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Virginio Ferrari was born in Verona. Please forgive this apparent banality. The syllables of this city of art and legend arouse too many connotations in our memories for the swift rise of a sculptor just 48 years old today to avoid being haloed by this fact. *Veronese*, Ferrari should deserve to trade his name against an identification between a man and a place; except that one of his distant illustrious fellow citizens had gone before him. A whole collective past, a whole atavism flows in his veins. His ancestry — son and grandson of marble sculptors — pre-destined him to bring life forth from inanimate materials; in the form of angels, for instance. “The angel, to make an angel,” he would say later with a smile, thus recalling his three years of labor in a funeral monument company. Far from pitying himself, he congratulates himself on this. For him, “the artist must first be a good craftsman, and then the artist makes good sculpture and good painting.” While still earning his first degrees, he affirmed his precocious mastery as early as his twentieth year, even before working three years as a young teacher at the Liceo Artistico of Verona. His first ceramics and bronzes, fully imbibed with tradition, give the proof.

“INCUBATOR OF LIFE”

But already these contemporary trends were teaching him that the language of arts is far from being frozen. Venice is very close; there the speakers for modern art choose to meet, and modern art reveals itself under all its faces. Ferrari went instinctively toward those of his elders, who would soon be his peers, and who responded to his deep affinities. Though among the ancestors Donatello is his favorite sculptor, he doesn’t hesitate to call Giacometti “the Donatello of our time.” His tastes draw him more toward Englishmen, Henry Moore and especially Lynn Chadwick, with whom one can discern a certain relation between those sharp forms and those of the *Volo tragico*. He was also struck by the expressive power of Etienne-Martin, before becoming acquainted with the surrealists, COBRA, and Matta and Gorky and all those whom America would reveal to him. But let’s not anticipate. In the immediate post-war period, in the bubbling of ideas jolting and crossing each other, Ferrari’s ideas may seem fairly simple — concerning sculpture, of course. As for the rest, this ardent theoretician was conscious of all the problems, which linked the destiny of art to that of society: he was an active debater in the controversies, which were working to rebuild the present and to outline the future. These controversies could not make the guiding thread deviate which leads the sculptor through the labyrinth of his creation: the central idea, certainly, which in spite (or because) of a certain uniqueness, is at the base of an uncommon inventive fertility, constantly generating new finds with infinite ramifications which in the majority of cases lead to action. The blind yet lucid faith in life remains the constant of this work through its successive molts. These are finally only the transposition, the glorification, the metamorphic projection of the life forces’ beating. Whence this late profession of faith: “I love life. I don’t like mechanics. The trees, the springs — water is very symbolic — are for me. And life, too.”

MAN AND MACHINE

Thus we witness, on one hand, the ambiguous conflict between the human being and the artificial mechanisms born of his mind and manufactured by his hands, a conflict which is given form(s) animated, we could say, by a sculptor obsessed with the problem of the man/machine relationship. Does man identify with his creature, his creatures? Will he end up creating them in his own image, or on the contrary will he begin to resemble them? To shape them in turn? This double procedure is equally plausible, translated into bronze in a series of “human metamorphoses,” where the plastic value is always predominant, at odds with any more or less picturesque or folk imagery. And his humanoids, in whom more than one commentator has rightly or wrongly discerned the persistence across one or two generations of the great surrealist current, often seems to be extraterrestrials escaped from a science-fiction film. What do the reactions of a too hasty visitor matter! Humans all the same, too human in the first degree: such terribly synthetic Maternity, expressionist for sure, gives free reign to alimentary/elementary appetites. Still more primitive on the scale of instincts beasts are the visceral transcriptions of living organisms. Men or beasts? No label tells us. The essential is the fermentation of life, all guts hanging out. Along the same line, Ferrari wants to snap up the movement which is the most visible emanation of the animal kingdom, its more obvious manifestation. Movement in its pure form, unshackled, un-mired in matter, as the flight of birds illustrates it — was the wing of the angel made into a statue on the tombstone premonitory? And the one from 1978, this polished bronze wing reduced to a sketch, is this its ultimate sublimation? — or the flight of machines fashioned in their likeness. Finally the ephemeral amalgam of the organic and the mechanical... How to suggest this flight in these heavy static masses of metal? Ferrari applies himself, and the illusion is perfect. The spatial apparatus thrusts straight toward the zenith, and the eye, turned away from the object, searches vainly for its trace in the sky. The caption *Vita nello spazio* takes on all its meaning here. An obscure prescience seems to guide the work of the sculptor who has not foreseen the Fall.

TRAGIC FLIGHT

To illuminate the continuation of the story, an anecdote is necessary. June 1962: on a radiant Sunday afternoon, a plane crashes on the Orly airfield near Paris shortly after take-off. It was carrying the 110 members of the Atlanta Art Association, amateurs, artists, and critics who had come to do a tour of Europe. There were no survivors.

