Crisis and crasis in Alexis Harding's processual painting

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The indirect origin of the formation of abstract art in the 20th century may be sought in the Platonic condemnation of art. In *The Republic*, Plato distinguishes between the demiurgical production of the artisan, a builder of functional copies of ideas, from the illusionistic production of the artist, creator of apparent objects without effective reality.

Compared to the artisan, who produces tools useful for the community, the artist reproduces things as *phainomena*, appearances. In other words, he creates inconsistent likenesses, with less value than the demiurgical copies, as they are the result of mimesis as an end in itself. Therefore, for Plato, art was a false copy of the absolute, an immutable reality of *ideas*, the universal essences and archetypes of things, opposed to the objects of the temporary sphere and relative to sensitive existence. As art is more like a false imitation of authentic beauty and, as such, morally harmful for young people, Plato suggested banning it from schools and replacing it with geometry, where beauty is expressed through the proportion and harmony of the parts (*Timaeus*).

This geometric conception of beauty resurfaced at the end of the Mediaeval period, in Renaissance Humanism, when there was a revival of Platonism. The regular Platonic bodies, i.e. the five convex polyhedra associated with the natural elements in *Timaeus* (the tetrahedron with fire, the cube with earth, the octahedron with air, the icosahedron with water and, later, in the *Phaedrus*, the dodecahedron with the shape of the cosmos) are resumed and adopted as ideal models in Leonardo da Vinci's writings, the *De perspectiva pingendi* by Piero della Francesca, the *De Divina Proportione* by Luca Pacioli and the *Four Books of Human Proportions* by Albrecht Dürer. Although the Renaissance Neoplatonic movement tried to rehabilitate the conception of beauty as the imitation of nature that Plato condemned, traces of that old *damnatio* resurfaced in early 20th century artistic literature. When, in *Die spätrömische Kunstindustrie nach den Funden in Österreich,* Alois Riegl said that crystalline beauty "…is the first eternal formal law of matter without life,"[1] the echo of Neoplatonic thought can still be heard, especially the ghost of those polyhedra which find a correspondence in the regular grids of some natural crystals.

Just a few years later, in *Abstraktion und Einfühlung: ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie* (1907), Wilhelm Worringer, the German art historian, argued that, "We can't believe that man inferred these laws, meaning the laws on abstraction, from inanimate matter of crystals; on the contrary, it's an intellectual need for us to suppose that these laws are implicit to human organisation even though every attempt to extend our knowledge on the subject can't exceed the level of logical conjectures […]"[2]. More precisely, if the figurative impulse, i.e. the empathy impulse "…is conditioned by a happy relationship of pantheistic trust between man and the elements of the external world, the impulse of abstraction is the consequence of the great internal disquiet felt by man in the face of it […]"[3] for Worringer. Faced with the disturbing change in elements of the external world, man feels the need to exalt his anxiety

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[1] A. Riegl, *Industria artistica tardoromana*, Florence, Sansoni, 1953, pp. 83-84.
[2] W. Worringer, *Astrazione e empatia*, Turin, Einaudi, 2008, p. 23.
[3] Ivi, p. 18.

seeking a tranquillity where *the spirit exhausted by the arbitrariness of the perceptions can rest.* "This need should firstly be satisfied by pure geometrical abstraction"[4].

In Alexis Harding's work, modernist abstract language is mediated through a processual operation.

According to him, the language is represented by the grid structure, i.e. the Cartesian orthogonal system of the image. The grid, akin to the crystalline structure Alois Riegl and Wilhelm Worringer talked of, is the most perfect expression of the abstractive impulse of 20th century art, with the painting tradition of the monochrome. The origins can be dated to the conclusive stage of Malevič's Suprematism, i.e. his emblematic *White on White* (1918), whose further developments crossed all art of the last century, from Yves Klein to Piero Manzoni, Ad Reinhardt to Agnes Martin, testifying to the definitive arrival at the 'zero degree' of the image.

Alexis Harding destabilizes these two paradigms - the grid and the monochrome, in order to permanently archive these historical premises, and above all to modify their grammar through the contribution of new ideas and references capable of involving the viewer. His language is based on a fascinating combination of forward thinking and chance, formalism and gesture where the concepts of *Cosmos* and *Chaos* collide, thus generating a fusion of ideal impulses and empirical experiences. This procedure, easily attributable to the practices of processual art and Anti-Form, promotes precariousness and movement through the inclusion of casual elements, triggered by a series of intentional and unpremeditated acts, in the creative pathway.

The *Chance Method* theorised by John Cage (initially based on the study of *I Ching* and not to be confused with the practices of improvisation), can be considered as a procedural model for Harding's painting where chance is the product of an intentional choice, i.e. a sequence of gestures and actions which direct and, together, limit the entropic possibilities of his art. To understand how this method works, some information, which can be found in much of the critical literature on the artist, has to be recapitulated.

Harding subjects the grid and the monochrome to a reciprocal stress test. The artist uses a single oil colour monochrome on a horizontal MDF or Aluminium support. Harding then puts down a geometric grid on the still wet paint using an enamel paint. The first effect of the superimposition of the two strata of paint is chemical. The incompatibility of the two paint substances, caused by the different viscosities of the materials, produces a sort of instability. The enamel doesn't bind to the ground and stays, so to speak, temporarily 'fluctuating' while the support stays horizontal. The surface of the enamel then becomes an uncertain, vacillating, easily disturbed field. One of the founding elements of this way of thinking and working with this method lies, to all effects, in the artist's programmatic will to disturb the pictorial domain of the square, altering the compactness of the paint film and forcing its perimeters.

