

# FAUSTO MELOTTI

GABRIELLA DRUDI



*I will cultivate within me scrupulously the Inimitable which is loneliness, these unique dreams never shall soil their raiment with phenomena...*

I come out of the basement studio with the lines of Cummings and other thoughts running through my head. I had seen again « The Cart of the Water-Diviners », « The Moon and The Wind », « The Revolution of the Poor ». A silvery sound. All Melotti's sculpture is an inimitable event which takes place at the heart of a labyrinth. This envoy of exact art possesses the unailing science of an insect. And yet it took him more than thirty years to dig the tunnels, build the passageways and walls that today shelter his aery glyphs from the assault of events. You cannot put your finger on these sculptures, which lure the eye with the mobility of their allusions, each more entrancing than the other, but making use of an esoteric, however familiar, jargon, like the lingo of astrologers or mathematicians; and this sort of anxious wonder, which rises from the impossibility of tracing the thread — of capturing the beast — forces you to go back and retrace your steps time and again.

When I say that Melotti's jargon is esoteric, it is not his stylistic idiom, necessarily intelligible, I am referring to, but that particular language of art,

inaccessible to all verbal codes, even when the art is verbal, through which the tone of a way of life seems to be conveyed, and all criticism of which, based exclusively on aesthetic associations, failing to enter the dark, is doomed to remain mere prattle.

Now the most unsettling and always operative element in this sculpture — which seems deliberately devised to topple our notions of the importance of consistency, so much so that many critics were to accuse him of a total lack of consistency — the most unsettling and operative element which baffles anyone who enters Melotti's studio for the first time is the great distance separating the sculpture from the viewer. These shining circles and radial planes, these pale forsaken « stage sets » seem as inaccessible as the moon still is. Anyone who expects to find himself at the center of the action, to become an actor in it, will be disappointed. No one is to blame for the abortive rendez-vous. For Melotti, art is irretrievably distant from life, dwells elsewhere.

Space, if it can be described as an entity, is an illusion: the non-differentiation and non-separability between the dimensions of its apparent inertness and the invisible dimension of time, are enough to disintegrate it. Melotti has used the word *silence* to denote the isolating area which surrounds certain sculptures of the past. This is how. Carlo Belli tells how around 1918 in Florence it was Melotti who initiated him in the discovery of the Renaissance. « ... He succeeded in making me understand Donatello's "San Giorgio" which had always struck me as an ordinary statue. "Look what silence moves around it". I was stunned ».

That distance is manifested by an absence of sound and immobilizes a point in space, resuscitating the concept of eternity, it is an established fact. This is probably what Melotti is looking for and, if you think about it, as a demand it makes sense. Eternity has been described as a quality of the mind at the moment it perceives itself as boundless. Little wonder then that a similar dream rises in the mind of the artist at the moment of creation.

The difficulty remains. In a world which has to shout every day to make itself heard, to choke back the fearful congestion of its images, Melotti uproots

sculpture and lifts it into silence and empty space. Now, this idea and the decision to wrench the work from an imaginary space and situate it in its real space reflects a rare and haughty approach to art.

In the entanglement of art and life, there is a threat, and a treacherous, exacting threat that risks depleting art. I wonder if it might not also deplete life. Melotti's sculpture, in its remoteness, in its ring of silence, seems untouched by the tempos of life, not even, it would appear, by the tempos of the artist's life. Today art is life ground into fine particles, drained of blood. These barriers protecting Melotti's fragile symbols seems as impenetrable as the airpockets sealed into Cornell's boxes.

Yet Cornell does not deny reality, he dodges it. It is to be found in the leftover fragments, the fetishes, the tokens of existence that Cornell lucidly maneuvers and sets out in his show-cases of the absolute. The glass prevents them from being used. It is, as Rosenberg says, the slot-machine principle. And Cornell says the same thing when he calls his self-portrait « Medici Slot Machine ». Except that here there is no mechanism to set into motion. Look and don't touch. The viewer is told of his powerlessness to attain everlasting life and art. Both are there, on the other side of the glass reflecting his jumbled image, on the other side of the mirror, used by others, alive, real, faraway.

So Cornell comes to terms with everyday life. Once these ordinary objects, pool balls, marbles, sand, snapshots, watch springs, have been segregated into the geometrical order of a box, they reveal inevitable affinities that change them into active, gleaming symbols. But they do not break with the past. The distance they create could be the distance of memory, their fixity simply the lack of a future. In Cornell's constellations time has only one dimension, like the time suspended in the cased-in piazzas of metaphysical painting.

