

## *Why Luciano Fabro Today?*

By Sharon Hecker (September 4, 2018)

Why should Luciano Fabro, a postwar Italian artist deeply attached to his national roots, be of interest to American audiences in 2018? Although he was associated with Arte Povera, Fabro described himself as “the heretic of the Arte Povera church.” This self-declared outsider position allowed him to develop a broad, open and collective sense of culture that extends beyond a single nation or time period.

I met Fabro, his wife Carla and his daughter Silvia thirty years ago while I was employed at the Christian Stein Gallery in Milan. I eventually went to work for him to help prepare for his first U.S. retrospective at the San Francisco MoMA. Fascinated by the recordings on answering machines, Fabro gave a talk in San Francisco titled “I Would Like to Leave a Message.” He read his words in Italian and I simultaneously translated them into English line by line. At one point, I accidentally read ahead of him by one line. Never missing a beat, Fabro stopped, looked up at the audience, and exclaimed: “Now THAT is what I call ‘avant-garde!’”

Since then, I have written numerous critical essays on Fabro to help him become better known to English-speaking audiences. Having translated his theoretical writings, I began looking for a U.S. publisher. Art historian Jack Flam put me in contact with Phong Bui, who responded that, before Fabro’s writings and art could be appreciated in the U.S., he believed a re-tilling of the soil would be needed. To this end, he invited me to be the guest critic for this issue of the Brooklyn Rail on Fabro.

Phong’s idea was to generate fresh interest for those who knew Fabro’s art and introduce him to young American audiences who may not know his name. Many of the renowned artists, critics, and curators whom I invited to write here about Fabro have known him, worked with him, or had a special connection to him. In addition to old friends, I invited a number of people who did not know Fabro personally, but who collect his work, have curated shows, have written about him recently, or are in the process of organizing exhibitions on him. Why, then, should we take a new look at Fabro? In my opinion, it is because of what he can tell us about the possibilities of sculpture.

Sculpture, for Fabro, was something that could be sensed, felt, touched, and tasted by the viewer. Before Félix González-Torres was piling up his candy installations, Fabro distributed sweets wrapped in messages, as part of an installation titled *Computers di Luciano Fabro*, *Caramelle di Nadezda Mandelstam* (Luciano Fabro’s *Computers*, Nadezhda Mandelstam’s *Candies*, 1990). The candies evoked a bitter memory, reported in Nadezhda’s memoirs, of the sweets that Stalin’s police cynically offered her while searching her apartment before sending her husband, the poet Osip Mandelstam, off to his death in a Siberian gulag.

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For Fabro, sculpture was related to craft and to craftiness. He made his needle-and-thread Penelope (1972) out of leftover material from his enormous Piedi (Feet, 1968 – 71), which were adorned with silk stockings sewn by his seamstress mother. Like the resourceful and cunning Penelope, whose creative weaving and unweaving staved off her suitors as she waited for her husband Odysseus to return, Fabro zigzagged his needle and thread up and down the wall. By leaving a dangling strand, he invited the viewer to take up the thread and continue his open-ended process of making.

Contemporary art's engagement with the viewer's mind and body was an important concern for Fabro. His works could be all-enveloping, such as In cubo(1966), a cube made to be inhabited by one person, or the numerous Habitats, which could be collectively inhabited; or they could be very small, humorously enticing the viewer to come closer to investigate. In Tu (You, 1978), he dangled a wire thread from the ceiling almost to the ground with a tiny egg made of red sealing wax at its end. This required the viewer to crouch down to discover an erotic image stamped onto the egg; in order to see the work, the viewer had to reproduce the kneeling sexual posture of the figures on the seal.

Many of Fabro's works evoke an interest in the visceral quality of the sculptural surface. In making his supine headless figure known by its shortened title Lo Spirato (The Expired One, 1968 – 73), he chose a butter-colored marble, characterized by irregular streaks. Sensuously warm and translucent, it approximated pale human skin and pulsating veins, a suggestive—and very contemporary—evocation of the “skin” of sculpture.

Fabro strove to create an ongoing dialogue between art and nature as a regenerative force. At a time when we are concerned with the human destruction of nature, his botanically themed works such as Felce (Fern, 1968), Edera (Ivy, 1969), Foglia (Leaf, 1982) and Nido (Nest, 1994) gain resonance. Images of nature played an important role in his philosophy of art. He wrote, “when the senses are renewed in art, art also renews nature.”

Fabro's openness to nature suffused his worldview. Once, we had a discussion about the question of roots. As an American of Hungarian, Russian, and Lithuanian ancestry, who grew up in Israel but was living in Italy, I could not understand his fierce attachment to his Italian land. Why all those maps of Italy he continued to make and remake? I said to him: “My roots are everywhere and nowhere.” He flashed a smile and responded: “That is because you are like ivy, the plant that does not need soil because it has its roots in the air.”

Finally, for Fabro, art was something to be experienced and shared rather than owned. Fifty years before Blockchain offered novel platforms for buying communal ‘shares’ in an artwork, Fabro was humorously issuing ‘collective shares’ for one of his sculptures, stating that their value would rise for everyone as the sculpture gained market value. He wrote: “when that which has economic value passes from one owner to the next, one of them loses ... when that which has cultural value passes from one person to the other it ... is enriched.” For Fabro, “culture ... can give forever and [is] never exhausted.”