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Pietro Ruffo Art between Invention and Creation

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Art is a function of the life of the people in which meaning is given by the aspiration of a superior consciousness.

Oswald Spengler

In the sphere of art a battle is now occurring between life and death comparable to that in the world of politics and economics. The art of today is mainly governed by the logic of the market; therefore each artist needs to take into account this reductive condition that considers art merely as commodified object.

As a consequence of this situation, art more than ever should be a tool to be forcibly reclaimed by the artist from a unidimensional, spectacularised society that suffocates freedom and diversity. The relationship between art and reality has always been complex and contradictory; at one moment there can be conflict, at another closeness, but never cohabitation. In any case, among the internal dynamics of art is the exuberance of visionary intelligence.

Pietro Ruffo is unequivocally one of the most independent and autonomous personalities of a new generation of artists. His continuous linguistic innovation, devoid of mannerism and driven only by his interior poetic need, never ceases to surprise us. His attitude confirms the autonomy of the artistic event, because art is not a form of knowledge but rather the means to experience the world. His inclination is for art to be absorbed into the space of critical reflection and self-determination; it is not understood as a 'product' but as research, an open work in continuous development. At the same time his work exhibits an indifference towards form understood as an aesthetic language to be manipulated for the sake of 'modernist innovation'. Rather, his complex artistic strategy is carried out with rigour and a high level of conceptual control beyond mere expressive intent, aiming to realise a novel image of the world.

The artist employs a wide range of techniques, from drawing and painting to digital photography and video. In his case the concept of intermediology is appropriate in so far as the artist, each time, freely chooses his medium according to the creative

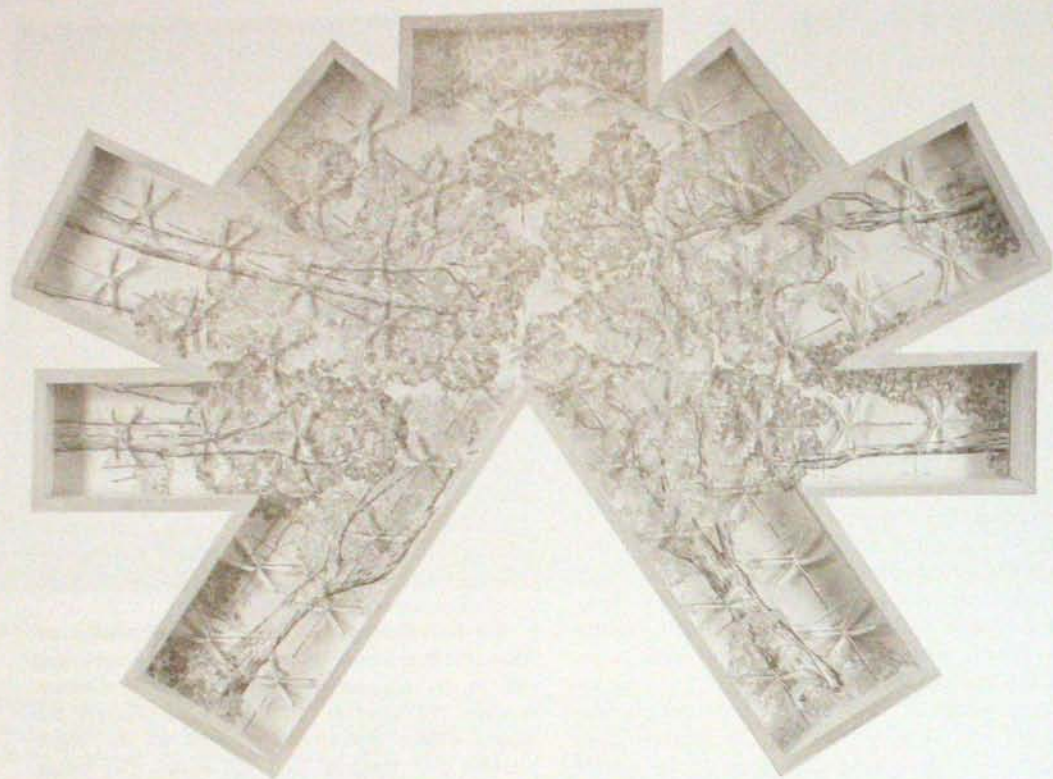
demands of the project. In his work there is always resistance to anything that would create an obstacle or pure identification between form and content, maintaining an ambivalent potentiality, a dimension that is both imaginative and critical. His work can be defined as 'work in progress' founded on drawings, to be understood not only as an expressive medium but more in Paul Valéry's sense: 'drawing as the most obsessive temptation of the intellect'. Everything begins with drawing, which indeed is the primary structure of each project. The preliminary ideas and the evolution of the work are genuinely internal drawings.