Now, Melotti hates the way the world is made — and he could be right. Children, madmen feel the same thing. And mystics and poets as well. He hates the world, but refuses to waste time arguing about it. Life is an unfathomable misery, its history a provisional inventory of crimes. Yet mankind, are indeed proud of this life. It is hard to believe

in change, change is frightening. Anyone cherishing other hopes will inspire only distrust, or at the most, pity. With these poor in spirit, determined to lead their happy lives, there is no choice but to turn your back, leave home. Abandon everything, forget everything.

As it is known, all forms of « running away » represent a possible response to a desire to change life. This does not mean that among these runaways from the world there are not men, like Brancusi, who know where they are going. In abandoning everyday reality, Brancusi harked back to the earthly paradise of the Golden Age, where he found himself in the bucolic world of mythical shepherds. He took part in the secret rituals of Nature. That Nature which has no bearing upon Melotti, just as things have no bearing on him. Melotti's escape is tortuous, but progressive. He could not take a single step backwards, could not turn to Nature, could barely feel sympathy for her and study her reflection from afar. Melotti's paradise has nothing earthly about it, it is a pure invention of man's mind.

The 'dramatic rapture of artistic creation is in the nature of a little boy who, having to walk home alone on a dark road, sings to screw up his courage and unable to remember anything, makes up the tune'.

There, that's the biography of the artist. With this, Melotti has said everything. What can be added? Let's have a look at the tune.

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For the person who still manages to believe in aesthetic formulas, Melotti is a hardened abstractionist who in his work carries out three contradictory, or at least different, operations. Assuming this to be the case, we are back where we started; this sculpture does, in fact, make us feel uneasy. Try comparing, at random, a stage set of 1970, like *Landscape I*, with *The Dissension* from 1968 and *Aplomb* which also dates from 1968. How can you tell them apart? That is, how can you measure the amount of neoplastic severity, surrealist allusion and metaphysical wonder which goes to make up each of these sculptures? I believe the critical difficulty springs not from the multiplicity of principles the artist brings into play, but rather from the subtle manipulation he submits them to. A shrewd manipulation, which aims at overthrowing the principle in its historical role, whence to raise art to a privileged position, timeless, without age. Melotti gives himself away with dates, which in his work seem to follow a random, arbitrary order, as though shuffled idly together for an exhibition, or a visiting friend. « This dates from... » The great passion of anyone who is in contact with life, or with art (which is life invented), this hence prevailing passion is to draw up soothing classifi-

cations, categories and, if that is not enough, gradings, which cover really everything. We would like nothing more than to be able to divide Melotti's work into cycles, phases, well-defined directions. But it is impossible.

A long horizontal line rolling back on itself in a loose scroll is the theme of *Sculpture N. 11* dating from 1934. At that time Melotti belonged to the group of Italian abstractionists who by following a strict diet of purism sought to reconquer beauty in a world that had aged badly. No one would have dreamed of seeking a hidden message in the transparent image of a line coiling back on itself and repeating itself on a larger scale. But thirty-five years later the idea returns in a sculpture with an ambiguous double title: *Sculpture C (The Infinite)*. Or it reappears as a citation, an insert, in *The Window*, dated 1935-1971, and in *Counterpoint N. 3* from 1970. Or it takes the form of a flute in *The Lioness and Her Flute*.

Take one of the « stage sets » from 1961, *White Blaze*, for example. Trace an imaginary line connecting the two rectangular shapes up on the left with the platform supporting the two figures below, also to the left. This will give you a long vertical rectangle the shape of a French door. Smooth out the crumpled-up paper on the right-hand side of the 'set', cut it into regular rectangular strips, arrange these strips along a level horizon. Eliminate the figures and the abstract shapes, which are the reflection of each other. Eliminate the allusions, the details, the dying tissues of chance. And you will have *Sculpture 25* of 1935.

The moon breathing spirals in *Counterpoint N. 4* is the same moon caught in the tangle of spirals hammered by the wind in *The Moon and The Wind*.

Another 'stage set' from 1961, *Life in Pieces*. In it life is shown as small, barely roughed-out blocks of terra cotta arranged on three levels according to a straightforward system of diagonals and parallels. Possibly because of an obvious association with the title, these indefinite forms would seem to suggest bits and pieces of human limbs, human but unrecognizable. Actually, they are Melotti's symbols, veritable hieroglyphs, the same as ever, the one he himself lines up in *Repertoire*, and which are here enveloped in a sort of warm larval existence.

So that Melotti possesses a private system of figures that represent nothing, and for this reason are commonly called abstract, and that change according to the instinctive laws of their biological cycle till they turn into a theatrical scene or a mask, without ever losing their hidden identity.

