



I REPRESENT THE ENCUMBRANCE OF THE OBJECT IN THE VANITY OF IDEOLOGY THE EXPIRED ONE

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IN 1968, LUCIANO FABRO BEGAN TO WORK ON A SCULPTURE WHICH HE FINISHED IN 1973 AND TITLED *I REPRESENT THE ENCUMBRANCE OF THE OBJECT IN THE VANITY OF IDEOLOGY*, BETTER KNOWN AS *LO SPIRATO* [THE EXPIRED ONE].²

Fabro selected a richly veined slab of marble to represent, at first glance, a life-size figure lying flat upon a mattress and covered with a bed sheet. Unexpectedly, however, the figure's head is not there. As the viewer's eyes gradually move upwards from the feet, the volume of the body flattens until one arrives at the sheet that lies directly on the pillow, where the imprint of the head is noted. Fabro described the work with these words:

"The subject of the *Expired One* is not a narrative theme but a proposition: what exists between the 'full' and the 'empty' space; not a pre-existing subject, neither real nor unreal, nor recounted. This approach was previously applied to objects or things and so now we must talk of propositions; the subject evolves around a proposition. I conceived a sculpture that would have a sheet modelled by a man's body, which, however, at a certain point, *sfila* [slides out] of it, resulting in *Lo Sfilato* [The One who slid out]. The subject doesn't necessarily correspond to the title.

The sense of the material that leads the gaze always returns. I make an ever continuous drapery, that doesn't start in any one place, rather it crosses the space avoiding any tendency towards closure"³.

Lo Spirato is quite different visually from the works

for which Fabro became famous during the first period of his career: rigorously-conceived objects with matter-of-fact titles such as *Buco* [Hole, 1963]; *Tondo e rettangolo* [Circle and Rectangle, 1964]; *Ruota* [Wheel, 1964]; *Squadra* [Set Square, 1965]; *Croce* [Cross, 1965] and *Tutto trasparente* [Completely Transparent, 1965]. These works form the background against which, in 1968, Fabro begins to work simultaneously on the *Italie* [Italies], the *Piedi* [Feet], and *Lo Spirato*.

Lo Spirato is a sculpture with which the artist had a particular relationship. He rarely exhibited it yet always kept it visible in his studio in Milan⁴. After more than 30 years, it was shown again to the public in two exhibitions: currently at the Christian Stein Gallery in Milan and, a year ago, at the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid⁵. Despite the work's unquestioned significance for the history of contemporary art and the artist, critics only mention *Lo Spirato* in brief discussions. The essay that follows, which is a work in progress, represents a first attempt to find a deeper way to approach this challenging sculpture.

Around 1968, many artists were producing works that related to the body in different ways. In particular,

these works utilized as a point of departure the body of the artist, which was then rendered “anonymous” through a host of artistic gestures. In 1966 Fabro himself made *In Cubo*, a work based on his own bodily measurements. He created an enclosed space into which the viewer must enter, thereby isolating him/herself visually from the outside world. Among Fabro’s Arte Povera colleagues, Marisa Merz wove *Scarpette* [Little Shoes, 1968], a work based on the measurements of her own feet. She then abandoned the shoes on a beach. Giuseppe Penone, in *La mia altezza, la lunghezza delle mie braccia, il mio respiro in un ruscello* [My height, the length of my arms, my breath in a brook, 1968], created a cement framework based on the measurements of his body and installed it in the bed of a stream to leave a trace of his presence. Alighiero Boetti, in *Io che prendo il sole a Torino il 24-2-1969* [Me Sunbathing in Turin on February 24, 1969], created a supine body out of cement balls that retained the marks of his fingerprints. He also added a vital and joyous element: a butterfly that has alighted on the figure’s shoulder.

These are not simple works. However, the way in which they were presented to the viewer suggests a seemingly casual attitude that was characteristic of Arte Povera in that period. In contrast, with *Lo Spirato* Fabro denied this casualness of tone, approach, and medium. In 1968, with the *Piedi* and *Lo Spirato*, he returned to reflect on the nature of sculpture in a decidedly innovative and contemporary way, even turning to sculpture’s most noble, enduring material: marble.

With the photographic work titled *Studi per lo Spirato* [*Studies for Lo Spirato*, 1971] and in his later texts, Fabro emphasized a painstaking process that reflects a long gestation period of rejects, trial and error, experimentation, and repeated failures. As opposed to the casual tone of Arte Povera, the artist described his process in detail, declaring its difficulties. The process took four years, because even though he gave instructions for the execution of the work to the artisan in Carrara, the result was repeatedly not satisfying with respect to what the artist had in mind. Fabro

wrote: “I gave him [the artisan] instructions, but he carried on with his stylistic features, which was precisely the thing that didn’t sit well with me”⁶. Finally, Fabro discovered the problem and found the right way to resolve it. He then recounted: “there is a tendency among artisan sculptors [in the passage from the plaster model to the marble] to enlarge the folds. So by giving them a much smaller plaster [in the thickness of the drapery] they had no trouble increasing the thickness. This natural growth led to the naturalness of the sculpture. In practical terms, I turned a mistake made by the craftsmen into something positive”⁷.