The lengthy and rigorous predisposition of the drawings inserts itself into the lived matter. In Ruffo's work it is the event that acquires presence. It is never the form that represents or becomes the event, rather the contrary: it is the event that takes form. Through this meticulous process the themes of his work are resolved: the concept of freedom, boundary and the depth of the artistic experience. Ruffo is committed to art as an ethical action with social destination.

For Ruffo, drawing is the artistic form that more than any other embodies itself as continual variation, and in its materialisation dissolves the distance between the concept and object, abolishing the subject-object distinction, as well as the realm between the imagined and the image. No longer expressing the history and intention of a subject, the work becomes thought that thinks itself through the material. Suspended between gesture and thought, drawing is the plastic language closest to the art of music and poetry. Indeed, to draw is not to capture appearance so much as a demand to animate thought; thus drawing is always beyond perception, the other side of perception.

The image exists in a space that is not on a two-dimensional sheet of paper. Rather it is a system of spatial relationship where the hierarchy of eye and law, inside and outside, before and after do not exist, allowing the image to open to many possibilities of meaning.

The external space of the drawing becomes a magnetic field that captures and organises the image. It opens itself to the possibility of otherness and seeks always to reveal the gesture of the artist to capture the moment that precedes the birth of the sign. The movement of drawing, the instant of art, is a mobilisation of the creative wheel, in so far as it is capable of generating a new perception of the world and a reinvention of both language and the subject. In this way the artist realises the need of art to carry a meaning as well as the authenticity of the experience.



10.10, 2010, graphite and paper cut-out, 195 x 225 cm, courtesy the artist

In the last two years, themes of colonialism and desires of liberty have led Ruffo to develop the project *The Rise of Liberalist Thought in the USA* through the figure of Isaiah Berlin, one of the twentieth-century's ablest exponents of liberalism. Berlin defined the concept of negative liberty as the absence of limitations on or interference with what an individual is capable of doing, whereas positive liberty is associated with mastery of oneself; in other words the capacity for self-determination and for being the master of one's own destiny. Examining the roots of these ideas, Ruffo drew two large portraits of Berlin on geographical maps of Russia, entirely cut out in the form of dragonflies. The insect symbolises the fleeting fragility of America's political attempt to export the concept of negative liberty into the disintegrating Soviet Union, its large wings allowing it to fly fast in multiple directions while at the same time its life is restricted to a very short span.

Berlin's subsequent concept of positive liberty is explored through six portraits of philosophers of the

French Revolution (Claude Adrien Helvétius, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Claude Henri de Rouvroy, comte de Saint-Simon and Joseph-Marie, comte de Maistre), identified by Berlin as enemies of freedom.

