Barry, Robert Huot, Patricia Johanson, Douglas Ohlson and Terrence Syverson, and two sculptors, Antoni Milkowski and Andre (Goossen 1995)). At that exhibition, Andre shows *Cedar Piece* and uses a fragment of the autobiographical poem *Blue Step* to present the work. At the same time, he writes one of his most famous poems, *Essay on sculpture for Goossen*, starting with which the relationship between the concrete and planar poetry and the structures of his sculptures becomes ever increasingly explicit, as will occur to an even greater extent in the poems of the years immediately after. Eugene Goossen represented, especially in the 1960's and 1970's, the opposite side of the critical debate to Clement Greenberg within the debate about Minimalism: while, on one hand, his position may be considered to be the daughter of Modernism as a result of the centrality assigned to the essence of the medium, on the other hand, he is profoundly unsure about the centrality assigned to the optical nature of the work, instead of paying greater attention to the tactility of the artistic object (Meyer 2001, 111). Precisely in this way – and regardless of Goossen, in an attitude which will be shared to a considerable extent by the Minimalist artists – the medium in its materiality and in its objecthood is the place for a subjective experience for the spectator, even before it is that which, within its revelation itself, characterises an artistic language and pushes the spectator to a sort of critical objectivity.⁷ In a certain sense, Andre, like the other Minimalists, rather than on abstraction, focuses on the simple presentation of the matter through the schemes derived from the visual poetry.

Minimalism's time in the limelight of the avant-garde, as a rather compact group of artists united by a common poetics, is quite short and related precisely to Goossen: it might start precisely with *8 Young Artists* in 1964 and end in 1968 with the Parisian exhibition *L'Art Du Reel USA 1948-1968* which in some way historicised the Minimalist experience.

From these years, however, we must recall at least five further exhibitions which may be considered as five key stages in Andre's career: in 1965, the first solo exhibition *Shape and Structure* at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York; in 1966, the *Primary Structures* collective at the Jewish Museum – considered as the most important Minimalist art exhibition of the 1960's (Meyer 2001) –, in which Andre exhibits *Lever*, again presented by a poem; also in 1966 and again at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, *Equivalent*; finally, in 1967, Andre moves to the Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles which allows him to make his perhaps most famous metal works, *Metalplates* and *Cuts* – the negative equivalent of *Equivalent*, an idea also present in certain poems for the same period but also in many subsequent works (Felman, Rider, Schubert 2006). The Dwan Gallery also allows him to publish his poems in seven volumes, in conjunction with the publisher Seth Siegelau (Passport 1960, *Shape and Structure* 1960-65, *A Theory of Poetry* 1960-65, *One Hundred Sonnets* 1963, *America Drill* 1963, *Three Operas* 1964, *Lyrics and Odes* 1969). The publication is peculiar: seven plastic ring binders containing the photocopied poems (with only thirty-six copies made). Andre is attracted by the use of photocopies: not only will he use it quite frequently as a means to distribute poems, but on certain occasions it will become a specific object in itself, as in the well-known *Xerox Book* published in 1968, again by Siegelau, in one thousand copies. Each of the artists involved (Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris and Lawrence Weiner) had twenty-five pages available. Andre cuts twenty-five paper squares, drops them one by one onto the glass of the photocopier and with every addition produces a new photocopy, thereby recording the manufacturing process. Andre's interest in photocopies, however, is not so much in the technical reproducibility but in the mechanical and automatic production capable of revealing the qualities of the materials used. The photocopied poems are not limited editions but have an index number on the back, as if to emphasise the unique nature of every copy within a series of variations. The apparent conflict between virtually infinite serial reproducibility and singular nature of a certain assembly (and, above all, a certain installation in a certain place) is one of the main motifs of Andre's work.

These references to Andre's early work allow us to quickly present certain conceptual polarities, which are quite frequent in the artist's work.

Above all, the classic couple *haptic/optic*: even words, for Andre, are things and things are made regardless of the grammar or the verse. The aim of the poem is precisely that of revealing the material and plastic qualities of (the) words. The typewritten words “tactile” are material examples of words, just as the metal plates are natural examples whose installation in a place permits the emergence of specific properties. “The properties of matter” – Andre writes – “are the most important content of my sculpture” (Andre 2005, 148). This research plane starts to take shape, also for economic reasons, in poetry. Like Goossen, Andre, precisely because of the centrality assigned

⁷ To understand the continuity and the differences between Modernism and Minimalism, it is sufficient to recall a famous quote by Greenberg: “The avant-garde arts have in the last fifty years achieved a purity and a radical delimitation of their fields of activity for which there is no previous example in the history of culture. [...]. The arts, then, have been hunted back to their mediums, and there they have been isolated, concentrated and defined. It is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself. To restore the identity of an art the opacity of its medium must be emphasized. For the visual arts the medium is discovered to be physical; hence pure painting and pure sculpture seek above all else to affect the spectator physically” (See Greenberg 1940, 32).

to the material properties, will be strongly critical of the optical values (and the expressive dimension) defended by Greenberg.

