

**The
Guardian**

Luciano Fabro
*Historically aware Italian artist given to
startling effects of dislocation*

By Christopher Masters (July 16, 2007)

The artist Luciano Fabro, who has died aged 70, is best known for a series of sculptures in which the familiar outline of the Italian peninsula was metamorphosed into an array of expressive, often disturbing shapes. The materials used were unconventional: thin, curling shreds of paper; a tight roll of copper strips; a twisted sheet of iron wire.

Even the titles were violent and visceral: Italy of Pain; Fetish Italy; Italy of War. Above all he achieved startling effects of dislocation: in Golden Italy, he created a map of his country in gilded bronze, which he then hung upside down like a carcass - literally, a revolutionary art. It is no accident that Fabro began these works in the late 1960s, at a time of exceptional political and social upheaval, but they exemplify the audacity that marked his whole career.

Fabro was born in Turin, but spent his most formative years in Treppo Grande, near Udine, where, despite the town's provincial climate, he quickly developed a fascination for avant-garde art. This led him in 1958 to visit the Venice Biennale: the experience of Lucio Fontana's slashed canvases, which dramatically introduced the element of space into otherwise flat surfaces, was succeeded by direct contact with Piero Manzoni, whom Fabro met when he moved to Milan in the following year. Above all, he was impressed by Manzoni's attempts to encourage real interaction between the object and its public, who, by standing on a "magic base" or eating a thumb-marked egg, could, however bizarrely, get beyond merely passive appreciation.

In the early 1960s, these influences coalesced in Fabro's own works, such as Hole - a pane of glass partly coated so that in some areas it reflected the spectator, who briefly became a part of the art - while in others, it allowed a view of the room beyond. Four years later, in 1967, Fabro created an installation totally covered with mirrors on the inside and outside walls. The unsettling sensation that this produced was enhanced by interior microphones broadcasting the visitor's reaction to the rest of the gallery.

Fabro's interest in exploring modes of perception was shared with other young Italian artists, such as Michelangelo Pistoletto and Giulio Paolini, with whom he collaborated in the so-called Arte Povera shows from 1968 onwards. An entertaining but idiosyncratic character, Fabro fiercely protected his independence, even unsuccessfully trying in 1971 to have the movement's exhibition retitled as simply a list of names. Despite this ambivalent attitude, he was

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unquestionably one of the most important exponents of Poor Art, often working with appropriately humble, mundane materials, as well as with more traditional media.

Like many of his colleagues, he was particularly concerned with the relationship between art's present and past. In 1971, for example, he devised an installation in which a sophisticated 18th-century painting, attributed to Watteau, was placed inside the entrance to a modern tent, a paradigm of simplicity and impermanence. Inevitably, the change of context profoundly altered the effect that the Old Master had on the viewer.

The transformation of historic images did not stop with the manipulation of their environment. In the late 1960s and early 70s, Fabro famously parodied a venerable genre, the sculpted tomb, carving headless marble corpses clearly visible through their tightly fitting shrouds. The expressiveness of fabric - its ability simultaneously to conceal and reveal the figure - was given both sinister and sensual dimensions in much of Fabro's work at this time.

In 1972 the pleats and creases of women's skirts, photographed in minute detail, briefly became one of his most obsessive subjects, while in the same year he also completed a series of grotesque clawed feet, placed at the end of immense tree-like legs, sheathed in shantung silk. This fantastic, mythical quality only intensified in later decades. Like many contemporaries, Fabro increasingly drew on Italy's ancient heritage, interpreted with an almost baroque energy and flair. The fluting of classical pillars - rearranged to form spiralling patterns in *Spirit of Geometry, Spirit of Finesse* (1984) - became a metaphor for the dynamic structure of the universe.

This tendency culminated in *The Sun* (1997), in which seven hollow segments of a column, arranged horizontally on the Tate gallery's floor, created a series of ray-like shapes around, in Fabro's words, "a nucleus of geometric emptiness". The brilliance of the Carrara marble in *Sun* contrasted dramatically with the dark Portorino stone of *Moon*, a totem-like sculpture, displayed in the same show, which deliberately recalled Brancusi.

Fabro frequently made references to other 20th-century artists, ranging from Marcel Duchamp to Piet Mondrian and Fontana. Evidently he felt as much nostalgia for the heroic days of Modernism as for the age of Pericles. By the end of his career he was aware that he himself had passed from the shock of the new to the comfort of the familiar.

One of his most successful later works, *Sisyphus* (1994), required the museum visitor to roll an engraved marble cylinder over a layer of flour, leaving an impression of the Corinthian king condemned to push a boulder for all eternity - in 1996, it was voted the most popular exhibit at the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis, apparently due to its combination of a classic story with an everyday material. Fabro's contribution to the 500th birthday of Michelangelo's statue of

David in Florence in 2004 worked in the same way - a cylinder rolled over marble dust revealed a nude figure.

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Yet Fabro realised that he could, as he put it, "no longer expect the reaction of the 60s. The reaction now is cultivated, a reaction to something else, there is no innocence any more. But then again there is memory ..."

His wife Carla predeceased him, and he is survived by his daughter Sylvia.

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