

# Foreword to *Maccheroni Books/Works: An Exhibition Catalogue*, Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge May 2007 by Jean Khalifa

## I. Materiology

Leaf through this book and look: it rarely fails, few are the artists, even among those of the stature and renown of Maccheroni, who can seize the gaze as he does, while using such a diversity of forms and media. What is his secret? It reveals itself easily to a careful inspection: at the edge of or within the shapes he plays with, this craftsman revels in the proliferation of particles, of asperities, of singularities, which either seem to call for a desired form or to prelude the loss of an existing one. When he starts with well-defined shapes, what he shows is the grain: the classical architecture of an imperial Roman villa is shot from angles stressing both the geometry of its pure design and the texture of its decay; skyscrapers in New York are seen in reflections on other skyscrapers, criss-crossing their surfaces in patterns which will later evolve into a series of paintings of minutely chequered surfaces or photo-montages where photographs of the city slice grainy silvery-grey planes. Conversely, when focusing on the apparently shapeless he keeps on revealing virtualities of meaning. Patterns of bark on a tree trunk mesmerize, evoking the unfolding of a vulva or the lacerated torso of one of his christs. When facing precisely the pure proliferation of the organic – pli selon pli, fold by fold – in one of the 2000 photographs of a vulva he famously pictured I, even a gaze hardened by all the avant-gardes of the past century feels moved (Maccheroni took part in several of the French avant-garde movements since the Second World War but always seems to have gone beyond them). In their astonishing presence these images instantly defeat the doxa that absence is all that is ever seen in this organ, an absence conveniently conceptualised by popular psychoanalysis as the obsessive presence of a lack – as a wound. The combined powers of sexual fascination and the only constant visual prohibition in Western art are appropriated here not to shock but to enchant us with the materiality of what is in front of us: Maccheroni's subversion is that of a materialist.

Why is what he calls his materiology so striking? Perhaps because for us, who have been so trained to look for forms in art (what does it show? what does it mean?), it forces vision to reflect upon itself. Using all manner of patterns, textures and materials (from canvas, paint and photographs to sand, fabric and industrial cardboard), he explores the ground or background of all forms. Painting thus is not so much an ideology, an articulation of forms, as the experience of the 'flesh' of the sensible, as Merleau-Ponty put it when speaking of Chardin or Cézanne. The paradox of Maccheroni's learned and deliberate 'archaeological' gaze on what is not yet gone is to give us back the present<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. Variation

Another striking aspect of Maccheroni's work is that it develops and is organized in series. These, he insists, are to be seen as variations rather than repetitions.

The attentiveness to a musical phrase produced through a series of variations creates a specific temporal object, seemingly detached from the general unfolding of the musical material and facing a subjectivity made alert to it. Likewise, Maccheroni's repetitions and transpositions of modules produce a distance vis-à-vis the content he modulates and a return of the spectator upon herself and away from the material of the sensation. But at the same time, when we effectively look at them, one by one, each painting, each photograph is seen as a unique differing item in the series. Thus each work appears as one way, among many, of organising the concrete singularities that compose the real, or as a study of the birth of a form in the material. Maccheroni never says anything that is not of a very general nature. The modules are clearly specified, either by a particular structure of the content (a pattern of organising lines) or by a stencil frame. The contingent details of the 'human condition' are inscribed within these abstract forms: a torso in his christs, a skull in his *Crânes et Vanités* (Skulls and Vanities), or a parking-meter in his *Attitudes socio-critiques* (Socio-critical Attitudes). But what counts is precisely the singularity of that specific instantiation of the form. When, in another series, vulva and skull, beginning, desire and end, are superimposed in a reinvention of the traditional vanitas<sup>3</sup>, one serves as the other's content, background and foreground constantly shifting in a radiographic photomontage. Materiological work had freed vision from the concept. The serialist system completes this work and materialises concepts.

## 3. Sign

From the idea of an archaeology of the visible, that is a re-presentation of its origin in the material sensation, Maccheroni was thus led to look at signs themselves, taken in their materiality and operations, rather than their significance. To reflect more systematically upon an *Archéologie du signe* (Archaeology of Sign), he invented a special series which presented explicitly the laws of its generation, a formal matrix of visual signs combining three geometrical patterns (x, + and o) with a set of seven texture and colour samples. Jean-François Lyotard noted in the book they designed together about this series, *La Partie de peinture* (A Game of Painting)<sup>4</sup>, that when Maccheroni presents the matrix of the series together with the works themselves, he now takes art as far away as is possible from the sensible, which had been the prime mover of his works, and forces us to look at painting as an experimentation with artificial languages, rather than as the experiencing of a nature. The matrix of the series is the archaeology of a possible universe, and each work within the series is readable as one among the well-formed statements which describe all the possible facts of this universe. Compared to all the other series in Maccheroni's work, which are open-ended variations, the simplicity of this universe makes each work the clear instantiation of a finite transformation group, a necessary variation on all the others, deriving its identity from its relationships within the system. Yet, when we adopt the gaze of the spectator at an exhibition, we cannot fail, after a while, to perceive the work individually or absolutely. Each work then is experienced as expressing a simple but complete universe and yet a universe which vanishes as soon as the sign is perceived in itself, as when the familiar meaning of an often repeated word vanishes, revealing the strange absence of a meaning nevertheless

intended. If we were to take Maccheroni's work as a Critique of Pure Painting, then this fundamental series would be its transcendental deduction, managing to make us experience the visible as sign, but also the sign as visible.