Ferrari paid only distracted attention to the news of the catastrophe. Yet ten of the passengers had visited his studio in Verona and had become friends of his. A little later, Ferrari made his first trip to the United States: four months of fairly disappointing contacts. From New York, he phoned Atlanta. He wanted to speak to one of his new friends. “He is dead,” replied a woman’s voice. The truth left him crushed. He gained a delayed awareness of the whole horror of the situation, and back in Verona, already haunted by the spirit of flight, he paid homage in his fashion, his sculptor’s fashion, to the victims of the accident.

Volo tragico is the theme of a series of sculptures in bronze, then in iron and cement, because Ferrari began using any material capable of serving as a support for his thoughts.

Bit by bit, through the requirements of the subjects he dealt with, he opted for polished or painted bronze — his sculpture is purposely multi-colored; wood, stainless steel, cement, synthetic materials,

including naugahyde when it was invented in 1968, and of course the noble material among them, marble. Everything was and would be good for giving, according to inspiration, a more pure meaning to the language of his forms.

Is this “narrative” sculpture then, as American critics have often qualified it? Without a doubt. It is and will remain so. Even in the most arid abstraction toward which it was moving with a clear resolution, Ferrari always seeks to conserve its human function. He won’t allow it to be an end in itself, which would reduce his ambitions and lower them to a purely decorative end. Launching pretty luxury objects, furniture pieces on the market would be unworthy of him. What Ferrari wants, he who is not unaware that one doesn’t sculpt with ideas but with tools in a struggle with a material which will maintain its formal autonomy, if not to deliver a message (he doesn’t have such a presumption) under the aspect of some worn-out allegory, is at least to affirm and communicate his concepts, which become conceptions, of life, of our condition as living beings... and mortals, as in the twisted debris of the fuselage and motor of the *Wreck (Relitto)* of the interrupted flight.

In truth, America was waiting for him, or rather, unknown to himself, he was waiting for America. Destiny had given him a first signal. The second would be decisive. Four years later, in 1966, his work was rich enough and mature enough to fascinate a considerable visitor, the collector and art patron Albert Pick, Jr., who in addition, owned the Illinois Pick Hotels Corporation. He took Ferrari to Chicago and had him exhibit in the Ravinia gardens. Subjugated in his own turn, Harold Haydon, who taught at the University of Chicago and directed Midway Studios, had him invited to spend two years as “resident sculptor” at the University. He would then become assistant professor there before settling in his chosen city.

It is proper to add that Harold Haydon has shown himself with perseverance to be the best and most far-sighted supporter of Ferrari, never missing an occasion to analyze and celebrate the successive phase of a body of work in perpetual evolution.

CHICAGO

Virginio Ferrari thought he would conquer the city. It was the city that conquered him. “Chicago is the most beautiful, the most fantastic city. That’s where the architecture is.” Thus speaks the Veronese. His sincere enthusiasm he justified by this architecture in full revival which he would help humanize.

And which would allow him to blossom: by the very dimensions and all the space which the city spread before him and which offered his spirit permeated by Latin culture the temptation of excess — he has grazed it without ever succumbing — and by its prodigious vitality — “fantastic,” he noted accurately — which he made his own by taming it. Chicago appeared to him to be the promised land. Or more precisely, rich in promises.

Life regained the upper hand, and first of all life taken at its source, at its *Fonte di vita*, figuring in multiple versions, at its first source, this “drop of life” which springs from some rock or metallic partition, struck by the magic wand of the sculptor-miracle worker, which escapes by the slightest fissure and won’t stop falling. It is really a quintessence of life, this drop which could be blood or sperm or even fertilizing water, and which swells, rolls itself into a ball, a perfect sphere, only complying in the final analysis with the imperatives of strict geometry, while continuing all the same in every era to deny its role as a sign. It can distend itself, dragged by its own weight, and drip while

solidifying — like Cesar’s later expansions — ; or again, from a fertilizer it can become an embryo; that fermentation, that germination are not treated any less like pictographs. No element of the fundamentally erotic Ferrarian universe can escape from this second reading of a coded language becoming more and more abstract — a language to which the sculptor would periodically make exception when, returning to his theme four years later, the seminal drop, bloody in reality and issuing from a manifestly sexual orifice, but of a reversed sexualism, was entitled *Gocce d’amore pop*, like a wink at the contemporary fashion of a new artistic trend. Thus a vast erotic mythology was constructed, where a hundred metamorphoses of a single desire find their place; this desire, long deified and channeled into inflexible formulae. The sexual mind overtakes the primitive rut. Larval life, embryonic life goes even further back towards its origin: the masculine-feminine duality evoked by extremely diversified images serves as a leitmotiv in a work in which, as in our daily world,

Everything makes love,
 Even the footstep with the road,
 The stick with the drum
 ... and the column with the roof¹

Work in which everything is couples: a couple of beams leaning toward one another, or joining and united by a copulative protuberance, a schematic couple in pieces of a sort of giant puzzle, ready to be linked... And the two bronze pages of the *Libro proibito* (Forbidden Book) sealed by the ring which pierces them. To the breaking point of a plexiglas bar whose two elements are eternally on the verge of re-soldering themselves. Patience... we’ll see later how this symbolism persists in the monumental works.

