

ALEPH, VIZ. LANGUAGE AND NATURE

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The foreword by Caterina de Pietri, collector and co-founder of Artphilein, draws the reader into the flow of emotions and reflections which accompanied her first encounter with the art of Mirko Baselgia. In her intense, extremely personal account, reverberations of her aesthetic formation, sensibility and the professional experiences of a lifetime are felt, while at the same time a dark and unsparing synthesis of the human condition also filters through, culminating in a blatant accusation.

This volume presents the artwork of a young Swiss artist, a winner of the Manor Art Prize, who has just had a personal exhibition at the Kunstmuseum in Chur, combined with a catalogue dedicated to his already copious production. Specifically, and in keeping with the original idea behind the Artphilein expositive space, which always concentrates on one artist at a time, this curator's selection would like to bring attention to one of the artist's most audacious and important intuitions: *Bastung digl Paster Aleph/Beth*. The work expresses the foundations of Baselgia's artistic research, and demonstrates, in an exemplary way, his technique and the sum of his aesthetic; both are based on *Verdichtung*, specifically, his inclination towards the condensation and compression of ideas and perceptions.

Here we take up again the threads of a discourse that has been interrupted, as if by a provocative flash of lightning, in the exhibition's last room, where two simple wooden sticks have been carved on their ends with, respectively, *Aleph* and *Beth*, the first two letters of the Phoenician alphabet. These two sober and rigorous objects, placed at the end of an itinerary that had arranged the artist's compositions in relation

to both space (inside and outside the museum) and to works in the permanent collection, left the visitor in a rather suspended state of mind, anticipating further creative development of the work. This has now been brought to completion in a dialectic relationship with the addition of an incandescent branding iron, presented here to the public for the first time. The carved letters are illuminated, emitting a dazzling brilliance. Consequently, *Bastung digl Paster* (The Shepherd's Rod) becomes the *Aleph/Fier Bugliaint* (Scalding Fire): the original and established symbol of the primitive relationship between man and nature, in terms of pure "sovereignty", is transformed into an animated representation of an evolution, that of language as manipulation of nature.

Originally the graphic form of Aleph was equivalent to the stylised head of an ox. As a result of rotating the character, the two "horns" became the two "legs" of the A. This was no accident: the original meaning of the logogram was "ox", or "livestock". From the artist's viewpoint, the actual material *incipit* of the alphabet precisely identifies language as a tool, as a primordial technique in the domination of the natural world, of the subjugation of animals to man (*begreifen* vs. *ergreifen*). These two well-made sticks, joined in a self-referencing dynamic to the incandescent metal branding iron, connected by a symbol which they have in common, that is, by a shared meaning, gain significance by means of an ancestral act of violence. At the same time they conclude an aesthetic itinerary which places the theme of the relationship between humans and nature into a singular expressive modality, a relationship which is characterised by control and exploitation.

To all of this is added the refined choice of materials and excellent workmanship, the prerequisites of extreme, formal synthesis. Moor oak is formed over millennia due to a chemical process which binds the tannins in the wood to iron salts. The incisions carved on the ends refer to the birth of language. Similar care was taken in the realisation of the branding iron, whose incandescence/temperature must be controlled in order to maintain its shape intact: this technical complexity is concealed so that

one's attention remains solely on the hypnotic source of light, without distractions of any kind, as if attracted to a primordial energy. The energy of fire.

The symbolic meaning of the installation will be extensively covered in the essay which follows this introduction. This dialogue focuses on the performative act which completed the work. Previous interviews with the artist revealed an initial hypothesis, later discarded, which was to position the sticks with the carvings facing down, in contact with the floor, and thus invisible to the eyes of the viewer. This choice would have amplified the allegorical value of the two letters, puncheons incised in relief which define space, thus transforming unformed nature into "land".

The Greek word for the first measure of all subsequent measures, for the first land-appropriation understood as the first partition and classification of space, for the primeval division and distribution, is *nomos*.¹

As stated by Carl Schmitt, *nomos*, in ancient Greek, indicates a "pasture", and thus, in a metaphorical sense, the conquering and regulation of a territory, the legal assignment of property. Deriving from the verb *nemein* in its third definition (to graze, divide, take), the term, over time, starting with Plato, has taken on the meaning of "usage", "custom", "law", failing to retain any spatial connotation.

Now, with the complement of a metal branding iron that becomes incandescent, resulting in irradiating heat, the two sticks are illuminated and the artwork is completed, acquiring a deeper symbolic value. The physical phenomenon of incandescence, in which an object brought to a high temperature emits light, occurs in the branding iron *Aleph* as electricity passes through the resistor, and is quite different from what happened in the past, when flames of fire heated the metal. In point of fact, it is precisely the capacity to transform fire from a natural element, or even a divinity, into a possession, and subsequently a universal competence, which has been revealed as a constant in «every known society. It is also, to an even greater

¹ C. Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, Telos Press Publishing, New York 2003, p. 67.

extent than the use of tools, exclusively human. Rudimentary forms of language and tool use are also found among non-human primates and other animals: but only humans, as part of their culture, have learned to control fire».⁵

In *Aleph/Fier Bugliaint* this evocative image of the linguistic medium refers to archaic beliefs about the powers of words, both divine and human, as well as to the practise of magic, and to the diffuse, corresponding conviction which holds that knowledge of a person or thing represents the first instance of dominion. The relationship between language and reality, and the birth of formal logic, sanction the breach in the original union between man and nature, based upon the zero-point of abstraction (word=thing), and consecrates man's control over nature, its diminution into space to be modified and made use of.

Further philosophical speculation and scientific doctrine about the nature of the human conscience, together with the inexorable developments in technology, have consolidated this submissive relationship. It was only with the advent of Darwinism, and in the more recent research into the philosophy of the mind and ethology, that new and important understandings have emerged about the cognitive capabilities of animals. There has been a progressive transmutation of animals from object to subject, they are seen as beings capable of interacting with their environment and of modifying some of their behaviour as a response to that interaction, even going so far as to transform their environment. These are just some preliminary thoughts in the broader reflection about the contradictory results of deploying instrumental reasoning and the dominion of technology, about which we believe Baselgia's *Aleph/Fier Bugliaint* can provide new and interesting stimuli and ideas.

Artphilein Foundation is grateful to the artist, the authors, and to all those who, in various ways, have contributed to the realisation of the exhibition and this catalogue. A special thanks goes to Choisi – One at a Time, the cultural association in Lugano

⁵ J. Goudsblom, *Fire and Civilisation*, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, London 1992, p. 1.

which has kindly offered to host the event and with whom a valuable collaboration has been established through the organisation of thematic exhibitions and the presentation of works from the collection of Artphilein Foundation.