no Fabro

, died 2007 in Milan

Luciano Fabro, *Giardino all'italiana*, 1994

"Nature has *fantasia*."
A casual visitor strolling across Luciano Fabro's Italianate "garden" in Basel's Picassoplatz initially notes a rhythmic series of vertical poles set at regular intervals. Every so often, one of these poles unexpectedly becomes a fruit tree sprouting from a verdant tuft. These trees seem to erupt violently from below the ground, breaking apart the large slabs of black granite that compose the otherwise orderly pavement.

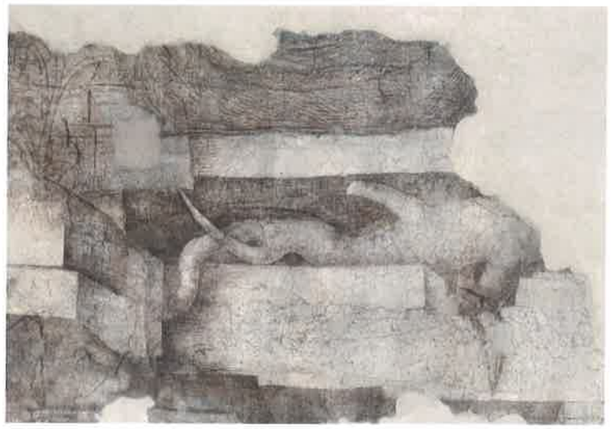
According to Fabro's description of the work, we discover that we are not just traversing a square in Basel, but rather an image of a giant lake that reflects the stars. We are walking between two spheres: the starry constellation of the Southern Hemisphere, and the sky above. "I wanted to make the earth transparent, as if it didn't exist anymore," the artist explained.[1]

Star-like electric lights set into the dark pavement, and pale granite slabs trace a path through the Milky Way, taking us back to an age when the only manner in which primitive man could orient himself in the universe at night was by the stars. Fabro's star-studded quest is as much physical as it is metaphysical: all three of Dante's canticles in *The Divine Comedy* end with the word "stars," the point of arrival of his spiritual journey. The earth has broken through the sky. Macrocosm and microcosm become interdependent and a dialogue between the two is sought.

The poles and trees in the plaza have a dual function. Fabro wanted to "show how nature is worked by man," and as a symbol of this he chose viticulture. This thought led him to realize that in the old areas of viticulture, for example in Ticino, archetypal elements of construction in the form of pergolas were used, elements that joined together symbolic meanings and functional elements. He thus created a system of rhythms symbolized by the poles of the vines inserted into architecture. The orthogonal grid that underlies these poles and trees leads us back to the Renaissance, the vanishing point of perspective, the architectural treatises of Alberti and Bramante, and further back to Vitruvius' accounts of the origin myths of architecture—for instance, the idea that people lived in huts formed from pergolas made of trees. Nature is tamed into architecture. Another form of synthesis is created between two opposites: tangible stone and the ageless principles of mathematics.

1 "Ich wollte die Erde transparent machen, wie wenn sie nicht mehr existieren würde," "Luciano Fabro über Plätze, Natur, Architektur und Mensch" [Interview with Sabine Lubow], in *Artmagazin. Die Kunstsammlung der Basler*, Basler Versicherungen, Basel 1999, p. 26–27, here p. 26.

2 "Denn die Natur hat Phantasie," in "Luciano Fabro über Plätze, Natur, Architektur und Mensch" [Interview with Sabine Lubow], in *Artmagazin*, p. 26–27, here p. 27.



Leonardo da Vinci, detail of monochrome preparatory drawing on wall, ca. 1498, Sala delle Asse, Castello Sforzesco, Milan

Luciano Fabro, *Basilea: Il cielo sotto la pioggia*, 1992

Although not apparent to the casual passerby, Fabro's ideas for this plaza connect back to the humanist tradition. In Raphael's *School of Athens* (1509–1511), Plato pointed up to the heavens and Aristotle down to the earth, searching for and seeking to reconcile a mean point between the two extremes. Raphael paints himself near geometers and mathematicians, and the entire fresco intimates the shared principles of harmony that govern art, music, geometry, and architecture.

The trees erupting from the pavement in Fabro's plaza are reminiscent of another Renaissance master, Leonardo da Vinci, and his drawings on the wall of the *Sala delle Asse* in the Castello Sforzesco in Milan. Da Vinci depicts enormous tree roots penetrating strata of giant rocks and stones that represent the castle walls. For Leonardo, as for Fabro, nature and culture are intertwined in two primordial antithetical forces. In both cases, the formidable tree roots erupt, erode, and break up the stones. Leonardo and Fabro give us a phenomenal sense of the instability of creation. "Nature has *fantasia*," wrote Fabro.[2]

A young couple crosses the plaza with a baby stroller and in a flicker, our mind transitions back from these lofty universal musings to the realities of the here and now: a plaza made for human pleasure, a moment bracketed out of our rushed daily lives, a place for temporary respite, casual thoughts, and relaxed conversation.

Sharon Hecker