Berlin specifies in his book *Freedom and its Betrayal* how they formulated a model of positive freedom that would become dangerous through the rise of an authoritarian nationalistic state. As the artist comments:

... even though Berlin considered those two concepts of liberty (positive and negative) as legitimate and valid ideals for man, in actual fact, history teaches us that they are perfectly susceptible to political abuse.¹

The final part of the project, *Atlas of the Various Freedoms*, examines in drawings and interviews with contemporary philosophers the different ways of interpreting and understanding the concept of freedom today. The artist is interested in investigating



Isaiah Berlin, 2009, watercolour and paper cut-out, 70 x 84 cm, courtesy the artist

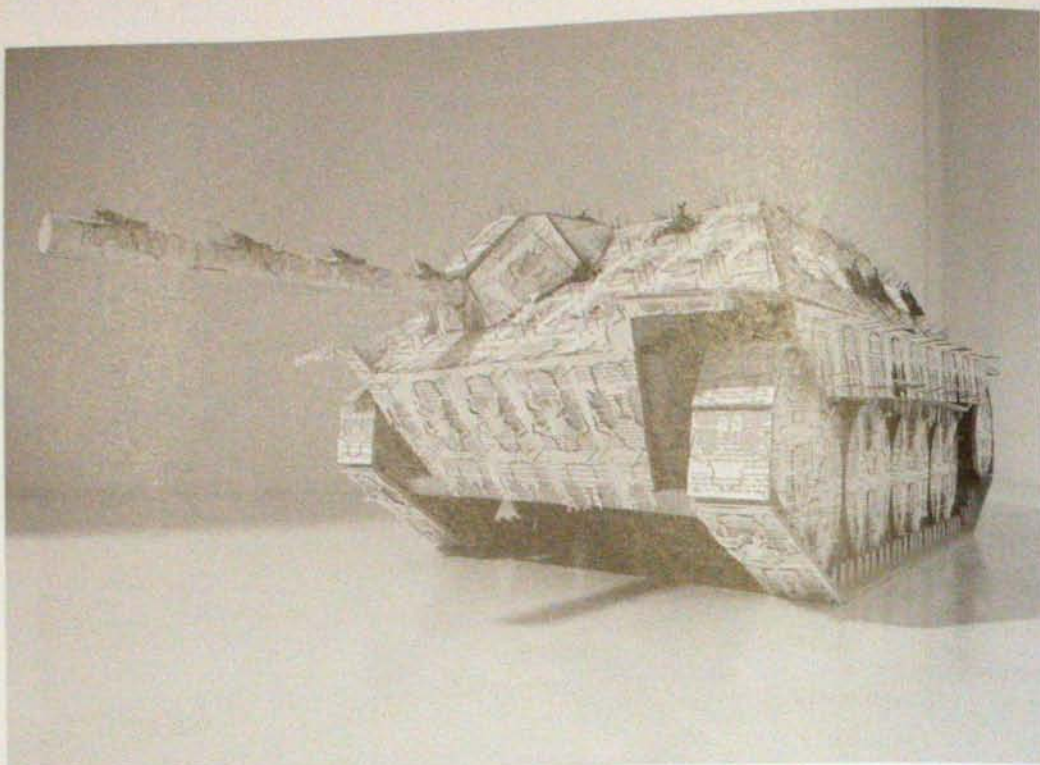
what the new model of liberty might be for contemporary society.

Another important body of work presents occasions for human participation in specific situations selected by the artist. For example in *Grasweg Project* (2005–2008), conducted in the psychiatric hospital in Colmar, the artist collaborated with the patients to produce three large watercolours for the entrance hall of the hospital together with a video shot by patients in response to Matthias Grünewald's famous crucifixion altarpiece. In *Beslan doppia mappatura* (*Beslan Double Mapping*, 2006) the artist constructed a space made of paper from the drawings of the classrooms destroyed in the assault on the Beslan school, each of which includes a solitary figure of one of the surviving children.

Ruffo's work always demands an open-ended reading; it is difficult to extrapolate a single represen-

tative example of his work, because it is an opus that expands in the flow of an undulating thought. It is a complex mechanism in which each work refers to the other like nesting Chinese boxes. At first glance we see beautiful drawings in the Renaissance tradition in which the power of the image offers harmony and contemplation to the spectator's gaze; but this soon gives way to a different realisation in which the apparent logical order of things is inverted, opening onto a transgressive and destabilising effect. The image is at the same time familiar and distant, embracing a suspension of temporality and an experience of thought realised through material process. It is through this aesthetic that other, more politically motivated concerns are conveyed which directly address global realities.