It is significant that his first sculptures, in other words, the sculptures dating from 1934-35, those that were saved

when his studio burned down, immediately create a spectral effect because they are completely lacking in consistency. On the other hand, this impression is borne out by the dull whiteness of the plaster. Or by the lifeless luster of the metal. Melotti brings the concepts of flat surface and depth into play as though he were a painter. He does so in order to manipulate them both and endow them with the function of conjurers.

« ... he would study a pair of eye-glasses hanging around his neck in which the windows of the room with the tops of the facing trees were reflected, and each time this would fill him with wonder and great joy, nor would he tire of gazing on it with amazement, for he did not understand this absolutely immediate cause and effect of the reflection ».

According to Schopenhauer, illusion is opposed to reality by a trick of the mind. According to Melotti, illusion is reality stripped of its perishable organic remains. Not through optical effect, but as a concrete phenomenon, these sculptures are set within an enclosed space where the depth is the distance between the figure and its double and the surface a sequence of impossible situations. In other words, Melotti's « figures », tottering slightly on their slender buskins, set against the quiescent sky of an imaginary Fortuny dome, or placed in front of a plain terra cotta backdrop, represent the fulfillment of a « literal and complete » concept of the theater, where everything, dogmas as well as myths, applies and exists exclusively insofar as it is objectified on the stage.

For us, in sculpture space is everything, and no plastic expression can possibly exist outside it; sculpture is a way of filling space, or even better it is a way space has of declaring its own existence, since men never stop questioning it. Now, these three dimensional hieroglyphs are often set out in series, also known as variants, implicating in their illusion a different approach to time, as it is precisely the case in the theater.

It would be easy to trace this temporal approach back to Melotti's connections with the classical abstractionism of the Thirties. « When a point starts moving and becomes a line, it takes time », Klee has said. He has also said something which comes even closer to Melotti, to an idea which for Melotti is past dispute, the idea that music lies at the very core of art, of every form of art, that it is the place where all the flowing and ebbing tides of creation meet. « I feel more and more the urge to draw parallels between music and figurative art. But no analysis I make succeeds. To be sure, both are temporal arts, as it can be easily proved ». Klee said it, but it fails to explain Melotti. We live in an age where analogies and

the intermingling of the arts have become a habit, I would almost say one of those nervous tics that have gotten out of hand.

Melotti instead sees music as the First Principle, and for this reason adopts its laws.

But I believe that in taking over these « exact » forms, Melotti was mainly concerned with protecting the evolution of his cosmogony.

In a case like Melotti's, the man in becoming an artist shakes off the life that burdens him and creates a new one to his own taste.

What is surprising about all these geometrics, about the spheres cooped in cages or hung on wires, the syncopated variations on a theme, the sets of spiral stairs that cast Babel-like messages, the flying rags, the taut springs, the conjunctions of half-moons, the gleaming arcs that shoot up like a spout of water, the curtailed gestures of the terra cotta dolls, is the fact that out of the maze of lines, planes, sudden voids, through flattenings and modulations of the forms that probe every corner of space and undergo a change in that space-time, a new physical reality is established which abides in a perspective of freedom and absurd.

Because in Melotti's hands, those hands which are unhampered by stylistic considerations, which have fashioned a sculpture without cause, the abstract shape is, as it is for Barnett Newman, « a living thing, a vehicle for an abstract thought-complex, a carrier of awesome feelings... the abstract shape is therefore real ».

In life there are no geometrics. In nature there are no numbers. Numbers, geometrics arise with man's separation from nature and serve to loosen the deadly grip of life.

So the only purpose geometrics and numbers answer to is in the fight against everything organic, chaotic and 'doomed to putrefaction'; and when Melotti spins his 'unyielding' geometric webs, when he devises his systems of visual counterpoint, he does so only because he has a practical mind and knows perfectly well what he wants.

These mathematics of form provide the structural support of his 'figures', pervade their very essence. It must be remembered that for Melotti all this represents the guarantee that his universe, his host of 'figures', has nothing to do with life, is only art.

Nevertheless in art there is life; and I believe, and have already mentioned it, that once having cast off the burden of organic reality, having raised to the very acme of exact form, to the giddy heights, of what in form is permanent, hence elementary and eternal, these sculptures have succeeded in « staging » a magic life of the highest order. What I mean is that the link between life and

art is welded at white-hot temperature. It could be the white heat of pure logic. So Melotti succeeds in releasing the mysterious power of emotions. Then the passions of the heart find ready expression in 'strains of song, in dances and laughter'.

