

Into the Horizon. Sculpture and Time in Bekhbaatar Enkhtur, Luca Francesconi and Namsal Siedlecki

I.

In his latest book, Carlo Rovelli presents the reader with the space-time distortions that occur close to the horizon of a black hole. If we were to walk through it our lives and the hands of our clocks would proceed at the same pace without any change, whereas if someone could see us from afar, they would see time slowing down to a standstill. To understand it, the physicist suggests that we imagine an increasingly distant exchange of letters from places where the postal service works progressively slower. Although we send letters every day, they would be delivered at progressively longer intervals, giving the unaware receiver the feeling that the pace of our life is somehow slowing down and that we are in fact gradually forgetting about them. While this example is in itself simple and admittedly incomplete (walking into the horizon of a black hole is something more than just sending letters on a long journey), it lays out one of the central legacies of modern physics and the contribution of Einstein and Finkelstein: the question of time must be approached prospectively. There is no homogeneous duration, no place – a horizon – where time suddenly changes, as if it were an abstract, immaterial entity. There is instead a plurality of horizons which shape as many temporal perspectives connected to each other in a concert with many voices, in a canvas painted by many hands where each colour transition exists both as a function of itself and as an overall weaving.¹

This exhibition, more than metaphorically, is a web of times in relation to each other. The title does not reveal this – the simple sequence of surnames of the artists featured eludes thematic ambitions – but it can be seen in the very nature of the works and the somewhat asynchronous way in which they occupy the exhibition space. The researches of Bekhbaatar Enkhtur, Luca Francesconi and Namsal Siedlecki find common ground in the exploration of the sculptural medium from an almost classical point of view, looking at certain theoretical references still fundamental today², according to which the origin and outcome of the practice is the productive collision of spatial and temporal dimensions. While reflecting the specific nature of the medium in its most coherent modern and contemporary declination, the space-time of the sculpture presented here

¹ “The weaving of the world lies in these relationships between times. There is no universal time: reality is the network woven between many local times by the possibility of exchanging signals. Up close, the horizon is a normal place. From afar, it is the place where time stops”. [My translation] C. Rovelli, *Buchi bianchi. Dentro l’orizzonte* (Milan: Adelphi, 2023) 36-37.

² I am thinking, among several examples, of a classic such as *Passages in Modern Sculpture* by Rosalind Krauss, still essential for a historical and theoretical understanding of modern sculpture.

unfolds in this groove, accentuating specific traits. In other words, as much as the physical presence of the work in the exhibition context and the experience of the viewer inherently states the significant and perceptive problem of duration, the works of the three artists insist on codifying a temporality that is internal and exclusive to the work, a time *in* the sculpture and *of* the sculpture.

This happens in very different ways. Through what can be said to be an intrinsic vitality of the material which manifests itself in a slow morphological change, as suggested by Enkhtur's works; through an almost alchemic stimulation of the materials and the infusion of “life” itself into the sculpture, as is the case with Siedlecki; or according to a narrative approach in which the work, albeit independent in formal and visual terms, develops a discussion on time, represented for Francesconi by the cycles of nature and the rhythm of our interaction with it. These different perspectives generate the composite time horizon on which the exhibition is based. The works that open it and the one that closes it are to me indicative of this heterogeneity. The first ones represent a sort of clock, not only symbolic, which keeps the time of the exhibition: the beeswax installation created by Enkhtur in the space in front of the gallery will inevitably change and decay in the coming months and it is impossible for it to remain in its current state. Siedlecki's *Wayfarers (Viandanti)*, on the other hand, is a series of works made using a galvanic tank – which can itself be read as a sculpture – in a process that will be completed over the course of several weeks. Even the work that closes the exhibition seems to have changed over time, although it did not. It is a small bronze horse, which Francesconi has imagined as a skeletal intersection between an animal and a vegetable. A work that seems stripped of its original volume, seemingly the testimony of a past life, but instead becomes a living and critical presence on our time horizon, on the present we live in and on our way of living on the earth.

II.