In the *Flag Series* (2006) and *Beetle Flag Series* (2008) the theme of the predator is identified with



Youth of the Hills, 2008, wood, paper cut-out, 65 x 60 x 185 cm, courtesy the artist

contemporary colonisation. Each work is composed of a layering of several image sources over a gesso ground. A digitalised map of a particular geographic area, taken from a historical atlas, is overdrawn with a simple plan of a national flag (USA, Israel, Hamas, China, UK, Lebanon, India), the series collectively alluding to asymmetric global relations of power. In fact, the flag itself is composed of hand-drawn skulls of predatory mammalian carnivores. The whole is mounted in a glazed wooden box recalling the presentation of biological specimens. The artist says that his interest in mapping is to understand the relationship between geophysical and biological phenomena and social dynamics. In the *Beetle Flag Series*, relief forms of a beetle are cut from the pages of books describing political and economic treaties between the USA and Latin American countries. Like the carnivorous mammal the leaf-eating beetle stands as a metaphor for the predator that sustains itself at the expense of a weaker organism.

The themes of temporal stratification, nature and its processes and the phenomenon of parasitism-colonialism, defence and aggressiveness, are

addressed in the work *Youth of the Hills* (2008). The title of this work refers to the name given to the new generation of Israeli settlers in the occupied territory of the West Bank. The artist created a large cardboard tank, a one-to-one scale model of a World War II German tank, covered with pages from a Hebrew prayer book cut to form an army of stag beetles. The insects are made in such a way that they can be reversed and unfolded; no part of the prayer book has been irreparably defaced. For the artist, it is fundamental to respect the rules of the culture to which the works refer. The titles are never illustrative or explanatory: on the contrary, they widen potential meanings to create a web of possible relations. His use of titles transforms the work and its context, influencing the entire structural organisation. Images and words produce an interactive union. As Roland Barthes reminds us, when image and text are juxtaposed they reinforce each other's radiant value and participate in a simultaneous perception that belongs to 'pure vision'. In its involvement of words and images, Ruffo's work demands a depth of engagement from the viewer, and goes against the grain of contemporary culture



New Italian Landscape, 2010, installation at MACRO Museum Roma, courtesy the artist

in which consumers have an ever weaker relationship to words, writing and reading.

Even in work that appears direct – such as *Israel Flag*, where German text is combined with the Israeli flag and a cemetery of bones, virtually begging an unequivocal interpretation – his aim is not to offer a provocative or personal point of view but to open a dialogue that insinuates doubt and insight. The images present a constellation of mobile symbols that open up to new relations and possibilities of thought. They suggest that the temporality of art may enhance life by condensing the multiplicity of the real in the unity of form in what Gaston Bachelard called a 'complex instant'; that is, an enlarged multiple space but *espacement* in Deleuzian terms, comparable to the psychic space of vertigo and the circularity of the labyrinth. In this way, the work realises an internalisation of the outside – not an emanation of the ego, but a making immanent of the other. In other words, it introduces elements of a new subjectivity that is neither concerned with what we already are nor with what we are no longer, but encapsulates our constant state of becoming-other.

Ruffo's recent architectural installation, *New Italian Landscape* (2009–2010), is a work that

encapsulates many of his thematic interests: temporal stratification of nature and culture; the human ancestral need to build in order to document our presence in a territory; to excavate in order to investigate the traces of our own past and the contrast between the territory's political and natural boundaries. The work builds up from different moments in time. It is designed as a conglomeration of architectural constructions that conceal subterranean presences beneath us resembling an outpost. The outposts here evoke the modest and minimalist constructions that arise furtively during the night in the hills between Israel and Jordan, built by young Israeli descendants of the first settlers – resolute promoters of a 'Jewish Risorgimento' asserting their own legitimate claim to and presence on this land. A lower construction, in wood and metal, which when exhibited in Ravenna incorporated one of the city's most famous pieces of architecture (the church of San Vitale) inside a container-outpost, was for the installation in Rome completed with a tower, like a sort of upturned container, in sheet metal and industrial paint. The complex stilt construction is raised about a metre off the ground, like an ancient building, leaving space on the gallery floor for an unexpected opening into a deep void, inviting us to look down. In the

artist's world of the imagination, the idea of the abyss, suddenly ripping through the ground, plays on the ancestral fear and fascination of an unknown world.

