**Text by Raffaella Resch**

La metamorfosi dell’acqua/The metamorphosis of water

“Nowhere would anyone grant that science and poetry can be compatible. They forgot that science had developed from poetry, and they failed to take into consideration that a complete change of times might reunite the two as friends, at a higher level and to mutual advantage” (1)

*Johann Wolfgang Goethe*

“Painting is mute poetry, and poetry is blind painting,

and both imitate nature to the best of their powers” (2)

*Leonardo da Vinci* (Lu. 21)

The exhibition dedicated to Galliani starts like his biography: the artist was born in Montecchio Emilia, on the bank of the Enza river, a tributary of the Po river. This environment has been recreated in a video made by Massimiliano Galliani in the winter of 2014, named “Fluire/To flow”, which is played at the entrance of the Aquarium, where Galliani tells the story of his childhood when he used to play on the banks of the river and be fascinated by the water and the reflection of the poplar woods on it. The confluence of the two rivers “creates an energy that is able to stir memories and the imagination”, the constant flow of water “creates the work of man, created the work of nature, creates everything”. In a sort of *flashforward*, like surfing on the waves of remembrance, we arrive now to this day, when on the occasion of the Expo Galliani decides to present his works - some historical, some never seen before and site specific - in Milan, in a venue different from a museum, dedicated to the study of the the water environments, and to place an installation in an uncovered part of the Naviglio.

Several events combined together to create “Il disegno nell’acqua/The drawing in water” in a timely concurrence: first of all the theme of the Expo, *to feed the planet, energy for life*, includes also water as one of the main nourishments for organic life. Secondly, Milan, a city located on an alluvial plain which established its foundation on the aquifer that allowed not only the development of agriculture and factories, but also a network of canals which linked it to the Pre-Alps and the Adriatic sea. Leonardo da Vinci took part in the creation of the efficient network of the Navigli: he studied the water flows of the canals and the sluice gates in order to compensate for the disparity in the ground levels. Last but not least, we have the backdrops of our scene, the building of the City Aquarium, built in 1906 for the Universal Exposition, and *Conca dell’Incoronata*, which is a national heritage and an uncovered part of the Naviglio where Leonardo's sluice gates have been recently restored. In this net of historical and current events we find Galliani, an artist who perhaps more than anyone else has pondered about water.

The project, that has been conceived for the 2015 Expo, aims at starting from these premises to create a connection between the old and the contemporary, between art and multiple disciplines: reflecting not only on Leonardo and the history of Milan, but also on the biological observation of natural phenomena, the aim is to tell a fascinating story of changing faces and landscapes. The choice of locating the exhibition in a building with a scientific purpose suggests a common point of observation on art and nature, because Galliani's work uncovers the structural connection between the art and scientific worlds, beside the dimension of man as artist and observer in connection with the whole.

The works selected for the Aquarium consist of a unprecedented collection of the most evocative works by Galliani: made with water, from drawings submerged in water in historical installations, of which we can find a rich documentation, to the works where water is an absolutely unique vehicle, used with experimental and almost alchemical creativity in drawings and paintings, on a board or on paper, and in etchings on copper. The final part of the exhibition is *Aquatica. La memoria dell’acqua/Aquatica. The memory of water*, a public work made for the Expo, located in via San Marco for the entire duration of the exhibition.

