

Ettore Sottsass

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ETTORE SOTTASS AND THE MEMPHIS BLUES

When I went to visit Ettore Sottsass in his studio, to see the enlargements of the works that he was going to send to the N.Y. show, he, Sottsass seemed reasonably amused and kept singing softly to himself «oh mama, can this really be the end/to be stuck inside of Mobile/with the Memphis blues again». I learned later, after having spoken, discussed, asked questions, thought about the answers and hopefully understood something, that the quoting was not at random nor off the point, as the two last lines of the well known Bob Dylan song, that from time to time, while I was looking, he continued to recite... «and here I sit so patiently / waiting to find out what price / you have to pay to get out of / going through all these things twice ». At a point I got it that I had to take it seriously and so I did.

I had already seen small, provisional prints of the works about a month before. They had made me very curious and left me intrigued. Many things I couldn't frame, many are possibly still escaping me, but I thought it worthwhile thinking about it, and so I started reading many of his writings and many writings about him, I asked other questions and was told many stories. Another problem was how to take those works, because after all I am about art — I thought — and it seemed to me that I couldn't relate them to the specific context familiar to me. However, they were attracting me in a different way than one of his many drawings and of the drawings of the architects that I knew. They had a quality, a different transparency, they were suggesting simple, direct, essential emotions. They were not speaking of furniture, houses or cities, but of men and women, their necessities and their lives. The *project* had been quite simply sent to hell, good or bad — for whom and for what? — together with the usual tools — pencil, paper, $2+2=4$ — but on the basis of what system? — utopia — but where and according to what necessities? It is more than three years that Sottsass has been traveling country roads, mountains and deserts, and blowing his mind in the city over this work. The result, a series of about thirty black & white photographic images, of cm. 40x60. Beneath every image a question or a statement. They are not to be seen individually, but as serial units and in fact one of their attributes is the insistence, the statistic quality of the method with which they were planned. They seem animated forms to feed into a supersophisticated computer programmed also to creativity, it could be our own head. He has divided them in three groups which remain fluid in my opinion (it is possible on the index to make different types of classifications) and are consequently just index-methods of work, hypothesis formulated later.

The groups are: design for the destiny of man (generally statements), design for the rights of man (usually questions with double alternative images), and design for the necessities of the animals (other ironical statements with images that are more illustrative than metaphoric). All photos were shot by Sottsass himself. The content of the questions and of the statements refers to cosmic emotions and events that are often concerned with architecture only indirectly, some of them sociologically definable, others definitively final.

Already back in 1969 he was writing, «it seemed to me that if one wanted to reconquer something in a world organized in this way, one had to begin to reconquer the microscopic gestures, I mean the gestures, the elementary actions, the sense of one's own position... ».

In another text of 1972, just about when he started thinking of this work, he was asking « what could be the relationship between a formal environment and the events that take place in it », and still before that, in 1969 he noted that « the only real environment (is) the cosmos with its rhythms and seasons, precisely because it cannot be measured, forseen, controlled, understood ». Within this frame of mind it isn't hard to see the work coming. Let's see other whys.

Stuck inside of Mobile

The traditional methods used to develop a project are conditioning to the point that it becomes impossible to get out of them. Finding it hard to bury them in his studio, Sottsass left the studio taking along what he could, an instrument that was more neutral than drawing, for example a camera, that also suited his desire of a physical confrontation with the world outside (to walk, to sweat, to get up early in the morning, to take the rain, the sun, the cold, to wait for the light, etc.) and few very simple materials (threads, strings, ribbons, poles, a glass, a chair, a cup, a blanket) to hitch-hike with the desert. But most of all he was taking with him the anger of long discussions with friends and colleagues, on arguments that always ended up stuck in different images, but still within the frosted boundaries of a kaleidoscope, and the anger, also, of all those bits and pieces that kept remaining outside the kaleidoscope and with which he didn't know what to do.

The trip wasn't a short one, it lasted three years. He returned with an alphabet, or rather the study of the possible meanings of a language, a series of propositions to colleagues architects and designers, and indirectly to all. They are not works to hang on a wall, frame, dissect, suppose, desire, but stories to read privately on a table, the stages of a journey made backwards, to the limits of existence, at the dawning of cohabitation and social living. Kind of a memorandum to keep within easy reach.