Luca Francesconi entrusts a narrative role to his sculptures, by means of which he draws a precise semantic field. The three works on display – a significant example of the artist's recent production – could be described as notes on a reflection carried out over the years on the cycles characterising and regulating human and non-human life on the planet. We should start with the pair of small bronze sculptures, *Vomiting Man* (2018) and *Putrefied Fish* (2018), which hint at a common narrative. Previously presented together in an exhibition with the evocative title *Eternal Digestion*, they represent a twofold look at metabolic processes, such as fermentation and decomposition, which effectively mark the time of life at a broad range: death is inevitably

followed by decay, which occurs through a fermentation process that in turn releases energy for a new life cycle. Fermentation is the characteristic of wine, as well as of our digestive system. The processes of decomposition, change of state and release of energy are an integral part of the so-called food chain. The two sculptures do not reveal anything other than what they literally show – the carcass of a rotting fish and a bizarre figure in the process of vomiting – encouraging us to look at two processes, in some ways opposed to each other.³

The third piece lies in the same semantic territory as the first two and shares their time horizon. *Horse. Agricultural Apocalypse* (2016) is a kind of visual comment on the alterations of the food chain driven by mass production, especially in the field of agriculture. As the title also suggests, it is a sculpture that, through its delicacy, elicits dystopian feelings. In fact, in contextualising his artworks, including this one, the artist often refers to agriculture as an ancestral practice that grants harmony between man and nature, as well as awareness of the rhythms shaping life⁴, dwelling on the now seemingly unstoppable industrialised drift that has led to the extensive spread of monocultures, the progressive loss of biodiversity and the disruption of the ecosystem balances. *Horse*, a vegetable skeletal mammal, offers metaphorical form to this distortion of natural times and clearly shows in the physiognomy of the sculpture's skull the features of a reptile. More precisely, it shows a reference to the biblical figure of the snake representing the deceptions of the society of consumption and mass production. In Francesconi's work, time is expressed as a narrative ecology of the sculptural practice, where the word ecology is to be intended in its most relevant and profound meaning⁵, without limiting itself to its reductive environmentalist connotation. In this sense, the work unfolds a temporal but also a spatial horizon that can be altered and resemantised. After all, the artist himself emphasises the narrative and aesthetic potential of his research also in accordance with the different relational configurations generated by the exhibition context⁶. This

³ The artist himself in the text accompanying the aforementioned exhibition states: "Vomiting is an act that falsifies the food chain, altering for a short time that disappearance into nothingness, and a new beginning, of which we ourselves are agents: like any other living being". L. Francesconi, *Eternal Digestion*, text of the exhibition curated by A. Iwataki and M. Vasseur Raluy, 67 Steps, Los Angeles, 2018.

⁴ Two exhibitions in particular should be mentioned in this respect: *Calendario delle semine* (Galleria Umberto Di Marino, Naples, 2009), *Snake, Rice, Food Outlet* (Jupiter Woods, London, 2016). During the exhibition in London, the sculpture *Horse* was shown for the first time.

⁵ In philosophical terms, as a field of study of interdependent relationships. See M. Iofrida, "Ecologia e filosofia", *dianoia*, no. 23, 2016.

⁶ On the relationship between artist research and curatorship: "Intervista con Josef Hannibal", *Flash Art*, 04.02.2017.

also applies to this exhibition as well as to the relationships, even unexpected, that may develop in the collision of the respective times of the sculpture.

Francesconi's horse is counterpointed by another animal, albeit an entirely different one. Where the thin, spindly structure of the former seems to shape the surrounding space occupying it immaterially, Enkhtur's wax wolf seems to compress it and acts as a visual catalyst. Lying on the space between two walls of the gallery, the animal holds a star in its teeth, a curious decoration with which it seems to play. It also appears to be indifferent to what is going on around it and to the other sculptures surrounding it, but we cannot be sure: the distinctive plasticity of Enkhtur's works leaves us apparently waiting for a change of pose, a sudden movement. The same applies to the other wolf on display in the exhibition. Placed outside the gallery, in a sort of limbo between the city and the exhibition area, it does not cause any fear, nor does it appear threatening, stretching out unconcerned about its surroundings. These works are representative of Enkhtur's practice: sculptures of animals, linked – in this case less than in others – to traditional Far Eastern iconographies, conceived and realised directly in the space they are to occupy.

These works, which mirror the ephemeral nature of the material they are made of – beeswax – only exist in relation to the exhibition, changing and progressively decaying, to be eventually destroyed. This is a specific and unavoidable element of Enkhtur's research as well as the primary gateway to the time horizon revealed by his practice. It is a time horizon entirely internal to the sculpture and it is structured in two directions. On the one hand, it addresses the age-old problem of the artwork's vitality – or *agency*, as we would call it today – by means of the plasticity of the pose, giving the figure an appearance poised between movement and stillness. But animation and vitality are obviously two very different things. The plastic effect of a sculpture can only hint at a vital force; on the other hand, the material it is composed of in its organicity cannot escape the macroscopic flow of time and it makes it immediately evident. Enkhtur's works are alive because, ironically, they will no longer be there very soon.

