

INSIGHT

THE WALL DRAWINGS OF SOL LEWITT AND DAVID TREMLETT,
ARCHITECTURE AND CONTEMPORARY ART IN COMPARISON



Coming from La Morra and beginning the descent into the Barolo vineyards in Brunate, the chapel does not go unnoticed. With the grafting of vibrant colours onto the homogeneity of a landscape characterized by brown earth, green vines and the brick tones of the architecture, the church literally jumps into view on account of its brilliant coloured “skin”. Roberta Ceretto, from the famous winery, said that when her father Bruno invited David Tremlett to be a part of the restoration of the long abandoned chapel, their relationship with the contemporary art world was almost nonexistent.

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Nevertheless, like any good businessman, he had the courage to give him carte blanche thus endorsing a project that became number zero of a series of contemporary art ventures with an international importance. And so begins the story of the chapel. In 1997 Tremlett was in the Langhe area to stage an exhibition at the Barolo castle and having accepted the job without hesitating, he offered his friend the American artist Sol Lewitt the chance to collaborate in the project, in particular the restoration of the exterior. Both artists were well-known and highly regarded members of the post-War art scene thanks to the “invention” of wall drawing, the technique of drawing on walls often performed by a third party on behalf of an artist’s original design.

Talk of “wall frescoes” is appropriate for this particular chapel which although built between 1913 and 1914 was never consecrated and was more normally used as a place of shelter and for gathering in by the farm workers in the area. Faithful to the repetitive and geometric rhythm of line and form, at La Morra Lewitt made use of the brick frameworks to create forms that were then painted with monochrome backgrounds in bright colours. Where the wall was larger, he drew straight and wavy lines that produced a free yet rhythmic progression. On the walls and ceiling inside however, Tremlett created a series of abstract paintings with less demarcated lines and softer tones. He also created a new circular marble floor in the apse and used Murano glass for the windows and rose windows. The result is an optimum balance between the traditional brick structure (a single rectangular nave, apse and central rose window) and a work of contemporary art. Here, the three-dimensional space of the building and the two-dimensionality of painting come together to create a project midway between art and architecture which is both rigorous and playful, intimate and yet open to dialogue with the surrounding landscape. Since the end of the work in 1999, the chapel has been restored several times because of the humidity of the soil. “This last piece of renovation work” says Roberta Ceretto “was quite substantial: it was decided to raise the chapel and install underlying masonry. All the plaster and the floor were removed in order to build an igloo or crawl space system to insulate the walls from the earth”. In order to keep faith with the original design, it was Tremlett himself in October 2015 who oversaw the work (Lewitt died in 2007) together with the same long-time assistants that he had collaborated with before (Peter Smith and Ferruccio Dotta). At this point, the city of La Morra awarded him honorary citizenship, “a gesture that came from the heart” according to the artist, and which confirms the status quo as a potential balance between tradition and innovation in cultural terms. In fact, the church is now statistically one of the three most visited destinations in the Langhe area. When asked about the relationship between architecture and the setting, Tremlett stresses that it is “obvious that looking at the scenery and then the chapel you find similarities” but that the idea at the heart of his work, “is not directly linked to the landscape that is in a particular place, it’s not linked directly to anything” (narrative, ed). On the other hand, the

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interest in choosing the abstraction is found precisely here, in the opportunity to provide common ground between the senses and intellect, a place that produces a seamless to and fro between sensory perception and thought.

While originating from an adherence to the existing situation, the abstraction allows access to another dimension from that governed by the perspective from which one rather too rapidly identifies the relationship with the external reality. Within the abstraction there are no directions for the eye to follow and no need to resort to symbols. "I'm not figurative" says the artist. "Often in my work I start from something that is close to mathematics, geometry or a similar system, because to some extent I've always been fascinated by the way things work."

The structure, as Tremlett intends, is often the key to his wall drawings: left exposed, they work as a time scan of the compositional space. It is a way of thinking "in series" that characterized artists with a minimalist attitude, whatever their creative field: "In the Seventies, I was very interested in music. I met and went to concerts by John Cage, Philip Glass and Steve Reich. There was something interesting in their "in series" thinking, and although it was not as accurate as the thumping music of Reich or the art of Cage, I like that kind of noise. I like the idea of language as a written form." It is normal in fact to perceive the wall drawings both as a visual system to be experienced simultaneously as well as a linear language (which we Westerners read from left to right). However, for Tremlett a sign is a way to put a value on space, a way to "reawaken" the sense of it. "In the last twenty years or so, I have quite often worked with architects. It frequently happens that they come to me and ask me to help them "make a space interesting". The task of transforming those simple into places on which to hang a work of art falls to me."

This transmutation, as defined by the father of conceptual thinking Marcel Duchamp, is the essence of art - that series of alchemical ingredients that causes the material to enter into dialogue with abstraction and that causes space to become tangible, immersive and timeless.

"I enjoy this kind of balance which is needed in order to collaborate with architects. They build a certain structure, and I'll destroy it ... Visually I mean, because the structure continues to exist, but I can change it. And none of this has ever anything to do with my ego. I put a list of ideas on the surfaces of the walls in a disciplined way, what I think has quality; I never want to be "personal", I do not like to express anything of my personality, which is my problem and which I keep strictly private." It is in this sense that abstraction confers freedom. Not so much because signs allow infinite interpretations - images generate endless stories - but rather because they are the closest approximation to infinity on earth. A dimension that is not conditioned by contingent space and time, yet

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which is useful for us to immerse ourselves in the vitality of the senses, of the here and now. "The meaning of what I do is my experience as a human being and as an artist who creates, designs, plans designs. That's all that has happened to me. Despite that, it has never been about my personal life and has nothing to do with illustrating something. Basically it's all here."



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