A second polarity within Andre's work is certainly that between *horizontality* and *verticality*. All Andre's sculpture is 'site specific' since every sculpture is above all the creation of a place rather than an object. Again a brief quote: "The essence of my work is not this or that but there or not there" (Andre 2005, 181). It is not a case of considering three-dimensionality as a property or condition of the sculpture but, rather, of intervening in space and providing the spectator with possible experiences of matter. The reflection on the specificity of the place, on the mass rather than on the volumes and the use of modular units will push Andre to focusing more on horizontality than on verticality:

I work in the horizontal plane because that offers a more efficient disposition of a given mass than vertical stacking does. The area above a horizontal work becomes much more part of its territory than does the area around a vertical stack (Andre 2005, 109).

As early as 1960, Andre speaks of his poems as "planes" or as "planar poetry" and so starts to experiment with the function of the plane in order to reveal material properties of the masses. But at the same time, since his fascination with Brancusi, Andre starts to reflect on the construction of verticality as an overlapping of levels. The polarity between horizontality and verticality is largely related to another classic polarity that between *surface* and *depth*, as it appears in the two parallel works *Equivalent* and *Cuts*, already referred to above.

The third polarity raised is the one between *scheme* and *single* (Wind 1925). Whether within the use of carbon copy or photocopies, or within the use of industrial materials always only assembled by means of juxtaposition and never with glues, nails or bolts, we might recognize one of the key elements of Andre's work: modularity which contains at the same time both the possibility of an infinite reformulation and the totally singular nature of the installation *in situ*. Alongside this, we have observed how every word is treated in its autonomy, as the grid becomes a relational scheme between the elements, and how modularity is used to construct a unitary and relatively homogeneous field. Within rather harsh criticism of Duchamp, Andre writes:

The Duchamp "readymade" is in a sense a molecule. It is a material object extracted from its quotidian ambience and placed in the context of art. My works are composed of atoms, that is, identical parts which form a molecule created within, and existing for, the context of art which is their quotidian ambience (Andre 2005, 93).

Not just do atoms not disappear in the molecule, but their variable relations produce new differences and singularity.⁸

Finally, there is a polarity introduced specifically by Andre, the polarity between *clastic* and *plastic*:

My particles are sort of cuts across the mass spectrum in what I call a *clastic* way (*plastic* is flowing of form and *clastic* means broken or preexisting parts which can be put together or taken apart without joining or cementing (Andre 2005, 142).

Clastic, from the Greek κλαστός "broken, crumbling," consisting of fragments. In geology, a clastic rock is a sedimentary rock consisting of detritus deriving from the mechanical and chemical degradation of pre-existing rocks. The closed and finite form, plastic in Andre's slang, the form as the appearance of the object clearly clashes with the morphological process of the stratification and deterioration of the matter, but it is precisely this process that makes the sculpture a place of experience.

I feel the following undated poem, to conclude, summarizes well Andre's intent and, above all, the tension between form, structure and space which we have tried our best to explore in this essay:

FORM IS APPEARANCE
STRUCTURE IS RESISTANCE

FORM APPEARS
STRUCTURE SUPPORTS
PLACE

FORM, APPEAR
STRUCTURE, RESIST
PLACE, YIELD

⁸ Andre asserts: "I Think the so-called art object has always been part of an open system." See Lippard 1973, 155.

(Andre 2005, 99)

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Giuseppe Di Liberti is assistant professor in Aesthetics at the Aix-Marseille Université. He graduated at the Università degli Studi di Palermo, where he studied philosophy and where he also obtained his PhD in Aesthetics in 2003, and was a postdoctoral researcher at the EHESS in Paris. He is a member of Centre Gilles Gaston Granger at the Aix-Marseille University. He has extensively worked on the history of aesthetics, mainly on the system of fine arts. His actual work focuses on the correlation between aesthetics and life sciences in Diderot's thought and the notion of aesthetics fact to recognise an elementary level of aesthetics dimension. He is the author of *Il sistema delle arti. Storia e ipotesi* (Milano: Mimesis, 2009; translated in French as *Le système des arts. Histoire et hypothèse*, Paris: Vrin, 2016) and co-editor, together with Danièle Cohn, of *Textes clés d'esthétique. Connaissance, Art, Expérience* (Paris: Vrin, 2012). He has published several articles and book chapters, and is a member of the editorial board of *Images Re-vues*.