#### 4. Books

In the modern artist's book the traditional relationship between text and image has been reversed. Image is no longer a visual illustration of text but rather a system of forms and the constraints of a particular shape generate the structure of the text, which thus reflects it analogically<sup>5</sup>. Maccheroni's constant attention to the relationships of sign and visibility was bound to encounter the modern book. Indeed he has worked with some of the finest writers of his time, and was supported by the most innovative designers and publishers. By nature each collaboration of this type is unique, but among all these joint works, the most emblematic would probably be the great books he designed with his friend, the writer Michel Butor, where Butor composed and recomposed his texts following the laws of the visual series they were working on, texts which were then physically inserted within the images themselves. The texts written for this volume demonstrate or study the productivity of this dialogue in books and works.

Cambridge is one of the places where the relationships between the modern book and the image have been the most extensively displayed and studied. So it is natural that Henri Maccheroni should have his first retrospective exhibition in the UK in the Wren Library of Trinity College<sup>6</sup>. But there is a more secret link, noted by Tessa Tristan in the book she dedicated to a comprehensive presentation of Maccheroni's work. The title of this volume is *Dioptrique(s)*<sup>7</sup>, and its dedication a sentence by Diderot praising Descartes for having related the phenomena of sight to those of touch, in an essay where the nature of light is studied through the phenomena of diffraction and refraction<sup>8</sup>.

In his *Letter on the Blind*<sup>9</sup>, Diderot, an empiricist philosopher leaning towards materialism, praised Descartes, his rationalist and dualist predecessor, for proposing to consider light simply as a movement of matter, and thus vision as a material experience which does not resemble the objects that occasion it any more than do the sensations in the hand of a man who walks with a stick in the dark with such dexterity that he 'sees with his hand': vision must be understood as an interpretation of material signs. The hero of Diderot's book is the blind Cambridge mathematician Nicholas Saunderson, friend of Newton and 4th Lucasian Professor of Mathematics in the University, about whom William Molyneux had sent to Locke the famous question: would he recognise the forms he knew so well from touch if he were given his sight back? Saunderson, whose sensibility was, according to Diderot, so exquisite that his skin was a canvas on which the world was painted, is presented as a materialist thinker who constantly denaturalises the objects of vision (and in that is more clairvoyant than those who see) and as a consequence considers the current state of the existing universe as an episode in a succession whose only necessity is the contingent unfolding of a natural history, capable of producing monsters as well as marvels, one among a plurality of possible material worlds. No wonder that Maccheroni should have recognised himself in such a genealogy.

#### Notes:

1- The first of these famous photographs, accompanied by poems by Pierre Bourgeade, were published in 1972 by Jean Petithory, perhaps the most innovative small press publisher in France in the sixties, in a limited edition volume: *A, Noir Corset Velu*.

2- This idea of an archeological gaze on the present links him of course to the work of the poet Michel Butor, with whom he collaborated

on remarkable books but it also explains his interest in the poetry of Saint-John Perse, who inspired an important series of watercolours.

3- See Arthur Danto, *Sex and Death in the Vanitas of Henri Maccheroni*, Crest: La Sétérée, 2001

and Claude Louis-Combet, *Le Chemin des vanités d'Henri Maccheroni*, Paris: José Corti, 2000.

4- This is one of the most interesting texts written by Lyotard on the nature of painting.

This physically formidable book was originally published in a bibliophile edition, silk screen printed in 1980 by Maryse Candela. It was reprinted in 1986 by La Casa Usher, in Florence (*Quaderni di Metafore/Cahiers de Metafore* (1986), 1:7-14).

5- See Jean Khalfa, ed., *The Dialogue between Painting and Poetry*, Cambridge: Black Apollo Press, 2001.

6- A selection of his work was shown at the Whitechapel Gallery in the autumn of 2006, together with works by Balthus, Claude Cahun, Marcel Duchamp, Pierre Molinier and Unica Zürn.

7- Tessa Tristan, *Dioptrique(s)*, Rouen/Paris: Daniel Duchoze, Ipsa Facta, 2003.

8- To figure this origin physically, Daniel Duchoze inscribed the title inside a thick layer of semi-opaque glass inserted within the cover of the limited edition of Tristan's book.

*La Dioptrique* is the first of the scientific essays to which Descartes' *Discours de la méthode* of 1637 was the introduction.

9- The *Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient* was first published in London in 1749.

10- Diderot, *Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient* (1749) (Paris: Flammarion, 2000, Marian Hobson and Simon Harvey, eds.).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty noted that with Descartes: "Vision is not the metamorphosis of things themselves into the sight of them; it is not a matter of things belonging simultaneously to the world at large and a little private world. It is a thinking that unequivocally decodes signs given within the body".

'Eye and mind', in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* (Michael B. Smith, Translation Editor, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p.132.

"La vision n'est pas la métamorphose des choses mêmes en leur vision, la double appartenance des choses au grand monde et à un

petit monde privé. C'est une pensée qui déchiffre strictement les signes donnés dans le corps.”  
L'œil et l'Esprit (Paris : Gallimard, 1964), p. 41.  
11- Diderot, Lettre sur les aveugles, p. 58.

**Copies of *Maccheroni Books/Works* can be ordered at [www.blackapollo.com](http://www.blackapollo.com)**