Fabro did not turn to the conventional pure white marble of statuary, but rather chose a warm-toned marble that mimicked human skin, replete with its veined imperfections. *Lo Spirato*, in fact, is sculpted in *Marmo Paonazzo*, which is a buttery colored, warm marble, characterized by irregular veins of many colors: black, dark red, yellow, with bluish veins that tend towards dark violet, intense blue and even orange. The sensuously warm, translucent look of this kind of marble approximates pale human skin. It readily shows us its veined imperfections and echoes the play between pulsing human veins and a suggestive evocation of the “skin” of sculpture.

Fabro further rejected an immediately comprehensible or recognizable subject from the past. Perhaps on account of *Lo Spirato*’s ambiguous title, due to the artist’s use of marble for it, and via iconographic comparisons with funerary works, critics have often associated this work with the idea of death. In Western sculpture the supine position is traditionally employed for sleeping or deceased figures, and this association to death has conditioned the perception of the work. However, Fabro asked the viewer to make an effort to approach the image in a more pondered way.

The supine position does not necessarily imply death. In yogic terminology, for example, *savasana* purposely places the body in this neutral position in order to quiet and relax it as well as to pacify the senses and the organs, thereby allowing one to empty one’s mind and become intensely aware of one’s breathing⁸. Fabro had already expressed the



concept of deep concentration in *In Cubo* of 1966. In this work, the viewer was invited to enter into a space modeled on the dimensions of his/her own body [the artist's idea was that everybody should have his/her own personal *In Cubo*] in which he/she can isolate him/herself in a space deprived of shadows. A lightweight white fabric gently screened out external light and sound. In this manner, the viewer achieved a heightened awareness of his/her perceptive possibilities in relation to the surroundings. The title *In Cubo* refers to the viewer's act of raising the lightweight structure in order to enter into the cube and be contained by it; additionally, it refers to an ironic pun, which was typical of Fabro, for when the title is written as one word, *incubo*, it corresponds to the Italian word for "nightmare".

Through its title, *Lo Spirato* evokes the idea of breathing. This brings to mind another work by Fabro called *Tamerlano* [Tamerlane, 1969]. About this work, he wrote, "It is not a face, nor is it a mask: it is the exterior of a cast of a face, the reference to what is behind it as if it were a bit transparent. The two straws that emerge [from the nostrils] were left in place in order to strengthen the link between the outside world and what is behind the sculpture, because they permit the model to breathe. If it must breathe that is because it is alive". As in *Tamerlano*, in *Lo Spirato* breathing becomes a crucial aspect of the work: the word *spirare* in Italian alludes to exhalation, emanation, and diffusion, to the idea of something that is liberated and moves continuously like the wind and breath. Fabro himself said that for him *Lo Spirato* "is the image of life, of the transformation of matter into spirit"¹⁰.

Fabro titled one of the pages in his book *Attaccapanni* [Clothes-hangers]: *Dal pieno al vuoto senza soluzione di continuità* [From fullness to emptiness without a solution of continuity]. On this page, he created a juxtaposition of photos [taken by photographer Giovanni Ricci] of the artist lying on a mattress, covered by a sheet, with a photomontage in which the upper part of the body has disappeared¹¹. These images, from the work *Studi per lo Spirato* [Studies for *Lo Spirato*, 1971], have frequently led critics to identify the body under the bedsheet of *Lo Spirato* with that of the artist,

something Fabro himself would reportedly not have wanted¹². From this page of *Attaccapanni* a third title of the work emerges – *Dal pieno al vuoto senza soluzione di continuità*, – which was later erroneously attributed to the sculpture¹³. Although not the correct title, it offers a useful definition for comprehending the sculpture.

Lo Spirato is the experience of the moment in which a body slips away [*sfilata*], or comes out from under the sheet and momentarily leaves the memory of its presence, encumbrance and weight impressed on the sheet. This experience joins the concept of fullness [the body] with the concept of emptiness [air-volume], in a way that makes matter appear nearly transparent. In contrast to classical sculpture, in which the drapery stands in for a body, *Lo Spirato* has the immediacy and rapidity of an event that is occurring: the body is already out from under the sheet. One might say that even if the figure is gone the sculpture continues to breathe.