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Now I remember that the first time I saw a Melotti show, I experienced a kind of contentment. Like when a wish you don't admit to because it is so patently hopeless, suddenly comes true. It happened a few years ago. I had gone into the gallery by accident. It must have been during the last days of the show, there was no one in the gallery. Impossible to figure out who the sculptures were by, I looked at the name, it rang a bell, but meant nothing. I didn't know if he was young or old, how long he had been working like that, where he had lived. I felt he must be very young, not because I hadn't heard of him, but because he seemed such an exception, so free to do anything he liked. Then I decided it must be the work of an enfant prodige, like Mozart, for it to possess such assurance and simplicity, or even of a little girl dressed up as a minister, like Lewis Carroll.

The truth is that the sculptures immediately succeeded in their purpose of astounding and of proving elusive in their exclusion and in their mysterious gaiety.

Carroll, in the introduction to *Alice*, describes the 'golden afternoon' on July 4, 1862, when he took the three Liddell girls for a boat ride on the Thames and for them began to devise the story of his adventurous heroine. The same memory is meticulously recorded in his diary. Alice Liddell and a minister who took part in the outing later confirmed it. Yet this memory is false. From the files of the London Weather Bureau it turns out that on that day in Oxford it was cold and rainy. What could have led Carroll and his friends to distort the facts, and deliberately so, as it was so memorable an event? Actually, it was not a lie. The 'golden afternoon' and everything else were circumstances laid down by the rules of the game, hence the only true ones. The memory of it had to go beyond reality.

In Melotti's sculpture, the rejection of reality represents the escape hatch for the trapped ego. Awareness is reflected in the absurd and finds there its ideal outlet. So the absurd inactivates the antagonism of the world as it stands, allowing man back into the universe of childhood and games.

We know that childhood games represent a setting off to the conquest of « things » in an almost organic process of assimilation. Yet this does not explain the longing for games and childhood we carry with us all our lives. We are up to our necks in reality, numbed by

its vindictive onslaught. The games of childhood thus take on the meaning of a systematic rebellion against those forces which arbitrarily restrict the many paths of subjective experience.

Breton defines playing games as a « way, now lost, of reconciling acting and dreaming » and which can be restored and ennobled in the play on words. Possibly that is what Melotti attempted with his play on visual language.

But that is not all. As a form of self-expression and a gauge of one's own powers, games, like dreams, touch upon the practical and concrete workings of the creative process. We would almost be prepared to believe that the longing for childhood is nothing but regret for that coming into awareness which was so unaffected and so brutally interrupted.

Like Carroll, like Kafka, Melotti recovers the operative powers that govern self-expression in games and dreams, and presses them into the service of art. Or rather, makes them accomplices to his destiny as an artist. The realism of dreams, the animism of games lie beyond, on the other side of things. So in Melotti's sculpture awareness is attained by spilling over into a world of impropriety and absurdity, one which 'spins dizzily to the center of truth'.

The 'rain', the 'wind', the 'moon', are they not natural phenomena exorcised by the artist, now free?

Some people have found traces in these sculptures of a sort of constructivism-in-progress. Others, like Maurizio Fagiolo, discover there a prophetic kinship with those « model geometry figures » which in certain technical schools were considered objects of study and for Max Ernst and Man Ray works of art.

That Melotti lies at an unforeseen crossroad between constructivism and surrealism is undeniable. The structuralist interpretation proposed by Crispolti is perhaps the most self-evident, for even in the 'stage set' pieces the framework is visible. The same holds true with the objects fitted into these 'stage sets' or in the sculptures. The billiard-balls, the bits of mirror, the stained rags, do not hide their beginnings as geometrical shapes, despite the patina of archeological remains, or perhaps because of it, as though they refused to yield to the pathos of the material or of memory.

Even so you throw surrealism out of the door, it comes back in through the window.

Games have rules as 'strict and boundless as those of geometry. The mystery in itself cannot convince us that our dreams are not governed by definite laws; so that, indeed, fortune-tellers and Freud have tried to unriddle them. To go back to Lewis Carroll:

« audible music causes vibration in the air  
inaudible music is not worth paying for  
no music is worth paying for, unless it causes vibration in the air. »

Or:

« no bald creature needs a hairbrush  
no lizards have hair  
no lizard needs a hairbrush. »

It is through the iron rules of logic that the automatic mechanism is released in Carroll. I think something very similar happens in Melotti. All you have to do is look at them, these scaffoldings tossed into the air. They make use of their maniacal perfection to remove all doubts as to what is really taking place: namely, a gamble.