His is not even a criticism to the traditional methods of making a project, rather an attempt to regain control of the situation or, as he would put it, to feel his feet flat on the surface of the planet.

Traditional architects come to utopias (the cities and houses that they build) through traditional means (drawing) that impose themselves as limits, that build upon themselves, within their own boundaries. Radical architects take off from the existing utopia (reality) and through very exact scientific and technical researches, land to a project whose value as such is however not clear since it lays more than anything else on its critical, corrosive action upon reality. Sottsass did even worse, he abruptly shortened distances and swept away all discussions, metaphorically suggesting the utopia and jumping the project. In fact he closed the discussion in the only possible way. The translation into images is direct, as in art, doesn't need projects, on the contrary it excludes them, and precisely because it is suggested more than realized, it is given through metaphors.

In 1970 he was writing, « the perfect and complete design of an utopia and the life in the utopia are the most difficult things to do and also the most poetic and it is very difficult to design and to do poetic things... it is difficult to reach transparency ».

The impasse with radical architecture is so bad that reality itself, the utopia, is used by the project, but a project that is more and more unstable, because it keeps being thought of as a project, while it is the final result of an utopia in the process of self-invention. And indeed what sense can have a project in itself? (even worse than art for art's sake), it can only have a critical value, but then it is not a project any more. It is a work. Radical architecture shares the same ambiguities of all conceptual art (and in the same years they were born) that labeled the idea as work and the work as documentation of the idea. While both, documentation and project, as final states, far from being a trait d'union, when they work, they work metaphorically like all art.

Memphis blues again

Sottsass understood it all so well that he cut and ran, turning the situation upside down to see if it was possible to put straight. He had to give up making architecture, objects, projects, to take to their extreme consequences the strings pulled by radical architecture. The price he had to pay to get out of «going through all these things twice», is a handful of cartridges shot out on all that, good or bad, maybe on shaky legs, but was still holding on. Each cartridge a poster built on the ruins, the posters a finished, clear cut, definitive work. A series of statements whose praise is that

they are not mere tautological spirals revolving upon themselves, but beginning and end, sharp, dry, of a story. That's maybe why they are also transparent. Certainly that's why they made me curious.

The Memphis blues are all there again, chairs, walls, doors, floors, corridors, beds, objects, and all the obsessions that being an architect involves, to repeat undaunted the oldest questions, the ever-known statements, here mixed and diluted with different memories, remote intuitions wearily digged out here and there, with the retina inside out and a reflex in the brains to photograph the nostalgias.

That things can be carried further Sottsass believes it for sure, even if he's sharp with his statements, hard with his questions, and leaves very little space to breathe. He believes it even if he throws his « very very beautiful architecture » on a stony hill, surrounded by a few branches of fake-like leaves, darker than the sky above. So what? Even if one of the many rooms where assassinations are being decided grows on another desert, made out of stones that look like malignant tumors, speckled with darkness like the pedestals that hold the columns of power, dressed of flowers without perfume and mournful, menacing drags. Memphis blues again or not, it can always change, as long as, it seems, we keep letting ourselves be seduced by this bastard planet, day after day, with a little more detachment, the sight very little sharper, and always in a manner that must be striking, involving, final.

Other blues

I said at the beginning that I didn't know how to take these works, because I didn't think I could refer them to a specific context familiar to me. It came to mind then that also the context where he was moving was not familiar to him. One of the many things peculiar to the epoch in which we are living is that we feel all somehow stuck in the context in which we are operating, and while we don't feel that we have to remove our interest from it, we're also aware that it can't be no good to be confined in the neon-lit corridors of a superbureaucratic structure, that the need is to cross-over and walk along the perfumed wild paths of the story of our species. That's why many cross-overs have little to do

with intellectual interdisciplinary interests, and are instead the outcome of a true necessity to touch the skin of people that travel through different territories.

This work of Sottsass one doesn't know where to put it because it doesn't want to be put anywhere, it isn't looking for a place, but for a state that is not there yet. We are all continuously searching for states that are not there yet, for spaces that are untouched or smoothed by time. To break out we often need to behave like crazy phantoms and swear that it is the light breeze of the ocean, not the dry flame of neon lights that blows on our shoulders.

