

## Letter to Gianmarco on the Abstract

1 December 1988

Dear Gianmarco,

No, really, I don't agree. I don't agree with your invitation to return to the truth. What truth? Such a return inevitably has to be ambiguous. What exactly is it, this truth of art? What we have here is only the truth of the factitious [*il fattizio*]<sup>#</sup> – the truth of that which is constructed and which seems to us to constitute a new portion of being. This truth is not transcendent, nor does it refer to anything immutable or eternal – rather it is made, constructed by poor hands. If this is the truth to which you are referring, then we are in agreement; but it is not. Actually you are pressing me to use the word in a Platonic sense, in order to show up my ingenuousness and my ignorance, my forgetfulness of a substantial being. But this is only rhetoric. I love art from the

<sup>#</sup>[Translator's note: literally in the etymological sense, 'man-made', 'created' (vs 'natural').]

moment when it became abstract – from the moment when, in abstraction, it revealed a new quality of being: the participation of the singularities of labour in a single whole, which is, precisely, abstract.

Art has always anticipated the determinations of valorization. So it became abstract by traversing a real development, by creating a new world through abstraction. To be an ontological experience art has no need of a concrete being. With the invention of the abstract, nature and the world have been entirely replaced by art. The modern is this abstraction, this participation of the labour of each singularity and its interchangeability. A community which is abstract.

I do not accept the polemic against the modern. It seems to me to be the fruit of resentment – and resentment is certainly the first among humanity's bad passions. Neither do I do not accept the defence of the modern as it is expressed today: take Habermas, who invokes common sense to declare that the modern is incomplete . . . This is not true. Even in places where modernization is historically incomplete – among the people of Papua or the tribes of Central Asia – the modern is nonetheless logically achieved. The modern does not realize itself as a process but as essence; it offers itself as result. The people of Papua, or Dersu Uzala, enter into the future of history, as of now. The pain is

huge, the damage is incalculable, but this is the way it is. The modern is effectual, including in places where modernization is not. And it is this inverse relation between the time of the process and the effectuality of the result that removes all romantic possibility of understanding life as a seeking and truth as the product of a constructive dialectic. This is the postmodern: it is the modern that has detached itself from modernization.

You are sickened by the postmodern. You claim that it is not true, inasmuch as it defines itself as detachment from the time of its own realization. I see things differently. I adhere to the postmodern because I see its experience as a truth of abstraction, and the recognition of this as a condition of experience. A process of accumulation of abstract events, of new determinations of meaning, of new and singular figures of community has been fully achieved. All this has finally succeeded in showing us a new world. Whether we want it or not, it is from within this world that all meaning is given. This is what the postmodern is: the truth of the factitious.

There is no point, then, in playing with words: when I say the 'truth of the factitious' I mean a narrow and univocal relation, a singular logical entity. The factitious has changed into truth, into a new nature, whether second, or *n*th, or whatever. The factitious annuls truth and produces a new and solid definition of it. A definition which

could not be more perverse, certainly, insofar as all normal relations of being are overturned by it – but an efficacious one, which corresponds to that function of connecting the sign to the signified, which is fundamental to the project of truth. This perversion is more true than any transcendence, than any traditional legitimation of truth. The factitious is not empty – it is being, even if we toil in it and are almost taken in by its shadows. But it is a powerful and real trickery. How solid this superficiality is! We can't get used to it, we complain about its trickeries. But they involve us, act on us and betray us. Their effects are real – so why should the causes not be real too? No point, then, in complaining. *Hic Rhodus, hic salta.*<sup>#</sup> Even if you really don't know what or how. Are superficiality and the factitious more true than the real? Whatever the case, they are the sole reality.

However, you might object, we have known reality at other times and in other ways. Our biography is there to prove it. The real was large and chunky and stood before us, just and unjust, true and false, beautiful and ugly. It was between these alternatives that we conducted our struggles – and we had no doubts about their value. During the years running up to 1968 our aesthetics was

<sup>#</sup> [Translator's note: *Here is Rhodes – jump here!* = Show what you can do instead of talking about it. Marx, from Aesop via Hegel.]

one of resistance, of demystification, and then of offensive. Peter Weiss gave an acute portrayal of the characteristics of the aesthetics of resistance. In 1937 Berlin, at the height of a triumphant Nazism, a group of young workers was caught up in the revival of classicism which Nazism was promoting. They were visiting a museum, to study the magnificent remains of the altar of Pergamum. But, as they relived the values of those sublime marbles – liberty, heroism, dignity, pain – and made them their own, there and then they discovered their own anti-fascism. The plastic arts of antiquity, studied philologically and politically, led those self-taught workers to conclusions opposed to those of Nazi classicism. The bodies themselves filled them with contempt for the liturgies of Leni Riefenstahl. For us, too, the Brechtian dynamic of alienation [*Verfremdung*] in the adversary, with its resulting mystification, was a real practice. Vietnam and the hallucinatory world of imperial America were our 1937 Berlin. And so it was that, yelling and desperate, we re-appropriated the imaginary of our times. And we turned it back against our bosses. You remember the 1963 Biennale? Rauschenberg? What a grip we had on reality in those days, how we bit on it! Then came '68. For a moment we had the impression of having set our hands so firmly on reality that now it belonged to us totally, an alternative creation. Through

the body, we filtered liberation. Not simply the re-appropriation and overturning of the imaginary of the enemy, a kind of hyper-realist delirium, an American surrealism: even more, even more, life and bodies could be recreated, reinvented. Resistance had become an alternative. The world was ours. And you are right, Gianmarco, when you call all that truth. And you are also right to project this truth into the sky and to consider your nostalgia as the only possible ontology. There were many of us who thought that way. And we did not realize that, while we were holding tight to that truth, others were digging it away from under our feet. Truth, even as we were holding it, became emptied of reality. We were waiting for them on the terrain of truth; but they restructured the world and stripped truth of its foundation. They made us paranoid and crazy, even as we were still gripping the true. Ah! how we deluded ourselves – blind new-borns in a world in monstrous transformation.

