

ROBERTO LANARO

“Famous phantasms of the past”

Mario Guderzo

“Where will I be? [...] I will be in all of those who have ever said ‘I’, who say it or who will say it; but especially in those who say it most fully, most energetically, most joyfully.”

Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, 1967

“Sculpture as Architecture

Over recent years, the distinctive feature of Roberto Lanaro’s sculpture has been that it gives expression to his own individual interpretation of the concept of the “monumental”; the artist seems to prefer to work on a grand scale because he is aware of the dominion that he himself exerts over the given. At the same time, Lanaro strives to create works which stand in a dialectic relationship with the ‘locus’ they occupy¹. One sees is a huge difference between his work now and that at the start of his career; however, while the growth in his art has proceeded univocally, one sees within this process the cyclical intersection of experience and experimentation.

For Lanaro, space itself has always played a leading role in his work. This space is the locus of events, actions and relations; it is the natural medium in which man and work come together in an expression of life. *Architettura* (1978) marks the begin of his exploration of the symbolic significance generated by setting a work within a site rich in atmosphere, within locations where silence itself seems to play an active role, to suggest and mould the forms with

which it interacts. This model would then generate the large monument that the sculptor would erect in Maubege, France (1988) - just as had happened with *Situazione verticale* (1978), *Proiezione* (1981), *Dinamica* (1982), and *Intervento* (1985). The sculptor often intervenes upon his material by means of torsion, and it is precisely this sense of movement which enables him to move beyond spatial limitations. The work itself becomes the component that coordinates and conditions the relationship between empty space and material. Due to the fact that it is a structural/constituent moment within our social reality - embodying a procedure that draws upon various linguistic, ethnic, environmental, social and psychological factors present within that reality - art inevitably acquires the character of necessity².

However, it is also true that the work of art bears witness within time to what the artist intended to communicate through his act of creation; very often, it is the case that a work both recounts an individual story and also expresses a specific culture. To those who come after, it communicates the profundity of a people’s creative spirit and principles; however, at the same time, it also expresses how the individual artist established a relation with a specific historical reality. In his work, the sculptor strives to leave a trace of a specific moment in his personal experience; of an important occasion or circumstance that opened the way to reflection upon the past and future of art. In effect, works of art have always served for such affirmation: when

one desires to leave a mark of one's own civilisation, it is art that is "called into play", which is seen as the best way of expressing the wisdom - the roots - of a people³. Generated by one's own experience of the forms in which humankind achieves artistic expression, this realisation and awareness become a cause of celebration. In Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, the lead character is portrayed at the moment of his death holding a copy of Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. "Where will I be?" he asks. "I will be in all of those who have ever said 'I', who say it or who will say it; but especially in those who say it most fully, most energetically, most joyfully." Just as the head of a family dynasty wishes to highlight the importance of "family memory", so testimony to the past of an entire community is embodied in that community's products, in its documents and archives, in its architecture and monuments, in the signs - some intentional, some less so - that artists have left behind them⁴. Roberto Lanaro is fully conversant with the qualities of the material he uses in the creation his sculpture. He understands how it can be transformed. He has experience of how it can be used; knows its origin and provenance. Obtained from earth, water, air and fire, iron is one of the elements that bear witness to man's dominion over the world. This is the element that Roberto Lanaro has chosen to engage with. Tradition and personal experience have taught him how difficult this, extremely 'stark', metal is to model; however, with striking ease, he uses it to give external expression to the full depths of his artistic sensibility. Bending, twisting and cutting the metal, the artist engages in a sequence of relations that might almost be described as inscrutable and mysterious. He himself has commented that, at times, the performance of creating the work has more value to him than the finished product⁵. In effect, the sculpture itself is the final 'act' in a sequence of actions, each one of which is fundamental for the "expression" of the work of art. The work's original essence and nature - the intimate