Lo Spirato grasps the ungraspable moment of the passage from the state of fullness to the state of emptiness. It captures both situations in the same instant: two states that have been considered unable to co-exist. *Between fullness and emptiness without a solution of continuity*. The object retains the memory of something that happened and disappeared, an emptiness that follows fullness and leads the viewer to an instinctive yet impotent reference. It is a reflection on time and space by way of the feeling of memory. The work represents the moment in which the sheet, the point of contact between space and the body, is no longer presented in a static way. Rather, the sheet leads the viewer to perceive movement at the instant in which the body has been liberated, while still maintaining a trace of its volume and weight. The force of gravity allows the sheet to gracefully alight, voided of the body. These aspects make *Lo Spirato* dynamic and pregnant with meaning, connecting it to Fabro's earlier research.

The enigmatic title etched under *Lo Spirato* is "I represent the encumbrance of the object in the vanity of ideology." This title announces two contradictory and dialectical positions: *ingombro* [encumbrance, of an object] and *vanità*

[vanity, of ideology], which create Fabro's definition of his own oeuvre in relation to contemporary sculpture. The word *ingombro*, referring to self and/or object, takes us back to the most basic, literal, obdurate, material nature of sculpture. As *Lo Spirato* reminds us, sculpture is a heavy, present thing that occupies space and can create an obstacle or impediment to physical movement and flow.

Fabro includes the word *vanità* and describes it as the "vanity of ideology." The choice of *vanità* perhaps plays on two meanings of the word *vano* [vain]. As evident in *Lo Spirato*, *vanità* could refer to sculpture as the condition of being without a body, as Dante recalled in the *Inferno* ["la vanità che par persona"], something deprived of true consistency¹⁴. This could refer to a sense of being inefficient, useless, without effect, or of a strong position taken by the artist with respect to the "vain" choices and fashions of the art being produced at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s. This position would cost Fabro dearly: he was subsequently excluded from several important exhibitions of the period. Fabro's work situates itself in an intermediary space, as he himself said: "that which is between the full and the empty." The same can be said about the space that exists between the subject emphasized by the title of the work, which opens with the word "I", and the non-I that Fabro frequently spoke about. He repeatedly declared that he wanted to create a work that maintained freshness and indifference. The artist did not want the body beneath the sheet to be identified with his own body. Likewise, he did not want his hand to be present in the sculpting of the work: "I wanted the sculpture to have anonymous modeling"¹⁵.

Fabro's vanishing figure seems not to merely reflect the Christian mystery of "the transformation of matter into spirit." Rather, he expresses disappearance through a visualization of the process of a vanishing body. As artist Bernhard Rüdiger has noted, Fabro's relationship to his materials, processes, and art had a metaphysical aspect that further differentiated him from *Arte Povera*¹⁶.

The sheet that covers the body, roughly and almost carelessly tucked around the edges of the mattress, is the element that animates *Lo Spirato*. It was Leonardo da Vinci who first

showed an interest in drawing the lower half of draped figures, much like the way Fabro's sheets cling to the "legs" and "feet". In his writings, Leonardo emphasized the importance of the body beneath the surface and of the point at which the body interacts with the drapery. In Baroque and nineteenth-century sculpture, drapery's movement continued to depend upon the figure that lay beneath it. Fabro's approach to drapery is new: the evaporation of the body endows the drapery with its own meaning, signifying not only the presence of a body but also its absence, thereby emphasizing the importance and autonomy of the element that covers it.

This idea leads to a reflection on the veiled figures by Medardo Rosso, an artist whom Fabro greatly admired and strongly defended¹⁷. Rosso was the first to transfer to sculpture the revolutionary idea of veiling as an erasure of transparency. In *Impression de Boulevard. La Femme à la Voilette* [Impression of a Boulevard. The Woman with a Veil, 1892-1897], Rosso turned a sculpted veil into a metaphor of artistic opacity by effacing, but not completely, the features of the figure. He thereby registered a threshold not only between being seen and invisibility but also between the artist/viewer and his subject. Through this gesture, Rosso represented modern sculpture as something whose meaning constantly moved, shifted, and escaped. Another work that clarifies the affinities between Rosso and Fabro is Rosso's *Ecce puer* [Behold the Child, 1906]. The face of *Ecce puer* is only an imprint of a face; it can no longer be measured against that of the head of the child whose portrait it represents. This concern appears in another form in the polyhedral head by Giacometti titled *Le Cube* [1934]; philosopher Georges Didi-Hubermann describes *Le Cube* as an object that is constructed upon a "voided face [...] that makes of sculpture no longer a colossus with clay feet but a volume erected on a lack, the contour of an absence, a loss"¹⁸. In these works, matter and form draw attention to dematerialization: the figure is disappearing and what remains is the memory of its gravity. These are the first sculptures of modern times that attempt, through full presence, to speak about emptiness and absence.