Ferrari is making his way gradually toward that minimal art which reduces structures to their simplest expression, considerably squeezing him margin for maneuver, and limiting the composition in space solely to geometric figures, tempered as necessary by the sensuality of undulating curves: the cylinder, the circle — which was and no doubt remains the feminine symbol —, the rectangle and rectilinear tracings. These would of course engender spheres, cubes, parallelepipeds, pyramids and other volumes.

Such must have been in any case the principles Ferrari passed on to his students, to whom, preaching what he had practiced, he began by teaching the modeling of the human figure. The busts he did of certain major Chicago personalities and those of his friends show that he can on occasion be a classical figurative sculptor. Let us close this parenthesis.

It is as a master of abstraction that Ferrari is known. “Lyrical” abstract or “cool” abstract? On the other side of the Atlantic he has the choice between these two epithets, which apply to him less and less while his art purifies itself as it goes along, and by the very virtue of this stripping-down, apparently in spite of himself, creates a poetic climate of a spiritualized eroticism like that into which the three panels of a slowly elaborated triptych (we see it as one) throws us: in other words, three immaculate plexiglas elements, imperceptibly separated by an infinitesimal cut, and which lean gently to fall away into the blue of the wave.

To tell the truth, Ferrari is abstract, mathematically abstract and ever more so, even when he is working in the theater, he who strongly recommends an intimate collaboration among all the arts: poetry, music, set design. On the set of *Murder in the Cathedral* he placed an immense cross-sword

¹ German Nouveau, Translated from French.

suspended high above the altar, pointing toward the corpse of the archbishop. At the end of the play, it shines, incandescent.

What distinguishes Ferrari from his American emulators as the legitimate heir of a long Mediterranean and even European tradition (and no one is mistaken about it on the banks of Lake Michigan) is his simplicity combined with his customary elegance: “a rare quality in Chicago art,” admits Alan G. Artner, which the most revolutionary audacity can’t compromise. This sovereign ease in the handling of forms and proportions, this harmony (the entire body of work could claim the title of some of the first resolutely abstract great sculpture), this “calm force,” this totally Italian *grazia* which imposes serenity on violence, something with which to seduce the general public, grateful to a sculptor who speaks a language accessible to all.

The bonds with Italy had never been severed, incidentally. Ferrari returns periodically to Verona to entrust the works conceived and brought forth in his vast Chicago studio to his founders.

There he pursues his experiments on the dynamics of solids. For instance, he is trying to resolve, as a sculptor, the problems posed by gravity and, why not, by an imaginary absence of gravity. Thus his bronze cubes revolving in their specific space are a challenge to the laws of equilibrium. Halted in its course, time suspends its flight and stops the fall of bodies in the different phases in their route. There they are again, these *Nine Elements*: more or less orthodox cubes, parallelepipeds, planes, immobilized in the midst of their tumbling. One would swear that Ferrari is amusing himself in this obvious bit of bravura by juggling with such cumbersome props. There is a good dose of humor involved in yielding to this crazy demonstration of fantastic geometry; each element suspended or touching the ground or some obstacle with one of its vigorous angles, finds itself petrified in a different position. This (simulated) tightrope exercise took place, and still does, in an enclosed space, a room in a private home. The *Tumble Cubes*, on the other hand, have an exterior wall as a support. Carved in white marble, they are for the most part on the point of falling; some of the more hasty ones have already left the superb alignment of their fellows who, practically detached, are preparing to do the same.

Ferrari will never cease to amaze us. In spite of their fallacious completion, which the notion of mater-piece requires, his creations all manage to have an opening, a crack, an escape route towards the possible, as if he were calling into question the certitudes of a too-rational material world which can be assembled and taken apart — like that machine he once so feared — while keeping for himself a future full of hypotheses. Derision is not his strong point. The ideal beauty, supreme goal of greco-latin atavism, remains his ideal, through the upsets of taste. Yet his gravity as a conscious and conscientious artist does not wish to pass for an acquiescence to an immutable order, in any field of spirit on the matter. He follows the rules of the game because the game is worth the while, knowing all the time that these rules are conventional. In the about-faces of his itinerary he has never dropped the permanent guiding thread; and, always faithful to his permanence, at a certain moment he breaks the thread. He keeps a way out for himself.