and deep-seated fibres of expression - emerge and seem to explode before you when physical matter becomes/is turned into "the material of sculpture". It is at this point that one most understands and experiences the deep nature of a metal such as iron. Implicit within this natural element is the whole experience of humankind. Everything is made manifest and contained here: "giving, doing, making mistakes, re-doing"⁶. For Lanaro, sculpture is a means of releasing forms from within materials; whilst continuing to be a metal, that material must ultimately achieve total purity, realising the full potential of its original nature. His primordial vocation becomes focused upon the dominion of space, with the artist also developing his own specific sense of the monumental as such. In effect, his work is a 'natural' presence set within a 'place'. It is no coincidence that many of his initial works take as their title 'captions' which refer to various kinds of action: *Separazione* (1971), *Proiezione* (1975), *Lacerazione* (1975) and *Torsione* (1975). The starting-point is a design that is gradually modified. However, sure of his own specific relation to the material of his sculpture, Lanaro shows no hesitation in proceeding to "make space" for inner expression; the modifications in no way alter the initial idea and thought. The artist's own specific mode of action forms a single whole with the creative evolution of the work; there are no sudden shifts and changes but rather a ripening and "substantiation" of an initial concept. It would be pointless here to try and look for "influences". Of course, Lanaro is fully aware of, engages with, what has already been produced; however, this assimilation of examples is nothing other than the pretext for measuring himself against such work, for tackling new ideas. Those dramatic twists and torsions within the material are a manifest expression of a strong desire for the new and original, of the artist's striving towards the realisation of his own thought and ideas. So it is useless to look for echoes of Braque, Picasso or Brancusi, or to pigeonhole Lanaro's sculptures in a specific

historical period, to label them as “Cubist”, “Expressionist” or “Concretist”. This is art which is always an expression of personal experience. A more useful approach would be to reflect upon the originality of what Roberto Lanaro proposes in sculpture which proceeds by shifts and turns; which aims for a more dynamic form of plasticity; which is not predicated upon a sense of “near weakness” before the solidity of the material; which strives above all to say something “other”. This striving and this dynamism co-exist with careful study and observation of the natural world around us; they are the fruit of a deep engagement with the real. Hence, for example, one finds geometrical forms that are assembled to become architectural constructs. Hence the interest in what can be achieved by exploiting the specific potential of various types of basic materials.

Sculpture as Sign and Picture

Lanaro’s works are never figurative, even if attempts are constantly made to identify some sort of iconography within them. Often the observer feels the need to do this; but what Lanaro’s sculptures offer is a new way of “reading”. Inevitably, one is being reductive if one insists upon imposing one’s own way of “looking” upon what the artist was actually aiming for; one must always remember that he was not only the person who “commissioned” and created the work, but also the first person to really look at it.

It would, therefore, be misleading to see solely the figurative, some natural “given”, in Lanaro’s sculptures. From the very beginning of his career, what has concerned him most is the representation of the three-dimensional reality, the application of his own inner research to the world of things; note, for example, how the artist applied the term *Proiezione* to many of the sculptures produced in the 80s (just as the title *Architettura* covers the series of “sketches” preliminary to the creation of large-scale constructions). In effect, the artist moves away from the natural “given”, interpreting it in a language that he has absorbed and

assimilated as his own: his sculptures are structures of signs that can express messages. A work of art might be compared to a complex written text - for example, a book. Hence, in analysing these works, which are expressed in visual signs, one must both ‘scan’ the text itself and also look at how this relates to the external space beyond; one must take into account the form of the work, the material in which it is made and the possibilities for observing the work from different points of view. Furthermore, in Lanaro’s sculpture time flows; the lines of certain surfaces mean that visual scansion can become “pictographic”. Aware that a figurative work can be easier to interpret than an abstract one, the artist sees that, in the latter case, the observer does not always have the material necessary to understand the message and the referent. It is the same situation that applies when one reads hermetic poetry or a non-traditional literary text which does not always allow for immediate understanding and interpretation⁷. This is why Lanaro “guides” the observer of his sculptures to an awareness of the concepts he was striving to express; each time he engages in a new and fascinating adventure, he deliberately makes an effort to provide clues for a possible “reading”, whilst also leaving the work open to each and every original interpretation. In his sculptures, things could not possibly be left to chance; but, at the same time, spontaneity is never stifled by excessively meticulous attention to technical details in the formulation of perceptions. All in all, one might say that there is a certain theatricality in both the intent behind the work and the way in which it comes about and exists. And the final achievement? The objective expression of a vision which might be described as “impressionistic”, given that it is imbued with a sort of surrealist and expressionist subjectivity. This is what Lanaro makes present to the senses; that to which he gives material expression in concrete form. And to do this, he uses a primordial material that fascinates him precisely because it is not easy and ductile but rather tough