Rosso was the first sculptor to have shown the tension, deeply shared by Fabro, between sculpture as a material process and a dematerialized illusion. Fabro carried this idea to a dramatic extreme in his disappearing yet enduring *Lo Spirato*. He accepted the challenge launched

by the early masters of modern sculpture to work in the space that is created in between the sculptural object and figural representation. This is the territory that allows Fabro's sculpture to signify the continuity of art beyond cultural shifts and artistic fashions.

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- ¹ Sharon Hecker is an art historian and curator. She has published numerous books and essays on three key figures in modern and contemporary Italian art: Medardo Rosso, Lucio Fontana, and Luciano Fabro. In addition to her critical studies, she has also translated Fabro's theoretical texts into English for his retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1994, as well as Fabro's lessons on drawings in exh. cat. *Luciano Fabro 100 disegni*, curated by Dieter Schwarz, Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Richter/Fey Verlag, Düsseldorf, January 26 - April 14, 2013; and in exh. cat. *Luciano Fabro. Disegno In-Opera*, GAMeC, Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Bergamo, Bergamo, and CIAC, Centro Italiano Arte Contemporanea di Foligno, Foligno, Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo [Mi] 2013. A selection of Hecker's work on Fabro is available at sharonhecker.com.
- ² The words *Lo Spirato* first appeared as "titles" printed by the artist on sale shares [date of issue: January 1, 1974] for the artwork.
- ³ Luciano Fabro, *Lecture parallele IV*, Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo [Mi] 1980, p. 21.
- ⁴ For the work's full exhibition history, see Catalogue Entries in this publication.
- ⁵ *Luciano Fabro*, exhibition curated by João Fernandes with Silvia Fabro, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Palacio de Velázquez del Parque del Retiro, Madrid, November 27, 2014 - April 12, 2015.
- ⁶ *Luciano Fabro*, exhibition curated by João Fernandes with Silvia Fabro, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Palacio de Velázquez del Parque del Retiro, Madrid, November 27, 2014 - April 12, 2015, p. 81.
- ⁷ *Luciano Fabro*, exhibition curated by João Fernandes with Silvia Fabro, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Palacio de Velázquez del Parque del Retiro, Madrid, November 27, 2014 - April 12, 2015, p. 82.
- ⁸ *Savasana*, or the "corpse pose", derives from the Sanskrit words *shava* meaning *corpse* and *asana* meaning posture.
- ⁹ Luciano Fabro, *Vademecum*, leaflet added to the catalogue *Luciano Fabro*, curated by Zdenek Felix, Folkwang, Essen and Boymans-van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam 1981; and in the catalogue *Fabro. Lavori 1963-1986*, Umberto Allemandi, Turin 1987, p. 181.
- ¹⁰ Jan Braet spreekt met Luciano Fabro, *Na de regen gaat een bloem open*, Openluchtmuseum Middelheim 1994, p. 89.
- ¹¹ Luciano Fabro, *Attaccapanni*, Einaudi, Turin 1978, p. 15.
- ¹² *Luciano Fabro*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, 2015, p. 81.
- ¹³ Jole de Sanna [*Luciano Fabro. Biografia. Eidografia*, Campanotto Editore, Pasian di Prato - Ud 1966, p. 80] erroneously affirms that "Dal pieno al vuoto senza soluzione di continuità" is the title etched on the bottom of the sculpture.
- ¹⁴ Dante wrote of the souls in *Inferno*, Canto IV, 6: "Noi passavam su per le ombre che adona la greve pioggia, e ponavam le piante sovra lor vanità che par persona". [We were passing over the shades whom the heavy rain subdues, and we were setting our feet upon their emptiness, which seems real bodies.] <http://danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> Accessed January 2, 2017. For English translation, see Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy, Inferno*, transl. Charles S. Singleton, Bollingen Series LXXX, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1980, p. 61.
- ¹⁵ *Luciano Fabro*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, 2015, p. 81.
- ¹⁶ Bernhard Rüdiger, interview with Sharon Hecker, unpublished, 2016.
- ¹⁷ Fabro encouraged the young critic Luciano Caramel to write his university thesis on Medardo Rosso in 1959. Over the years, Fabro had a particular interest in Rosso's experiments with photography. See Luciano Fabro, "Photograph of Medardo Rosso. Interview with Jole de Sanna," *Medardo Rosso*, Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea, Santiago de Compostela 1996, pp. 244-6. See also Sharon Hecker, "Isolated Fragments? Disentangling the Relationship Between Arte Povera and Medardo Rosso," in Sharon Hecker and Marin R. Sullivan, *Postwar Italian Art History: Untying the Knot*, Bloomsbury, New York [forthcoming].
- ¹⁸ "Face évidée... qui fait de la sculpture, non pas un colosse aux pieds d'argile, mas un volume érigé sur un manque, le contour d'un absence, une perte - la perte d'une face." Georges Didi-Huberman, *Le Cube et le visage: Autour d'une sculpture d'Alberto Giacometti*, Macula, Paris 1993, p. 12.