Ruffo's work is supported by a philosophy in which the world is not seen from a privileged anthropocentric perspective but from a wider vista in which humans are but one – albeit destructive – part of an organic whole. Relevant to this is Francis Picabia's statement that the earth is a spherical home which should be inhabited by Bedouins; where it is necessary to be nomadic, to cross ideas as if they were nations, countries or cities. In expanding upon Picabia, Gilles Deleuze notes that the mythical nomad eschews property and is not a slave to the desire for possessions; on the contrary, there is a subversive strength and silent power in refusing to define boundaries. Ruffo's work likewise offers us an expansive gaze on reality, in which the spectator is obliged to rethink his or her ethical relationship with the world as a shared but finite entity.

NOTE

1. Referring here to Berlin's 'Two Concepts of Liberty', a lecture delivered in 1958 at the University of Oxford, and published in *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1969, and reissued as *Liberty*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

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Streets of Crocodiles in the New Europe

Aga Skrodzka

A collaborative project between the photographer Kamil Turowski and Cultural Studies scholar Katarzyna Marciniak, *Streets of Crocodiles* is a collection of photographs and essays that document, and poignantly comment on, the turbulent social and cultural transformations that continue to take place

in postsocialist Poland. While Turowski's lens zooms in on the city of Łódź, the broad conceptual scope of Marciniak's criticism may well apply to many post-1989 Second World societies.

The authors' focus is on the controversial issue of dealing with otherness (ie the racial, ethnic and gendered other) by a nation that is overwhelmingly homogeneous; specifically, they set out to interrogate the collective attitudes of the postsocialist society, as those attitudes are embedded in both the material and rhetorical public spheres of the nation. Although looking predominantly at the immediate Polish context, *Streets of Crocodiles* extends its critical scope beyond Poland, onto the region of East Central Europe, the European Union, and the West in general. By making a direct reference to the work of the brilliant Jewish writer and illustrator Bruno Schulz (1892–1942), the photographer and the essayist establish a connection with the pre-existing tradition of creative commentary on the region's earlier encounters with globalising forces of international capitalism. (In his prose, Schulz responded to the changes that Austro-Hungarian Galicia underwent as a result of the oil boom of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries).¹ Through the gesture of evoking Schulz – the citizen of a volatile multilingual and multiethnic region, which Galicia and East Central Europe decidedly were at the turn of the twentieth century – Turowski and Marciniak subtly reflect on the loss of cultural diversity suffered by the region in the course of the twentieth century's political upheavals, but also remind their readers that today's situation in which coexistence must be negotiated with others due to changing economic circumstances is not a new challenge.

The stated motivation behind this publication is to confront, and therefore acknowledge, a silenced aspect of the otherwise well-theorised transition of East Central Europe from Soviet-style Socialism to post-Wall capitalism. A sense of loss, an experience of inadequacy, eruptions of prejudicial hatred as well as a certain measure of shame are all sentiments that Turowski and Marciniak bring to light as symptoms of a postsocialist society that is so keen on parting ways with its own troubled leftist legacy that it plunges into religious fundamentalism and fanatical nationalism. Careful not to generalise, Turowski and Marciniak report on the process of ideological retrenchment among certain groups within the society whose citizens continue to face economic hardship and cultural deficit as a result of the bankruptcy of the Communist dream assisted by decades of Soviet colonisation. While today the official governmental discourses push the postsocialist