When Sottsass writes that the only real environment is the cosmos because it is not intelligible, cannot be scheduled, classified and so forth, he knows very well that this involves a continuous movement, a non-stop-going, a perfect balance, exceptional elasticity and mobility, continuous flows of vital energy, chain-grids of diagrams, roads crossing that we thought interrupted before.

In that context he's entered with primitive, thin materials, easy to disguise and camouflage. Some he borrowed from the wood or the river, others he took with him that are such obvious, paradoxical ready-mades that needn't be disguised for they result in themselves cut-out, a negative print on the text. Nor are the camouflage and the disguising secretly done, just ambiguous and bipolar, as the cosmic events that they are trying to tune in with. All the structures are in sight, the poles held up by long-stretched strings, although not all the strings are there to hold the poles or to keep down the ready-mades. With their same presence they openly declare their status as outsiders and their will to amalgamate, which is also how they become welcome guests and do not remain pompous ornaments, without grace.

All the built structures are light and so deep down rooted that they can afford to flirt in the provisional, props found on location and put together for a game. They recall certain signs and writings drawn on sandy beaches and destined to be cancelled by water, but fallen into such an intensity of desire that each drop of water will remember forever to have washed them away. They are camping constructions, transformable walls, to fold and take away, mutable and transitory like seasons. The ribbons, the bows, the tiny strips of paper (perhaps

toilet paper) will blow with the first wind or will be slushed when the rain starts falling but have the freshness of a flower neck-lace that you want to lay at night, before sleeping, on the bed of your lover.

The lines of these structures don't try or care to follow the ones of the landscape, they don't seem to share formal preoccupations, they lean where they can, fall and stay on the ground and let the grass climb on the poles, the leaves grow on strings and threads, and the cloth move freely around. They seem, really they are, tricky traps. Set up for who?

A camera is possibly the most natural means of expression of this century and Sottsass uses it naturally, as a pencil to draw — you will pardon him his professional deformation — on a sheet, that is the landscape around him, the signs of his own alphabet.

The comparison with artists using the same medium comes natural — you will pardon me now my professional deformation. Sottsass doesn't record plastic surgery operations on the skin of the planet (land art type), nor cuts out slices of reality to compose in a different manner, nor does he use a background to tell a story before it. Rather he deduces a story from a background, which is left to live free, autonomous, to create the correlative of a continuous cultural revolution, because there's nothing that is possible to conclude and nothing that wants to be, on Sottsass's side, concluded. In fact it's hard to say whether the landscape is to serve ribbons and poles or if ribbons and poles are to serve the landscape as ornaments, votive gifts or such.

And in the centre is the cosmos, not man, or rather the centre is somewhere in the middle between the two, sort of intergalactic alliance spoken maybe at the door « through which, sometimes, "you" are meeting your love ». The question is — I suspected it from the very beginning — that deep down Sottsass loves life more than art, prefers the juice to the essence, and that the famous fruit, instead of painting it, hanging it, section it and study it under a microscope, instead of putting it under glass or plexiglass, with the risk of it going rotten — maybe — he prefers to swallow it in a gulp.

Barbara Radice

(translation in English by the author)

Luca Patella

VITTORIO FAGONE

Considered one of the most interesting and lively creative personalities of the past years, Luca Patella occupies a very special position in the panorama of advanced art research in Italy today. Although he is among the animators of certain Roman art circles where a number of paradigmatic developments have been achieved by the new Italian avant-garde (from Pascali to Kounellis), Pa-

tella has not frozen his own image as an artist and his own working horizon into any specific zone. On the contrary, he has always preferred to experiment along more « adventurous », continuous and free lines.

In fifteen years of closely woven activity his work presents a consistent and constantly advancing picture. Among several successions and patterns of re-

search three clear constants can be suggested:

- a) a vital expansion (or explosion) of the materials and articulations of artistic language, its connections and meanings;
- b) the highlighting of the relation between what the artist does and how the public receives it, as the identification of a field of creative behaviour;
- c) the regaining of the artist's role as an