III.

While Enkhtur's sculptures range between the plastic manifestation of a form of life and its actual presence as substance, Siedlecki's sculptures are placed in a similar perspective by extending their sphere of influence. As I mentioned earlier, the two works opening the exhibition provide concrete evidence of its duration by changing and developing over time. In the case of Enkhtur's wolf, this is clear for natural causes, due to the organic nature of wax. Siedlecki's *Wayfarers*

(Viandanti, 2023), on the other hand, is a work with a specifically process-oriented conception which is developed almost as if it were an artist's studio without an artist, where a series of sculptures produce themselves in an indefinite time horizon. Metaphor aside, the transformative dynamic the work brings into play in the version proposed here is unidirectional. Two small copper sculptures, representing a French ex-voto dating back to 50 B.C., are set in the galvanic tank placed at the entrance of the space. One of them takes the role of “sacrificial anode” which will gradually give its body to the other, its polar opposite. The galvanisation process behind the exhibition will therefore result in the shaping of ten sculptures, nine disembodied *Wayfarers* whose mass has slowly been absorbed by the tenth, immersed in the pool. We can already notice an initial outcome of this series *in progress*: the material transferred has given the figure an almost coral-like porosity, simultaneously thinning and softening its forms. As you might expect, this process is only controllable to some extent. How much the sculptures influence the changes for each other is often unpredictable and depends on the structure and consistency of each original piece; however, it is certain that if the *Wayfarers* are immersed for too long, the anode will deteriorate completely.

Therefore, Siedlecki's ability to picture and explore the medium of sculpture and the temporal horizons it can open up passes through a kind of alchemic vocation too, which is expressed by questioning the matter itself and discovering new forms and dynamics. *Deposition* (*Deposizione*, 2020) – in an even more explicit way than in the galvanic process of *Wayfarers* – summarises what I mean by time within sculpture. In Saint-Nectaire (France), there is a spring of water with an extraordinary high percentage of calcite crystals: if properly channelled, it reaches a well where it is possible to put objects. Under this flow, Siedlecki left rough canvas for about six months. Essentially, the process is similar to how stalactites are formed, even if this last process takes millennia; *Deposition* speeds up this time tremendously, crystallised and fossilised in a singular sculptural time machine⁷. This extremely fast transition from liquid to solid state is a simulation, once again, of a vital process, and it finds correspondence in visual and formal terms with *Mycelium* (*Micelio*, 2023). However, this correspondence is limited to a certain aesthetic assonance. The work, displayed here for the first time, is made of a particular weave of mushroom spores (proliferated in a predefined form) which incorporate the art piece and then are suppressed by a source of heat, thus stabilising and concretising the sculptural object. The result is a tablet of a

⁷ “Canvases fossilise in the darkness of a cave, nature quickens itself [...]. Approaching and incorporating ever more distant futures into the matter of its present. The hypothesis of a distant future and the means that led us to see it. A time machine”. [My translation] N. Siedlecki, in P. P. Pancotto, *Namsal Siedlecki. L'Alchimista moderno*, in *MAXXI Bvlgari Prize. Alessandra Ferrini, Silvia Rosi, Namsal Siedlecki*, (Mantua: Corraini, 2022) 87-88.

consistency that is difficult to describe, of clear organicity, with some slight introflexions that even evoke optical suggestions. In the exact centre of the work, the artist laser-engraved a square measuring 6 centimetres per side, the canonical measure of altar stones in churches on which relics were traditionally placed. For the artist, *Mycelium* is a kind of relic of a completed life cycle, a sculpture that bears witness to it.

If exploring the time horizon of a sculpture can result in the inclusion of a form of life within it, this also applies to its creator. If I simply look at the perpendicular intersection of the thin but rough metal support elements and their joint, I would think of *Breath* (Soffio, 2023) as a rather different work from those usually made by Siedlecki. In order not to be fooled, I should simply focus on the strong contrast between the structure and the crystal head it supports, but there is more to it than that. The work is a sculpture that speaks of itself, of the artistic practice and of those involved in it, realised by blowing the material inside a bronze head bought by Siedlecki and transformed into an instrument to generate a color positive picture of the vacuum in it. As a single sculpture, the crystal face coexists with the blowpipe, the instrument that created it. The blowpipe, which was eventually sealed, is not empty, and consequently neither is the sculpture: a breath is trapped inside it. We cannot see it, but it is there, and it marks an indefinite time from within it.