

Massimo Scolari's Laconic Landscapes and Oblique Architecture

Alberto Sdegno

“Landscapes uncontaminated by the usual aesthetic prejudices of human sight” [Moneo 1987, p. 4]: this is how José Rafael Moneo comments the works in the catalogue of the exhibition *Hypnos*, held in November 1986 at Harvard University and dedicated to the work of Massimo Scolari. The exhibition also included the painting *Gateway for a city on the sea (Porta per città di mare)*, realized a few years earlier –in 1979, exactly forty years ago– and described by Scolari in the same volume in the transformation from painted landscape to physical architecture, on the occasion of the 1st Venice Architecture Biennale [Scolari 1987, pp. 54-57]. If the work will be particularly significant in the author's work –considering the appreciations of authoritative critics– the Biennale itself will have a noticeable importance in the cultural debate, as the recent volume by Léa-Catherine Szazka testifies [Szazka 2016]. The event in

the lagoon city, in fact, will start a new attention on architecture on a supranational scale, also because singular spaces –like that of the Corderie of the Arsenale– will be used for the first time in exhibition environments. Precisely in this area with a longitudinal extension –created to produce the ropes of Venetian boats– twenty internationally renowned architects will be invited to design the urban fronts of a hypothetical *Strada Novissima* [1]; of these, Massimo Scolari is the only one who has decided not to practice the profession, having chosen to study the problems of architecture exclusively with the tools of representation. But the transmutation of the *Gateway*, we mentioned before, from painting to scenic installation, is not uncommon in his work. Often, in fact, in his activity as a painter, Scolari decides to go beyond the limits of the two dimensions of the imaginative, to propose a stereometric translation of

Articolo a invito a commento dell'immagine di Massimo Scolari, non sottoposto a revisione anonima, pubblicato con responsabilità della direzione.

the figurative apparatus. This is precisely what happened with this work, but also to other founding objects to which he has turned his attention: for example, the *Ark (Arca)*, which we often find depicted in his watercolors and which in 1986 landed materially –with a subtle and ingenious play of scale– at the 17th Triennale in Milan to distinguish *The Room of the Collector (La stanza del collezionista)* [Scolari 1986]; but also for the figure of the *Glider (Aliante)*, which floats in many of his painted skies, built in laminated wood for the 5th Architecture Biennale [Scolari 1991] and now permanently positioned on the roof of the Venetian place of the IUAV University of Venice; and again for the *Turris Babel*, which was realized, in dismantled form, for the 9th Venice Architecture Biennale [Scolari 2004].

It is precisely in the *Gateway*, however, that several of the *operating modes* recurrent his work can be found: this oil painting, in fact, shows a brick portal anchored to a natural landscape, placed on a narrow sea passage, which reveals an inner space where the façade of a small building set into a mountain slope can be distinguished. The waves are counterbalanced by a threatening sky, against which two wings, which frequently populate his works, stand out. In other words, we have in front of us a synthetic essential “laconic” architecture, to use a term often found in the titles of his works. In this case, the flat representation becomes a model, a bit like the outline drawn by a maiden of her lover’s shadow –described by Pliny the Elder to describe the origin of drawing [Plinio Secondo 1988, p. 473]– which was transformed into a silhouette of pressed clay thanks to the skillful hands of the potter Butades of Sicyon.

But this painting, apparently balanced, actually presents an iconographic conflict, generated by the use of two dissimilar methods of figuration. As Tafuri points out, in fact, “the use of two systems of representation –perspective for the landscape, axonometric for the architectonic figure– makes the view of the mountainous island in the background a problematic one. The disclosure of the dam alludes, in fact, to a perspective center embodied by the small house set at the foot of the mountain. But that disclosure is deceptive, for it does not belong to the landscape which is in itself already ‘too constructed’, but rather, to a projective space whose secret laws are known only to the immobile V in the sky” [Tafuri 1980, p. 14]. The trained eye expects to see the convergence of the architectural lines of the portal, which instead proceed in *paralleli modo*, towards that improper center of projection that governs all axonometric drawings.