and harsh, a material that is all the more seductive for resisting the efforts to fold and bend it, to subject it to expressive transformations. This challenge - posed not only against material itself but also against space and time - becomes Lanaro's natural mode of self-expression. One might draw comparisons here with certain mythological representations, in which the celebration of a ritual becomes an event.

Space itself is the other vital element in Lanaro's work; in studying the iconography of his art, one simply has to look around one to see how totally the representation "identifies itself" with the locus in which it acts out its lead role. The works to which the sculptor gives the title *Dinamica* are always created for outdoor sites. Their background is the natural landscape - the more natural, the better - and it is within/against this setting that the artist raises these figures, these abstract compositions and geometrical constructs. Within his wide and varied output, the results always achieve the status of reflections which are the fruit of "pure thought"; fully reflecting what took form as the artist's vision matured, the end-result is never the fruit of chance. To be fully aware of this one must recognise the substantial motivations behind the work, its full import - which can be grasped solely by appreciating the profundity of thought expressed.

Like painting, Lanaro's sculpture presents itself as a "pendant" to a setting. The surroundings themselves reflect his artistic experience, the skill of someone who knows how to place his subject within a setting - just as a painter knows how to set his figures within a composition. And that setting might be made up of a blue sky, a hedge, a crumbling wall and a green garden, or of intersecting roads, urban sprawl, sterile concrete and reflecting glass. But whether a stretch of landscape or a remnant of antiquity, these 'sets' serve as that against which Lanaro's sculptural forms and figures stand out as themselves. Furthermore, with the passage of time, the metal takes on different colours: the water of rain and morning mist makes it turn brown and grey, with other changes in chromatic tone being

due to the bluish hue of the sky, the glaring hot light of midday or the reflected glow of the moon. It is well-known that metal changes colour as it comes into contact with the elements, forming its own thin skin. Famous phantasms are concealed there, just as they are within the manifestations of the natural world. In effect, it is Nature which is made responsible for the not only the preservation of the work of art but also for its transformation and metamorphosis; Nature has not only the ability to mould the work, but also to save it. When the rust is intentional, when it is allowed to imitate the play of tonalities and colour shades that time creates within iron, then it is time itself which works to mix the artist's pigments, modifying colours and nuances. As a creator, Lanaro is someone who knows how to give special meaning and sense to a natural raw material, iron. It is this which, like some new Vulcan tackling the universe as a whole, he transforms, using fire to generate a vortex of growth within the inanimate metal. It is not brushes and palette knives that are used here, but hammers, anvils, tongs, pliers and various other tools that can grip and twist the material. The artist does not spread fields of colour or trace out lines; he uses acetylene flame and blowtorch to perforate, to round off and to shape the final work. This is clear in three works identified as *Intervento* or *Finestra*, which were created in 1985-86 and can be interpreted as insertions within a well-defined space. Here, the artist's intense physical and emotional involvement with his materials results in huge structures that are thrown open to the light, shifting and changing as their own shadows do so. Geometrical forms rise from the ground, taking on colour in the light and occupying the entire circumambient atmosphere. These are immense geometrical constructs that stand out within space and yet refuse to submit passively either to time or to our gaze. Aware of what has already been achieved, Lanaro seems to break through towards the monumental. However, it was not this choice of the monumental which decided Lanaro to follow a course from which he has never turned

back; instead, that decision arose from the artist's conviction that inner reflection and thought would ultimately generate a fundamental result⁸. The development of the artist's language is predicated upon a continual return, an interaction with - and then interweaving of - the various experiences generated by the wide range of Lanaro's interests. It is the concept of "monument-document" that is central here, with Lanaro's work taking on the rhythm of time itself, with physical materials embodying vertiginous ascent and giving voice to the very impossibility of intruding upon mystery.

