SOL LEWITT: A SYSTEM OF PAINTING

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Sol LeWitt institutes a system of painting. His process springs from a clear-cut basic programme and a preliminary *idea* from which the execution of the works is derived like a corollary from the axiom in a mathematical proposition. At the outset, the *idea* envisages the subsequent performance of the operation, establishes before-hand the rules that will govern the mutual dependencies of the individual elements of the whole so as to avoid as far as possible the whims of choice and the options of taste: «The artist would select the basic form and rules that would govern the solution of the problem. After that the fewer decisions made in the course of completing the work, the better. This eliminates the arbitrary, the capricious and the subjective as much as possible»[1]. Even with colour, LeWitt makes use of the same method; in fact, he takes extra precautions since colour is the most strongly indeterminate component of painting and the most exposed to emotional and expressive temptations. Meanwhile he uses basic colours — yellow, black, red, blue and surface white, reducing their thickness and semantic ambiguity as much as possible. Later, he traps them in a web or rigorously pre-established lines: for example, vertical for the yellow, horizontal for the black, diagonal (from left to right and from bottom to top) for the red, and again diagonal (but in the opposite direction) for the blue. The next phase in the process consists of the simple overlapping of individual elements by means of a combining operation that permits an open, and virtually infinite, series of results. LeWitt is driven, therefore, by an anti-subjective and anti-expressive urge. Objectivity is, of course, a boundary idea, an absolute term of reference to which the process must adhere as closely as possible, acting as the genetic core of an operativeness verging on a theoretic, and conceptual, understanding of art and its creation. What LeWitt is really doing is stating a sort of theorem: given a surface, implying a series of line variations (regardless of whether they are limited or infinite), find the necessary operational regulations for obtaining a relation between the lines. The process is purely syntactic and the solution is to arrive at a mathematical *compound* or *structure* that can be defined in linguistic terms as «an autonomous entity of internal dipendencies» (Hjelmslev). The artistic process, therefore, is identified with the *transformational operations* carried out within the system, and the value of the work consists of the alterations made in the code, which the latter, however, foresees and understands as a field of possibility.

The creativity of language is not doubted, but is denied as absolute freedom in that it is conditioned by the structural base of the system. A strictly linguistic relationship is set up in LeWitt's work between basic rules and individual action, which is similar to the relation established by De Saussure between *langue* and *parole*, and later, by Chomsky, between *authority* and *execution*, and by Hjelmslev, between *system* and *process*: «The process comes into existence due to the fact that there is an underlying system that generates it and determines it in its possible development. A process is unimaginable — since it would, in an absolute and irrevocable sense, be inexplicable — without its own underlying system»[2]. The basic rule that governs the performance of LeWitt's work assumes the value of a *generative model* (in the truly Chomskian sense), namely, of a *grammar* that *generates* the virtually infinite series of phrases. The same combination game envisaged in the rules set by LeWitt, implies a practically infinite opening, but is at the same time rooted (generated) within (by) a system, just as in the case of Chomsky the infinite creativity of individual language (of the *talking subject*) is always a creativity governed by precise rules (*rule-governed creativity*)[3]. LeWitt's process is, therefore, not dissimilar to Chomsky's characteristically mental and deductive idiom, one similarity being the common use of a deductive method that is extrapolated not so much from the codes of natural languages as from the artificial linguistic systems of mathematics and of symbolic logic. For that matter, LeWitt often returns, in his writings, to the question of the autonomy of the artistic process, and to the formation of the formal structure through a rigorously deductive process starting from the axiom-idea. This is not deductible from other sources, but is instead intuitively stated with a wide margin of judgement and convention. From this moment onwards, however, everything is carried out according to very definite rules, with a consequentiality that requires no verification from without, exactly as occurs in logico-mathematical propositions, but also in games, where the initial convention generates rigid rules of behaviour like those of a ritual.