Perspective landscape versus oblique architecture: an imperative that we find in many of his works. The further moment of disorientation is manifested precisely in the desire to bring to an end this double communicative register present in the painting. The architecture, in fact, presented in cavalier oblique projection, becomes solid axonometry in the installation at the Corderie, skillfully described in the construction drawings of the 1:1 scale model set up there. A physical, material and tangible axonometry that can be perceived through the perspective vision of the visitor’s eye, making the parallel lines, that remain separate in the pictorial figuration, converge in the center of projection itself, anchored on the horizon and rigorously identified thanks to the methods of descriptive geometry. In addition to the technical drawings supplied to the executors of the work in the Arsenale in Venice, and synthesized in a watercolor now in the archives of the Centre Pompidou in Paris, few sketches remain to document this transition from painting to architecture. We have proposed one of these –never previously published [2]– next to the famous oil painting. A detail of the sketch –in keeping with the logic of this journal– is presented on the cover, to underline the centrality of drawing and the necessary analysis to which the materials published are subjected, as though observed through a magnifying glass. This preparatory drawing shows human figures –rarely present in Scolari’s works– sizing the space that will welcome visitors. Measurements and numbers reduce the scene to a certain extent, and in the vertical space in the center, against the black background, a rectangle appears on which there is the little ‘V’ that Tafuri spoke of. As Scolari reveals, to those who have not had the opportunity to walk down this *Strada*, that rectangle recalls the original painting from which the installation was generated, where the ‘V’ is the mark of the wings in the painting: “In this work –comments the author– I wanted to construct the parallel distortions of axonometry, exactly as it is done with converging deformations in theatrical perspective. In order to eliminate any ‘projectual’ ambiguity, I placed the painting ‘Gateway for a city on the sea’ immediately inside the entrance, so that *upon entering the representation* one finds only another representation” [Scolari 1987, p. 54].

But it is no coincidence that axonometric drawing governs many of his figurative works. In his theoretical writings, Scolari frequently declared his interest in this method of representation: for example, in the text *Elementi per una storia dell’axonometria* [Scolari 1984] published

in the Issue No. 500 of *Casabella*, now re-proposed in the volume *Oblique Drawing. A history of anti-perspective* [Scolari 2012, pp. 1-24] which brings together many of his research studies on this subject, including *Soldierly perspective* [Scolari 2012, pp. 287-324] and *Drawing in 'paralleli modo'* [Scolari 2012, pp. 325-340].

Combining axonometry and perspective in the same figurative context can only redirect the observer away from a reassuring and usual vision to an enigmatic representation. Often those who observe one of his paintings or watercolors, in fact, are led to continuously move closer to, and then away from, the work in question: to understand both the precision of the mark and the message held in the communicative register, but also to understand the subtle –often skillfully hidden– visual distortion that the eye encounters. Near and far, then. With a behavior similar to that of the two well-known figures described by Walter Benjamin, that is, the surgeon and

the magician who, each in their own way, treat the patient differently: by touching the inside of his organs or by imposing their hands from a distance [Benjamin 1969, p. 13] [3].

And we cannot but agree with what Mario Gandelonas wrote about Scolari's *theoretical landscapes*, in which he noted "a sophisticated 'confusion' of rules: the natural rules are applied to the geometrical or architectural landscape; the architectural rules are applied to the natural or geometrical landscapes" [Gandelonas 1976, p. 61]. The observer, therefore, is led towards a sort of disorientation, whereby, perhaps, he is invited to lose rather than to find himself in the work. Thus the comment by the well-known German critic mentioned above, written in memory of his *Berlin childhood* could be fitting: "Not to find one's way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling" [Benjamin 2007, p. 103].

Notes

[1] The *Strada Novissima* was realized by Cinecittà S.p.A., with the collaboration of other companies [Cellini et al. 1980, p. 5]. On the 1st Venice Biennale of Architecture, see also: Szacka 2016.

[2] We thank Massimo Scolari for kindly providing the drawing.

[3] On *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*, see also: Sdegno 2018, and the bibliographical references cited.

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