Sculpture as Life

Lanaro, too, has experimented with new ways of organising space. Over time, the complexity of the relations between idea and end-product has been simplified through intense dialectical development. Hence, one can see his sculpture take on a more graphic connotation. Squares, triangles and other geometrical figures are transformed into solids, within constructions where the fundamental component is the graphic sign. Lanaro envisages the work of art as capable of containing space, and the design of such work thus "retraces" the very prototypes of figuration. The sculptor intervenes upon the elementary structures in order to create modulations; his aim is to allow the figure to generate the type of movement most suitable to it, to underline identity through a rigorous counterpoint of parallels. Ultimately, of course, it will be the site of the work that will define its natural (or fictitious) dominion, because - by immersing it entirely within that setting - Nature will itself model the work. Thus Lanaro's works are not signs; they do not refer to other things. Instead of stirring emotions or expressing something, they express themselves. The autonomy of these forms rests upon technical/artistic mastery exercised upon material; via a slow process of stratification, such forms emerge from the interaction of states of consciousness, from general ideas deep within the intelligence. In works such as *Dialogo* (1987), *Verso l'alto* (1988), *Presenze in tensione* (1988), *Incontro* (1988) and *Le Grazie*

(1990), one finds the full embodiment of external reality. This is the reality within which a work of art achieves its full potential to communicate, when, as an autonomous form, it stands as a "thingness" embedded within spatial and temporal life⁹. Far from being a confused or indistinct amalgam of sense impressions, such a work is rather "a metaphor of the Universe", which itself is the origin of a cognitive process wherein the formal relations in a work of art or between works of art constitute the perfection of order¹⁰.

One of the compositional forms favoured by Lanaro is the bow, with these gigantic figures standing out against a space that is intentionally conceived of as a backdrop. Extending slowly to occupy space, these huge forms have something ancient about them; they reflect the interest and attention that Lanaro dedicates to history and to that which bears witness to it. *Arco della vita* (1988) is a giant construction set outdoors within an area of workshops and factories in the town of Breganza near Vicenza. The base is "introduced" by the symbolically significant presence of flowing water and above it rise two monoliths, the symbolic representation of a triumphal arch raised by a conqueror. In another settings Lanaro would again use such large-scale structures with their own inherent functional properties. In Padua, he created the *Libro della Croce* (2005), which followed on from the *Rilievo* (1990), and in Thiene - at the church of San Sebastiano - he created the *Portale* (1990). In this latter work, the profound significance of the notion of a "door" is of fundamental importance. The door not only symbolises a point of entry, but also the secret space beyond it, the mysterious power to which it gives access. (Think of the *Sublime Porte*, which symbolised the power of the Turkish sultan.) The entrances to temples lead through to the recesses that house the *Sancta Sanctorum*; hence, a door is the symbol of a rite of passage from one state of life to the next. Representing a boundary, it marks a point through which one enters or exits, passing from one state of existence or consciousness to