LeWitt's systematic approach now reveals an unsystematic slant, of an almost irrational kind: behind the *idea* the presence of an ambiguous and secret dimension can be glimpsed — a sort of *nebulous* pre-linguistics, from which the generating ideas of the logical processes emerge. *Painting as a system* is only established later on, but is bound to depend on that prior universe and to receive some kind of guarantee from it against the total non-expressive arbitrariness. LeWitt is lucidly aware of this irremovable starting condition and even seems to go so far as to justify, when he says that «irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically»[4], a comparison between the obsessively consequential processes of his art and the no less robust chain of reasonings of maniacal logic. The substantial impression one gets is that LeWitt's work contains, next to and despite its systematic rigour, an axiology of the illogical and the irrational. This is confirmed not only in the symmetrical pair of aphorisms («Rational judgements repeat rational judgements» — «Illogical judgements lead to new experience»), but in his work too, in which a slight, but appreciable rejection of theoretic grounds can be noticed, as the artist ultimately draws unrepeatable signs moved by a secret vibration, by subterranean moods that come from far-off, profound places an make use of the painter's *hand* as a go-between, a mere transition.

The reference to the poetics and work of Ad Reinhardt is inevitable. Before LeWitt, Reinhardt had already said that everything in the artistic process can be finished within a purely mental and conceptual dimension, without involving any manual-pictorial intervention; just as he had already rejected (with equal determination) any contribution made by texture, accidental effects, automatism and calligraphy. He was also convinced that metaphysics, mysticism and symbology have nothing to do with painting. But his work to some extent denied this, with its wealth of metaphorical senses and nourishment derived from far-eastern spirituality. He can therefore be linked with the experiences of the *great initiates* of modern art, with the mystic rationalism of Mondrian, Malevich or Rothko[5].

LeWitt clearly saw this aspect of Reinhardt. Questioned about his relations with the older artist, he recognised the ascendancy but separated their works, declaring — perhaps with an involuntary movement of identification — that Reinhardt began as a painter who was all intelligence and rationality, but ultimately seemed to believe in a sort of *absolute non-intelligence*[6]. Something of the kind occurs in LeWitt too, whose work, as we have seen, to some degree escapes at least from the more rigid premises of the theory. But some ambiguity is also to be noticed in the interpretation of his own particular and heterodox declension of *conceptual art*. On the one hand he may be posing the problem of a *system of painting*, seeking a confluence between *conceptual art* and structuralism, and on the other, the exercise of concentration within a pure mental dimension and the strong suspicion shown towards the physical components of art-making trespass into iniziatic territory, where conceptualization is related to the experience of absence and emptiness and to the doctrine of no-mind in oriental thought. For that matter, his *Sentences on Conceptual Art* open with this aphorism: «Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach».

[1] S. LeWitt, *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, catalogo della mostra personale al Gemeentemuseum dell'Aia, 25 luglio-30 agosto '70, p. 56.

[2] L. Hjelmslev, *I fondamenti della teoria del linguaggio*, Torino 1968, p. 43 (ed originale *Omkring sprogteoriens grundlaeggelse*, 1943).

[3] Per questi aspetti della teoria chomskiana cfr. *Le strutture della sintassi*, Bari 1970 (ed. originale *Syntactic Structures*, Hague-Paris 1957) e *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, M.I.T. 1965.

[4] S. LeWitt, *Sentences on Conceptual Art*, cat. cit., p. 60.

[5] Ad Reinhardt, *Twelve Rules for a New Academy*, 1957. Cfr. P. Colt, *Notes on Ad Reinhardt*, in « Art International », n. 8, oct. 1964, pp. 32-34, e L. R. Lippard, *New York Letter*, in « Art International », n. 4, may 1965, pp. 52-53.

[6] Cfr. *Intervista di Achille Bonito Oliva a Sol LeWitt, ottobre 1969*, nell'« Album 9-68. 2-71 » della Galleria « L'Attico », Roma 1971.