In the first place, Melotti reveals an iconoclastic spirit, which pulverizes the very concepts of volume, surface, empty and full spaces. If Tatlin saw a sculpture like *The Rain* he would feel like Rodin. These are not sculptures, they are drawings which have stepped off the sheet of paper. Melotti would say nothing is arbitrary: suffice it to know the 'bases of harmony and plastic counterpoint to be found in geometry'.

We might answer that Pollack's mechanical process was also governed by a strict rule. His inimitable gesture had to be controlled down to the slightest flicker, like an actor's in the Theater of Cruelty.

Another iconoclast, Jasper Johns, might be closer to Melotti in this: his confidence springs from the use of collective symbols — in his words, 'things the mind already knows — and not from a subjective proposition. Geometry is something the mind knows.

To set out from a mental truth it makes sense. Today there is a mania for explaining art in terms of life. It is the guilty conscience of modern man that has brought about this obsession. It is easy to see why Melotti's sculpture has been ignored for so many years. He is an electronic engineer as well as a skilled craftsman. Yet he believes in the 'mad supposition of art'.

He clings to a trapeze and soaring through space draws the figure of a man who is an artist.

There may be a world of art that corresponds to the world of life, but in that case it is not art that must change, but life.

We have to make up our minds to believe in art for what it is.

Gabriella Drudi

Translation by Robert W. Mann



### FABRO, NAGASAWA, TONELLO, TROTTA: POINTS IN COMMON

**Without indicating individual names, we have put the word « artists » before each answer since we are not interested in personalizing opinions which, if shared, belong to all of us and possibly to other artists as well.**

**Data:** *Do relationships among you play a decisive part in your cultural autonomy?*

**Artist:** A relationship, or exchange, has always existed among artists. It's like thinking that there are no relations among peasants who have similar problems. It is with the advent of the technological era, of the consumer system and cultural industry that relationships among artists are broken off, because interests unrelated to art emerge.

- Since there are problems, which moreover come before producing art, it is simple and natural to have relationships, to try to act coherently without denying oneself or one's origin.

**Why do all artists end up by accepting competition and isolation?**

- Probably because they eliminate the real reasons for being artists. They have professional, not art problems.

I think that for many of them it is a question of bringing their cultural models up-to-date, since they tend to assimilate everything, even what does not belong to them.

- They are part of a system where no present exists. Because they correspond culturally to what is being done today, where the idea of future and of constant change is dominant, this has novel quality for them.

Naturally, this value expires automatically, so then other things have to be invented, and so on. To lose the sense of reality is like looking for immutable values within mutability. Their main

fear is the forming these dynamics, because they would find themselves inside a vacuum, thus emphasizing their constant self-denial.

*In your opinion, what kind of culture can be achieved as an alternative to the dominant culture? From time to time we hear Mediterranean art mentioned...*

- Yes, a Mediterranean art has been hinted at. I've always wondered why, from a certain latitude upwards, the world has chosen so-called development and progress, while from a certain latitude downwards it has remained underdeveloped: Mediterranean area, Third World, etc. Anglo-Saxon civilization advanced in a particular direction and has produced a particular type of culture which cannot be recognized by those who have other roots and wish to be consistent with their own origins (that is, uncolonizable). They seem to me two different or even opposite things. They can move away from poetry and culture because they came from by now the destruction of culture. Where we are concerned it is natural instinct; it is part of our being.

*Nagasawa and Trotta, your cultural background differs from Fabro and Tonello's European background. What are the differences?*

(Nagasawa): Yes, there are a great many differences, but I don't feel them very strongly. What's important is to know them. I'm Japanese, but for me the knowledge of other cultures is important. In the past, cultures always came to Japan from outside, and they were studied. We accepted what interested us, without destroying anything, and in this way our culture evolved. Then in modern times, European culture arrived, and unlike what happened in the past, it created a certain confusion, since it mixed together both Latin and Anglo-Saxon culture. Latin culture had something in common with Japanese culture; it was normal to live the present. The Latins lived in an existential way; the present can be found at any point in the history of Latin culture. Anglo-Saxon culture sets out with the intention of creating the new, which is gone an instant later; then something else new follows: a repetitive culture, with a vision of the future without the present. Latins live in a more realistic way, for today alone. It's like being born in the morning and dying each evening. The most difficult situation for man is to destroy his own culture and to receive another, in which he doesn't find roots. This means to die. Such danger and fear must have always been felt by the Latins, which would explain their continuity and coherence with their culture without becoming strangers to it.

- (Trotta): I lived here as a child, then for more than 20 years in Argentina and I've been back in Italy for about 5 years