Since 1977, water has been one of the typical components of Galliani's work. It acts as a symbolic as well as a chemical agent, thanks to the interaction between the drawings submerged in ponds or springs, where nature acts as *natura naturans/nature naturing*, defining the final form of the work and, paradoxically, its final dissolution in the liquid. In the installation *Ophelia*, after the work of Millais, the girl is portrayed on a paper sheet submerged in a pond, where water subsequently dried out. In the end she appears covered with leaves and debris from the bottom of the pond: they erase the strokes of the pencil and proclaim the destiny of death of the Shakespearian heroine. The second experimentation of Galliani is in 1979, during a solo exhibition curated by Demetrio Paparoni at the Archeological Museum of Syracuse and the Aretusa spring. Such a spring of freshwater flows a few meters away from the salted sea, where papyrus plants thrive among ancient columns. “In the museum on some papyrus papers I drew by pen mythological subjects which were linked to water. Then on the bottom of the spring I laid a large drawing by sanguine in-between two transparent sheets of Plexiglas. After a few days the large sheet was already sprinkled with countless of other markings due to the flowing of water, to the carps and swans, who are daily inhabitants of the spring. The other drawings on papyrus, moved by the flowing freshwater, dissolved in it returning the subjects and the ink of the sheets to the original watery element, the form of the above mentioned Greek myths”. Later in 2008, Galliani came out with a new conceptualization of the element, through a work that consisted in repeatedly projecting his drawings on the surface of a tank full of water: “this way the time and images of my works were memorized by water, that in its continuous motion upward and downward from and to the earth would have kept forever the memory of my works like in a catalogue of the infinite. Coincidentally at the same time, in the newspapers all around the world a curious thing appeared, the theory by a French scientist of the existence of the memory of water. This idea produced many reactions in the scientific world that today still follow each other on the *web*”.

The leaching action of water is also used on boards and papers not so much for diluting colours but as an element of dissolution of the forms, forms that first are fully drawn by pencil, then made vague, enveloping the wooden or paper frames underneath. A very original procedure is used for the etchings on copper, where, in order to engrave the surface, the acid is put on a piece of cardboard soaked in water.

The idea of water is developed by Galliani according to different points of view. First of all the aesthetic-formal view, that perceives water as a transparent and reflecting fluid, and it is skillfully rendered by Galliani's technique recalling the use of pencil and charcoal typical of the drawings from the Renaissance. Then from a philosophical point of view: Galliani sees in water a substance that brings knowledge to all the living creatures, cyclically changing biologically and chemically, and so holding the codes for their creation as per a cosmogonical principle. From the poetical point of view: water moves on our planet, from the sky to the sea, and also from the mountains it comes down flowing on lands and in valleys; it rains on cities, monuments and people, and absorbs the memory of things. Finally, being fundamental to our ecosystem, water is the backdrop where the worries of the soul are drawn, in a relationship between nature and body that seems unresolved and problematic.

Occurring simultaneously to the exhibition, the work *Aquatica. La memoria dell’acqua/Aquatica. The memory of water* is placed out in the open via San Marco. The installation consists of two large drawings on poplar boards where the face of a woman with a unusual hairstyle is traced by pencil and with a blend of Himalayan salt grains and egg white: in the hair bun we can clearly discern the swirls of the water turbulences studied by Leonardo. Next to the two boards carrying the Siamese yellow ocher portrait of the woman, there are two slabs of poplar, one light blue like water and the other one red, in order to enclose the drawing in a sort of frame and at the same time link it to the elements of the environment. Thanks to rain and weathering, nature defines the final form of the work and, paradoxically, its dissolution. The visitor witnesses an event empowered with a great symbolic charge, where the formal perfection of Galliani's drawing will merge and dissolve in water, as a rejuvenating principle, a new configuration of art.

Nature is the countermelody to Galliani's reflection which draws from scientific knowledge in order to translate reality into symbols. The more reality is known by man, the bigger is the astonishment and uncertainty in regard to our role in the universe. The wonder Galliani feels towards nature's treasures, the feeling of incompleteness of the human being towards a world he doesn't belong to because he is its antagonist, but in which he tries to find a reflection of himself, all express the eagerness of the artist's vision in search of a balance attainable only through art.

In addition to Leonardo's studies, especially the sketches dedicated to the turbulences of water, that make a fundamental premise for Galliani, the artist's inspiration seems to also have a direct link to the Goethe's aesthetics and philosophy of nature, mainly in *The Metamorphosis of Plants*. Not only Galliani's works are made of water as a vehicle of them, but through it they become alive and are included in a life process of transformation and rejuvenation; they undergo a metamorphosis that makes them understandable according to both rational and aesthetic thoughts.