another, from one atmosphere to another. The iconography of Lanaro's sculpture also reveals the frequent presence of columns and pilasters, weight-bearing structures that are destined to be interpreted as symbols. *Dialogo* (1987), *Verso l'alto* (1988) and *Presenze in tensione* (1988) are more than the embodiment of an upward tension. They are mystical structures that are of spiritual import; they seem to bear witness to Lanaro's striving towards some sort of human redemption. Humankind has passed between these columns. Standing as silent witnesses to history, the structures become "living" sculptures at the very moment in which they participate in life, in which they underline a sense of human fatigue and suffering. Roberto Lanaro's artistic language becomes more daring still at precisely the moment he focuses his attention upon work that in some way represents human life - as in *Disputa* (1991), *Dialogo* (1991) or *Sviluppo* (1997). However, his art is never playful in expression, not even when he is striving to capture the most domestic dimension of existence; indeed, it is precisely here that one finds even further compression of the 'action' which is the core of his more mature artistic language. Inspired by the exploration of spatial potential, this language achieves full expressive power when Lanaro aspires to bring together a multiplicity of experiences in a single synthesis. It is then that he achieves a simplification of form capable of expressing that which is more profound - more profoundly known - and, at the same time, capable of going beyond the natural world to suggest the symbolic and paradigmatic. The subject matter of the work of art thus becomes both the means and result of thought. In work produced over a short period of time, Lanaro manages to bring together the threads of his artistic experience, to document that which is/has happened and to encode it through his own understanding thereof. Form is never improvised; it strives to be the translation of a primordial structure generated within the artist's mind. And it is realised thanks to the huge internal energy which is released by shapes, structures and geometrical constructs.

When he engages with "life", Lanaro becomes even more of an "architect". Identifying himself with (and immersing himself in) a particular location, he designs and creates what are tantamount to structural details - details which become the complements to cities, symbols of a specific place, archetypal images of a specific history. Here again, the work in metal is the fruit of experience acquired during long periods spent within his studio - his forge - where by trial and error Lanaro identifies the temperatures needed to work bars and plates of metal to the required forms. And once again, the essence of art is revealed to be the ongoing dialogue between man and matter that is the very core of life itself. Embodying clear-sighted awareness of that which generates it, the work of art is the product of carefully-measured energy, expended in the deliberate actions of craft. Lanaro knows the thickness, fold and form the metal has to take on in order to give expression to his "architecture". He has no doubts or hesitations; he knows the appearance his works must assume and he has no uncertainties about what the final result will look like. As he works to achieve that final form, he takes into account the rust and patina that the passage of time will create upon his works; he never forgets that, day after day, the metal will be exposed to the action of wind, frost, rain and snow, which will modify the fall of sunlight upon each surface of metal¹¹. These sculptures, therefore, reveal not only technical mastery but also Lanaro's stance with regard to humanity and life itself. In them, we see his own artistic creativity interacting with what Baudelaire called *correspondances*. And this interweave of secret and subterranean realities is made possible for Lanaro by the lucidity he brings to bear each day in his engagement with the material of his art. Technique and feeling might be considered as the two parameters that enclose the entire span of his work. His entire oeuvre is not only an expression of the dynamic "becoming" within constructed form, but also an embodiment of feelings and affections.

NOTES

1) "Works of concrete art should not be signed by their creators. These paintings, these sculptures - these objects - should remain anonymous, within the great studio of Nature, just like clouds, mountains, seas, animals and men [...] Artists should work in a community, like the artists of the Middle Ages". J. Arp, *Art Concret*, in *Jours effeuillées. Poemes essays, souvenirs 1920-1965*, with a preface by M. Jean, Paris 1966, p. 183.

2) G.W. Bertram, *Arte*, Torino 2008, p. 176: Martin Heidegger - who is credited as a leading figure in the discussion of aesthetic appreciation - "describes the act of "placing-here-the earth" using the example of the Greek temple: insofar as it places before us a world, the temple does not make material disappear, but makes it emerge out into the open within the world of the work itself. Rock identifies itself with the task of supporting weight and reposing within itself, and thus becomes rock. Metals become bright and shiny, colours splendid, sounds vibrant, words talk. All of this is done, first of all, because the work withdraws into the mass of the stone and into the thinker of the stone, into the solidness and flexibility of word, into the hardness and brightness of metal, into the light and darkness of colour, into tonalities of sound and the force of words".