The second action is to incline the support which produces the sliding of the paint grid and, therefore, the breaking of the Cartesian outline which is altered and deformed through the force of gravity. The collapse of the enamel paint, the result of a shift on the surface area of the support (and even beyond the edges of the painting support), definitively compromises the ideal order of the orthogonal structure. It's no accident that Wilhelm Worringer

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[4] W. Worringer, op. cit., p. 37.

considered space "the worst enemy of any abstraction attempt"[5] and therefore the first element that should be stifled in the representation. Although Worringer referred to the illusionistic space of painting, Alexis Harding's disturbance of introducing a sort of three-dimensionality into the abstract art field - if only by virtue of the thickening and the skin-like drying nature of the paint - is undoubtedly caused by the sliding and resulting pigment accumulation.

  The effects produced by the combination of chemical action and mechanical stress can be seen in works like *Get Out* (2000), *Black Oil/Pink Gloss* (2001), *Slump Fear* (2004), *Breeding Lilac* (2003), *Burrow* (2005) or *Drifter's Escape* (2006), where the traces of the sliding grid highlight the migratory path of the paint on the surface of the support. In truth, this path is not only the result of simple gravitational force but also of a series of knocks and strains caused by the artist which change the linear track.

Harding's method revolves around the tension generated by the bundling of antithetic artistic traditions, the static and idealist one of geometric abstraction, the lyrical and Vitalist one of abstract Expressionism through to the conceptual and, at times, mystical, ones of Anti-Form and Processual Art. Harding chooses to work in a dimension tangential to the disciplinary borders of each of the languages because adopting just one of these contexts would mean replicating the outcomes without having the chance to investigate the additional potential of the abstract grammars.

The state of crisis, a permanent condition of Western society, i.e. the so-called *liquid world* described by Zygmunt Bauman, in which man would have difficulty in adapting to the speed of social, economic and political changes, is a concept that no contemporary artist can overlook. This concept is obsessively repeated in its real meaning, more than its negative one, in Harding's abstract language. The term *crisis* comes from the Greek *krino*, which means 'separate', 'discern' and 'evaluate', all actions that cast a shadow over even a positive nuance and prefigure the opening of new opportunities and new operational and compositional possibilities after careful reflection. Causing problems for the traditional abstract art codes and the resulting dismissal of their Platonic, scientism-adhering or conceptual matrices is not an end in itself in Harding's art. His motive isn't simply critical but constructive. In a certain sense, *crisis* and *crasis* coincide in his painting. The artist builds an expressive form that reflects the complexity of contemporary abstract languages, dominated by semantic ambiguity (Tony Godfrey, *Painting Today*, Phaidon, London, 2009) and formal hybridisation (Bob Nickas, *Painting Abstraction*, Phaidon, London, 2009), on the rubble of Modernism and the fusion of practices and grammars that appear to have waned.

In particular, the intrinsic ambiguity of Harding's art arises also from the expansion of the painting field beyond its borders and its approach to the dimension of object, therefore to the real-life field. The concepts of transformation, change and instability that preside over the construction of his works, show how the entropic and self-destructive mechanisms of his work can achieve radical outcomes, especially in the series titled *Temporary Wet Painting* (*TWP*)*, created in his studio from 2005 or in galleries and unconventional spaces. Harding arrives at a form of expanded painting that, from certain points of view, recalls Katharina Grosse's *Environment Painting,* in this series of paintings, where the whole layer of enamel slides out of the perimeter of the panel, invading the floor space. The process is overwhelmingly invaded by the time dimension with the spatial dislocation of the paint matter which, pouring from the field of the representation bursts into that of reality. Time is a crucial factor in the making of the studio paintings, however in these ephemeral TWP works, it is

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[5] W. Worringer, op. cit., p. 41.

more urgent and pressing. The works are temporary - once displayed and photographed, they are destroyed, thus declaring the physical and objective nature of painting and how it belongs to the field of phenomenological studies rather than that of metaphysics.

The three-dimensional inspiration of *TWP* can also be seen in other Harding works such as *Plummet* (2005), *Cardinal* (2006) or the more recent *SEAM* (2018) and *Pink Cuts* (2019), where the extrusion of the paint beyond the limit of the support, with the consequent formation of what can be defined as 'paint prostheses', effectively transforms the paintings into plastic objects.

Alexis Harding's practice seems to obey a contradictory logic which subjects incongruent impulses and instances to a forced and reciprocal friction to check whether a synthesis can be achieved or, as actually happens, it's the friction that generates a new expressive and procedural model. This principle of contradiction illuminates the polarities between geometric order and entropic disorder, project and chance, intensifying the tensions between the virtual image and the concrete matter, the space and surface. This in turn triggers a chain of reactions, a plethora of frictions and amendments that end up adulterating the traditional genome of imageless syntaxes, ensuring them, however, a place in the group of most vital current artistic experiments. In an operational horizon such as contemporary art, continually subjected to analyses and revisions and perpetually threatened by the menace of the wear and obsolescence of languages, this detail which seems anything but negligible to me