

White Birds

By Martha Kirszenbaum

Under the fallen boulder of an avalanche a flower grows. Over the shanty town the moon rises. I offer dramatic examples so as to insist upon the bleakness of the context. Reflect upon more everyday examples. However, it is encountered, beauty is always an exception, always in despite of. This is why it moves us.'

— John Berger, 'The White Bird', 1985.

In his celebrated essay 'The White Bird', English novelist, poet and art critic John Berger employs the metaphoric example of traditional Eastern European wooden white birds in order to assess the relationship between art, nature and the world. Convinced that 'seeing comes before words', Berger, in his short and striking text, expands on the symbolic nature and figurative representation of the handmade wooden figures, emphasising respect for the material used in their construction, the coherency of the bird within the culture it is produced and the mysteries

of the hidden in the final form of the wooden statue. He provides us, the reader, with the unusual experience of the magical world of art and nature. Further on in the text, he ventures his opinion that art is irrelevant and undeserving unless, and until, it is used to portray and depict the social and political controversies of the society and to light the injustice done to the common man.

For his project presented at Jupiter Artland Foundation, Italian-born and Glasgow-based sculptor Marco Giordano has used 'The White Bird' as the starting point for his reflection and practice. Structurally composed of four movements—belief, thought, behaviour and result—the exhibition is rooted in a painting session during which amateur painters portrayed the faces of Robert and Nicky Wilson, the founders of Jupiter Artland, while the couple read John Berger's above-mentioned essay. The result of the session led to the production of about fifty paintings, colourfully depicting ears, noses, hair and profiles of the Wilsons. Following Berger's antinomian humanism, whose prose singularly compelled in its capacity to project presence and intimacy, Giordano's approach seems to similarly expose and connect the owners of the exhibition space to the amateur audience, breaking and inverting the conventional boundaries and the expected hierarchy structures between those who own and those who dispose. Here, the powerless appear to have retrieved the control of representation and aesthetic judgement—qualities that are usually dedicated to an artist. Marco Giordano elaborates upon a relationship of power and interdependency between three poles: the owner, the audience and the artist, and this triangular correlation revolves around a self-fulfilling prophecy, or prediction, that indirectly seems to cause

itself to become true, by the very terms of a positive feedback between belief and behaviour.

While the first movement of the project indeed leans on the notion of belief, the second part relates to the realisation of the project through the notion of thought. Inspired by the collected portraits produced by non-professional painters, Marco Giordano produced thirty sculptures representing ears, noses, mouths and hair; many of which are made of ephemeral or destructible materials found on the estate of Jupiter Artland, such as mud and seeds, sponge and salt, coral and rope. The raw bareness of the material seems to evoke the practices of artists from the *Arte Povera* movement, whose sculptures and installations would be primarily made of natural, leftover and inexpensive materials. Beyond the fragility of the substances in Giordano's body of work, what strikes the viewer is the anthropological quality of these objects, each of which is presented on a metal stand, recalling a museum of anthropology or an alley of totems. In 1962, French ethnologist and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss analysed the notion of 'totemism' in his eponymous essay of the same title. Arguing that 'totemism' is in fact an illusionary anthropological construction, Lévi-Strauss shifts from an approach focusing on the alleged universal features of totemic cults, toward the structural analysis of classification properties and dualist organisations, proposing a system of relations divided between nature/ culture and individuals/group. In a comparable approach, ontological classification appears at the core of Marco Giordano's project, as he seems to define and assemble them on the basis of which part of the face they suggest.

Arrangement and installation are the foundations of the third movement of the project, which the artist has entitled 'behaviour'. Taking advantage of the large outdoor space of Jupiter Artland's grounds, Giordano has disposed all his sculptures along a thirty-metre trail, creating an avenue for the visitors to walk through. Not only does the installation delimit a path of power to access the entrance of the historic grounds, as each sculpture could recall the figure of a guard, but Giordano has also arranged amongst his works two motion sensors that diffuse mist from each sculpture. The sprayed water aims at recreating a reproduction of power, using water as a parabola of wealth. The presence of unexpected moisture in the installation also refers to purification rites of cleansing, such as ablutions, frequently used in most religions to remove any type of uncleanness or bad energy. This time, however, the rite is unconsciously activated by the visitors as they walk into the alignment of sculptures, once again reversing a structure of power and the dichotomy between active and passive actions. While the visitors expect to be taken on a journey, they are in fact propelled to the centre of the installation, which cannot exist without their participation.

The final result—and fourth movement—of the project is the book you are holding in your hands. It is the outcome of a revolving circle of interdependences and collaborations between different agents whose situations and predispositions would not lead to an encounter. This last phase closes

a cycle composed of beliefs, thoughts and behaviours, that was started by anonymous painters, developed by the institution's owners, deepened by the artist himself and finally activated by the audience, the visitors and the readers, that is to say, by yourselves.

1. John Berger, 'The White Bird' in *The Sense of Sight* [italics] (New York: Vintage International, 1985), 7.2. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism* [italics] trans. Rodney Needham (Boston, Beacon Press, 1963)