3) "To be able to imagine, consciousness only needs to be able to go beyond the real, to constitute it as a world, because the annulment of the real is always implied by its very construction as a world [...] An image is not the world negated, pure and simple; it is always the world negated from a specific point of view - that is, from that point of view which makes it possible to posit the absence and non-existence of that object which will be made present 'in image'". J.P. Sartre, *L'Imaginaire. La psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination*. Reference is to the Italian edition *L'immaginario. Psicologia fenomenologica dell'immaginario*, R. Kirchmayr (ed.), Torino 2007, p. 276.

4) T. Mann, *I Buddenbrock*. Reference is to the Italian edition, Torino 1967, p. 598.

5) *Burri e Fontana: materia e spazio*, B. Cora (ed.), Cinisello Balsamo 2009. See also *Benetton 1/Il ferro*, F. Battacchi (ed.), Venezia 1991.

6) "Sculpting marble is one thing, sculpting wood is another, working in malleable clay is yet another, and still another is sculpting with iron, which has nothing to do with using chisels and hammers to intervene upon a block of material. Space is the locus of the work of art. But it is not enough to say that the work simple takes up place there. In effect, the work of art treats space in accordance with its own needs; art defines and creates space as it is necessary to itself." H. Focillon, *Technique et sentiment*. Reference is to the

Italian edition, H. Focillon, *Technique et sentiment*, Bologna 1998, p. 243.

7) Thus in *Le città invisibili*, Italo Calvino describes a city that is known precisely through signs: "a footstep in the sand indicates the passage of a tiger; a marsh a vein of water; the hibiscus flower the end of winter. All the rest is silent and interchangeable; trees and stones are solely what they are [...] The eye does not see things but rather images of things that mean other things: the pliers indicate the house of the teeth-puller, the tankard the tavern, the halberd the citywatch, the weigh-beam the greengrocer's. Statues and shields bear lions and dolphins, towers and stars: a sign that something - who knows what - has as its sign a lion or a dolphin, a tower or a star. Other signals warn us about what is prohibited or allowed in a place [...] From the doorways of temples one can see statues of gods, each shown with its attributes: the cornucopia, the clepsydra, the Medusa - so that the faithful can recognise them and say the right prayers to them. If a building bears no sign or image, its very form and location within the order of the city are enough to indicate its function: palace, prison, mint, school [...]". Reference is to the Italian edition, Torino 2008.

8) D. Formaggio, *Studi di estetica*, Milano 1962, p. 281. One of the fundamental categories that apply in aesthetics is "fragility", underlining that "the beautiful is rare, is sought after". See also O. Becker, *Della caducità del bello e della natura avventurosa dell'artista*, Napoli 1988.

9) With regard to the reproduction of the model it would be interesting to compare what is said in J.J. Wunenburger, *Filosofia delle immagini*, Torino 1999.

10) D. Formaggio, *Fenomenologia della tecnica artistica*, cit., p. 67 and H. Focillon, *Vie des formes*, Paris 1934. See also M. Heidegger: reference is to the Italian edition, *L'origine dell'opera d'arte (1942/43)* in *Holzwege. Sentieri erranti nella selva*, V. Cicero (ed.), Milano 2002, pp. 91-136.

11) "The work of art itself plays the leading role in the becoming and constructing of its own "forms", which are "feelings" in so far as these forms are at the origin of personal spheres of affection. Such forms are not signs, they do not refer to other things: "they do not produce psychological emotions, they do not express anything; they express themselves". The autonomy of forms thus derives from the "possession" of material through the application of artistic technique, from their slow and stratified formation in a process that brings together individual awareness and general ideas in "blind agitation buried deep within the intelligence". H. Focillon, *Technique et sentiment*. Reference is to the Italian edition H. Focillon, *Technique et sentiment*, Bologna 1998, p. IV. See also D. Formaggio, *Fenomenologia della tecnica artistica*, Milano 1953, p. 67.