

Between Logic of the Absurd and Bildungsroman: The Experience of Transformation in Michael Fliri's Work

Letizia Ragaglia, Director Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art,
MUSEION, Bolzano-Italy

Michael Fliri is a sort of contemporary Charlie Chaplin in various ways. Similar to the legendary actor, the young artist has made the absurd his logic; in his works the logic of the absurd often offers some minor revelation in everyday contexts. Fliri's preferred medium is performance. His performances, which he presents in the form of videos, are micro-stories based on very simple plots: the protagonist, mostly the artist himself, performs little exercises aimed at a better understanding of himself and the development of his personality. Though his works, because of their playful and naive character, are not to be confused with "historical" performances that have gone down in art history, the artist is definitely a descendant of the protagonists of this genre which originated in the early twentieth century.

Concerning oneself with Michael Fliri's work in 2012 means also regarding the circumstances that led to the emergence of the performance genre. This not only discloses its present-day relevance, but also how it has changed in the context of Fliri's work. Performance sprang both from a profound desire to break up the boundaries of conventional genres and the rejection of traditional forms of artistic expression.

One might counter this by pointing out that "academic" formalisms have also caught up with performances in the twenty-first century and that performances have lost their subversive impact in a certain way. We must not forget, however, that performance has reemerged on an international scale in the 1960s to take a powerful stand against the so-called bourgeois culture. The performance artist refuses to be subjected; he enriches the arts by incorporating manifold – sociological, philosophical, psychoanalytic, anthropological – approaches, strives to overcome the concept of the self-contained work, and fights the fetish of commercially exploitable art. While the twenty-first century has not produced anything that could be compared to the utopias articulated by the sociocritical forces around and after 1968, a certain "performance attitude" – even if subjective, intuitive, random, and thus not to be categorized unequivocally as pertaining to a certain genre – is still alive.

This attitude also characterizes Michael Fliri's works: far from the painful actionist activities fathoming the limits of the body, they rather resemble those performances that triggered processes of self-understanding by relying on obsessive rituals. Take,

for instance, Bruce Nauman's video from the 1960s in which incessantly repeated gestures evoke the idea of a self-contained work. The focus on the body and its basic functions commits the observer to an almost childlike, if not primitive, view of things and suspends the division between art and life.

We also come upon childish and partly obsessive elements in Michael Fliri's work. Other key words that might be mentioned in this context are fantasy, anarchy, comedy, perfection in arts-and-crafts terms, metamorphosis, play, but also trouble and pain. The protagonists of his work are anti-heroes who try to assess their position in the world through extremely physical activities bordering on the absurd. Fliri's works, which often radiate an almost primitive rituality, in which life is permanently sublimated in the form of minute poetic, trite, and insignificant gestures, testify to the artist's penchant for slapstick, for the intensity of non-verbal communication characteristic of silent movies. Fliri's interest centers on the body, yet it is not the "scandalous" body of the sixties which had to be stripped and exposed and reduced to point zero. The artist rather utilizes the body in a playful manner, achieving authenticity with his disguise and *mise-en-scène*. *Mise-en-scène* and medialization have become perfectly natural strategies of artistic production in the meantime. And though Fliri's works are ostensibly performances and video pieces, sculpture and painting are of crucial importance in that they are indispensable elements of the artist's careful presentation.

Calling the stages of Michael Fliri's career into mind, we find him presenting himself as a snowman trying to merge with the environs in a symbiotic manner, as a red-combed hen emerging from a gigantic shell, and finally as somebody who turns from a sheep into a pig and back again.

All his costumes are "homemade" or were sewn by his mother until recently. Yet, the skiing suit he wears in the middle of August in the train station of Bologna where he leaves a bag full of ice with a train ticket on the seat of a railroad car bound for Bolzano dates back to his days as a ski racer. At the International Performance Prize Festival, the artist, his face concealed behind a hairy mask, scrapes away at an ice block to prepare some granita for the visitors. While the sequence in which Fliri, wearing a grey-and-yellow checked shirt and a helmet with luminous stripes, undergoes various hilariously funny "domestic mishaps" radiates a perfect slapstick atmosphere, we suffer with him when he climbs a snow-covered slope with stilts on his legs and sinks into the white again and again. We feel the intensity of the emotional tension he succeeds in conveying with nothing but his presence and his eyes when he sits on the floor of the Museion in Bolzano, clad in nothing but a plain brown cloak and being transformed into an albino gorilla by the expert hands of two Hungarian make-up artists. This understanding of space is something also manifest

in his work conceived for the façade of the Museion: as soon as the installation is projected onto the exterior glass surface, a poetic tension between light and shadow makes itself felt.

This summary might be continued ad lib: each example would demonstrate the same meticulous mise-en-scène of a micro-story in which the – albeit minimal – sculptural aspect of scenography is as essential as the artist's use of colors, the sound track, and the tempo. Following a specific rhythm (which may be coincidental), certain elements and figures keep recurring in Fliri's works: they remain stable for a short span of time, change, and vanish for no apparent reason. Most of the performances exist only in the form of videos that have been edited by the artist himself, who attaches great importance to rhythm. Although or rather because rhythm and tempo are so important to him, time remains an undefined quantity: time is suspended and something vague like in old avant-garde films. Fliri utilizes the early silent movies' positive dimension of "silence." This enables him to endow his works with a surreal and/or absurd touch in a perfectly natural way and to create an unreal atmosphere that is aimed at elucidating our everyday life. Doing without any digital manipulation, Fliri succeeds in making the spectator identify with his gestures and activities: the emotional states conveyed in this way grant real insights. As the artist does not rely on language at all, the emphasis is on the physical and the sensual dimension of perception.

The physical character of Fliri's performances is of crucial importance. The protagonist of his videos embodies characters whose particular connotations do not result from the act of imitating something or someone, but from a genuine desire for transformation, which leads to an actual experience of change. Beyond all the humor and lightness his works breathe, Michael Fliri stages miniature Bildungsromane whose protagonists invite the spectator to share their rite-of-passage experiences.