The work is like an independent organism made up of parts that dissolve in the ecosystem, in order to unite again through the cycle of water and so reproducing themselves in the same way as nature does. That nature that Goethe sees as a dynamic whole that preserves its unity to rejuvenate itself. Man is the self-consciousness of nature, since he can only know himself when he knows the world. The dynamic fusion between the subjective and the objective dimensions in Goethe is called *Bildung*, shaping, that is the strength of metamorphosis: an evolving formation in sync with the natural world. “What is already formed is at once reformed; and if we want to attain a living understanding of nature, we must become as flexible and mobile as nature herself” (3). “The phenomena of formation and metamorphosis of organic beings fascinated me; imagination and nature seemed here to compete on being the most daring in their outcomes” (4).

For this reason the drawings, placed in water and left at the mercy of its leaching potential, of the metamorphic act of possession of the environment towards the sheets, become a completely new object - originated from the artist's designing capability - which identifies with the design of nature. The philosophy of art by Goethe clarifies Galliani's approach to nature: in the perception of nature we feel limited due to our incapability in grasping the vastness and complexity of the universe as a whole, but according to Goethe “according to our way of thinking, we wouldn't call this limit a gift, because a lacking can't be considered a gift, but since man at best can reach only an imperfect understanding, we would consider it a generous act from nature the fact that she gives man such contentment even though limited” (5). There, the wonder of man takes shape, but it is still the passion for something inwardly felt that reintegrates that form into a metaphorical movement which displays it in a new structure, breaking its rigidity and repetition. Finally, the metaphorical deed brings to the inescapable absence of form: “The idea that metamorphosis is a gift from above, it is very solemn, but at the same time a most dangerous gift. It leads to formlessness, it destroys knowledge, dissolves it” (6).

What is left after this dissolving process has a huge meaning for Galliani: where art has infiltrated nature, something ideally superior was born, a testimony to the message from the transformed art work which has metaphorically become a natural element. What man can know about nature - that is his rational and scientific approach, Kant's synthetic a priori judgment - merges with the aesthetic judgment.

The installation dedicated to Ophelia , made in 1977, is a clear instance of what has been mentioned above: the work drawn by Galliani is submerged in water and his parts metamorphose with the surrounding ecosystem until the original form they started from is completely dissolved: this brings a new *Bildung/Shaping*, made up of many metamorphosed objects, enclosed within a transparent wrap. The memory, the study of transformation, as well as the meaning of the work are located here: in the series of outcomes of the metamorphosis.

*Aquatica. La memoria dell’acqua/Aquatica. The memory of water* - the installation at *Conca dell’Incoronata* - is the climax of this research because it has an additional element. With the dissolving of the parts of the work in the surrounding environment, the *Bildung/Shaping* becomes reality: through an immaterial element, “memory”, the remains of what the work was are infused, preserved in water vapour and rain. Poetry is here invoked, as well as the artist's and the receiver's poietic imagination: the latter feels how the exchange of physical elements (the board, the drawing, the salt, rain, evaporation) leads to an image of a higher level, to a work that permeated air and the surrounding environment and that, through the cycle of water, will fall back again on the city.

“It is the property of water that constitutes the vital humour of this arid earth; the cause which moves the water through its springs against the natural course of its gravity is like that which moves the humours in every species of animated bodies. It is that, which we contemplate with great wonder, that rises from the lowest depths of the sea to the utmost heights of the mountains, and returns to the low sea rushing out through the burst veins (of the earth) and with extreme swiftness it mounts again and returns by the same descent, thus rising from the inside to the outside, and going round from the lowest to the highest, from whence it rushes down in a natural course; thus by these two movements combined in a constant circulation it travels through the veins of the earth” (Ar. 236 r.).

Notes

1. J. W. Goethe, *La metamorfosi delle piante/The Metamorphosis of plants*, Guanda Editore, Milan 1983: 86
2. Leonardo da Vinci, *L’occhio nell’universo/The eye of the Universe*, curated by G. Fumagalli, Sansoni Editore, 1943, from which the quotes are taken from.
3. Goethe, ibid., 43
4. Ibid., 53
5. Ibid., 125
6. Ibid., 144