When reality is removed from truth, you cannot continue calling it truth. It is the real that has become true – another truth, frightful, vile and repugnant; as for the sacred sublimations of the true, we can leave them to Hegel. Here the new presents itself in the clothes of a tramp. And yet this is where the truth is – and it is to this that I recall you, dear Gianmarco: to this new truth,

in order to overturn it anew and to revolutionize it, as ever. But, above all, in order to know it. In order to know our crisis: because this passage from one truth to another across reality, this plunging of our soul into the abstract, is a journey which engages us with great force. We have to live this dead reality, this mad transition, in the same way as we lived prison, as a strange and ferocious way of reaffirming life. You could not avoid the atrocious experience of prison, the contact with death and its violence – even when we tried to, we could not avoid that atrocious experience. We were constrained to suffer dark romantic hallucinations. There was no longer any alternative. Certainly, for us, there has never been an alternative to the world, but always an alternative within the world. *À la* Rauschenberg: a world that is assumed, shattered, reinvented in the form of its monstrosity. But even the possibility of such a heroism was now denied to us. Any Brechtian alienation that might prepare a dialectical reconquest in the future, any experience opening to transfiguration, was refused to us. We have to live and suffer the defeat of truth, of our truth. We have to destroy its representation, its continuity, its memory, its trace. All subterfuges for avoiding the recognition that reality has changed, and with it truth, have to be rejected. Even biography was to be thrown into the weeds. The very blood in our veins had been replaced.

So there we have it, an authentic Christian moment of our existence: to be capable of a radical break with our reality, of an abandonment and of an absence which place us, once again, in contact with the other, with the abandoned friend, with the real that had been dispersed. To accept the abstractedness of the world, to endure its coldness, the desert of passions; and there, on this empty horizon on which we move, rendered blind by our misery, to seek – to seek the real, always, until it falls into our hands: an encounter, an event. Is it possible to determine the event? No, we can only search for it desperately. Determining it is only a matter of discovery. If luck and grace aid us, and only in that case, we will be able to think, vaguely, of a reopening of hope. The truth of the factitious, which was our starting point, might perhaps turn out to be rich. Nothing guarantees it, but who knows . . . Let us imagine dance steps on this new stage of the real.

So the postmodern, this true abstraction of the real, has to be accepted. With a loyalty which aims solely at the reconstruction – or rather constitution – of the world. In effect, in this desert – which nevertheless constitutes the only possible real – truth will be constituted. So let us begin by putting together the most simple things. Both the space of our habitat and the time of our conscience require objects in relation to which we can

re-take the measures of our life. We are living after the deluge, after life, after the modern. In the world of appropriation and in that of the alternative, nature and history had left us some existential fragments. The landscape was here and there coloured and varied, but at the same time it limited our freedom and constrained our imagination. Now freedom has become total, because our misery is as great as our freedom, and our imagination has become capable of dealing with the infinite possibility of the void. We do not contemplate a 'state of nature', but a state of things which is unnatural, post-natural, posthuman and inhuman. There are no longer natural determinisms or historical vestiges, nor finality or fulfilments which hold: the space has become entirely a-teleological. So we shall not talk about a 'work of reconstruction' (to the extent that this would suggest a past and objects to be reproduced . . . when in fact the very idea of model and of repetition has disappeared with our generation) – but simply about a 'work of constitution'. The abstract is our nature. The abstract is the quality of our labour. The abstract is the sole community in which we exist. Outside of the abstract there is only the indecency of a natural life which is already dead, of a religion which no longer has a sanctuary.

It is for this reason, my very dear friend, that I invite you to follow me in this new and formidable adventure.

To understand the nature of art today is to understand how the pain of a world which has been lost can venture into a naked and unknown continent in order to create being – new being. I leave you with this thought from Lyotard's *L'Inhumain*:

To think is to receive what happens according to its singularity. It is to open up to what is to come. The work of art does nothing else. By coming into the world, it renders present a game of colours – or of sounds, or of words – which was unimaginable before it. This is particularly true of contemporary art after the invention of abstraction . . .<sup>#</sup>

<sup>#</sup> [Translator's note: Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.]

## Letter to Carlo on the Postmodern

5 December 1988

Dear Carlo,

You, truly, were not scared by abstraction, or of bringing everything into question, including reality. In the mid-seventies you were the first among us to become crazy, because you understood in what direction we were heading – towards the negation of our very experience, towards the overturning of our ethics – to become crazy in the refusal of the way things were going. But at the same time you internalized that abstraction which was making you ill, and you prepared yourself to consider it as a necessary life environment. When you got out of hospital and came to see me, you said that our equilibrium, our happiness are somewhere else, outside of this savage re-appropriation of being, which has blocked our psyche and destructured our soul. Intelligence and morality have quit being, this being is an *energoumenon* – and you suggested: let us choose the abstract, let us stop this intolerable suffering. The postmodern is the