Let us halt, among other relatively recent creations, before the groups of marble spheres which cover the ground in minutely calculated constellations: *Rolling Spheres*, notably; or, what is even more convincing, before the rhythmic distortions of these blocks weary of their repose: or the false unfinished bronze cylinders, like broken rings which turn upon themselves, nervously taut, and which the harshness of metal cannot dehumanize. “What I like to give to the material,” says Ferrari, “is a human tension, like a skin.”

INTRA AND EXTRA MUROS

So Ferrari found architecture par excellence in Chicago, architecture made city, where his work as a sculptor could and should find its place. Otherwise, why would he have become an ex-patriot? He left Verona, his Square of the Grasses (Piazza delle Erbe), his sublime Manor Square (Piazza dei Signori) for a colossal agglomeration of modern buildings, which were waiting for and demanding modern sculpture. He thought rather confusedly, or at least one presumes, that his own role would be to integrate man, the transcended human presence converted into signs, into this organized mass of stone, cement, iron, and glass, constructed by architects like Mies van der Rohe (the last “great” to date) in the same spirit of rigor and purity as his own. For no sculpture could adapt itself better to the environment than that which he had in mind. It was up to him to fulfill the environment. Was it pride to formulate the idea? Or more likely did his first monumental conceptions speak for him? Some of them, *extra muros*, made concrete his scheme to “make sculpture into a structural element of the landscape,” a landscape he dreamed of helping to revive and remodel. Indeed, Ferrari discovered a calling as a landscape artist. His projects prove it. He views the urban setting, with its buildings and its open spaces, as viable and livable whole. And his imagination was involved further ahead in the future when he suggested putting a piece of this setting under a bell jar, an esplanade under a transparent cupola...

As for this environment with which the sculptor is confronted, it has lent itself with good grace to Ferrari’s interventions, which recall eternal truths: the open air becomes his sculpture, it is its natural element; outside the museum-cemeteries it can breathe, but in general, isolation is hardly better for it. Ferrari can only envision it closely linked to inhabitable spaces. The marble balls are still another example. There are others, which are more convincing; among them there is simply too much choice. As early as 1969, the massive bronze couple, aptly named *Vita*, still enrobed in its thick-skinned layer of bark bearing un-mysterious sexual emblems, erected its two parallel trunks in front of the Loyola Medical Center. Abstraction was arriving rapidly. Two years later, *Dialogo* brought into play a quartet of separate elements of the same metal. Two of them, the human figures, lean toward each other in animated conversation, under the protective complicity of their partners. The group responds perfectly, in the Albert Pick Hall of the University of Chicago, to the objectives of International Affairs. In the setting of this same university, in front of Midway Studios, two long blades bound together finish in the slightly more expressive heads of the *Two Lovers Looking at the Stars* who are lost in the clouds. One is reminded in spite of oneself of the first amorous duet of the lovers in the Capulet garden when Romeo compared the stars with Juliet’s eyes. We are drifting into full poetry.

Happily, titles aren’t necessary for Ferrari to endow his creatures with their bit of dreaminess. *Ecstasy*, for instance, would do without verbal reference; it too rises, tapering, as it goes more than eight meters above its double though apparently single trunk in Ravinia Park — like the three imposing sculpture-sentinels that stand at the entrance to Michigan Avenue. But it is in the shelter of the lobby of a building edified by Mies van der Rohe, that the concave polished bronze silhouette of *Earth Form* was placed on a marble pedestal. These resolutely abstract lines and volumes would henceforth be the only masters of the game, as in this *Prism Into Two Elements* that would pivot on their axis, if this bronze bar weren’t squared, on one of Northwestern University’s lawns.

Thus this austere geometry sews the multiple nudity of its figures everywhere. It spreads its reign over parks and gardens as it does over its own domain, the mineral universe. It ends up singing a

hymn to the glory of metal, and to its own glory at the same time, in the extraordinary *Being Born*, the biosphere, we could say, the word made image, in gestation. In it lies the summation of Ferrari's research, which is first of all structural in the two stainless steel circular forms included one inside the other, the larger one gaping outwards as if to rip the other which it imprisons; then symbolic, and doubly symbolic, according to the admission of the sculptor, who wanted to express the significance of a piece commissioned by the Tool and Dye Institute, which is the energy and power this industry distributes, its growing prosperity illustrated by the opening. At the same time, Ferrari could not deny the deeper meaning of his action: "I try to symbolize the birth of life."

This he managed to do, saying the maximum with minimal means.

The condensation of a very broad body of work, *Being Born* could pass for Virginio Ferrari's testament if... What blasphemy toward a creator in the full force of age! *Being Born*, by its very significance of birth to the nascent condition, if we may use this tautology, is not an end point but a point of incessant departure. *Being Born*, if those words have meaning, is the work always being created by an artist who is perpetually becoming.