



Artist: Barbara Nicoli

Exhibition title: “Barbara Nicoli, Semiotica della Natura”, 9 June – 14 July 2015

Venue: Fabbrica Eos Arte Contemporanea

INVISIBILITY, THE PLANT'S ACTION

Manuela Gandini

ALBERO. The dead slow explosion of a seed.

Bruno Munari

There's no more time. Time is over. Who on earth ever takes the time to look at the shape of a leaf, its color, or its ribbing anymore? It seems like no deceleration is possible in the frantic human brain. Joseph Beuys had warned us: align your intelligence with nature's, now! The artist, theoretician, and activist of Germany's Greens never stopped advocating the creative power and intelligence of every form of life on the planet: from the rose to the beehive, from the mineral kingdom to vegetable oil and the rest of the plant world. His pedagogic mission was to bring consciousness to humans in order for them to reclaim their anthropological and planetary unity.

Barbara Nicoli searches for this unity by bringing obsessive attention to the living worlds that surround her. A performance artist and thespian, engaged in engraving and pictorial/sculptural experimentation, she works with the long-term in mind. She processes the detail and visually transposes the plant's poetry. Her ready-made pieces are authentic handicrafts of nature: leaves, twigs, soil, flowers, wood. She sees the energy and biological creativity in each one. The leaf, the subject of engraving on precious paper, is the constant element of her search for intense dialogue

with the vegetal kingdom. Immobility and movement co-exist in the same work without contradiction. Clearly in contrast with the fixity of 18th century botanical tables sketched for scientific, documentary purposes, Nicoli preserves the plant's original vitality, organic nature, and inner world. Each leaf is a short-story (lengthened, symmetrical, torn, needle-pointed) that no one - in their rational everyday life - would ever even dream of reading, perhaps for that very same indifference to the environment that has brought us to poison our own food supply. "The question of agriculture - Beuys states - appears to be essentially a religious matter, because if we widen our outlook we might also see the plant's own invisible ends, its existence in the universe that surrounds it at cosmological level. Only then will men and women be able to see that this is their only system of nourishment. Only then will they understand that fertilizer essentially depends on the stars and therefore on an immaterial parameter".

Some souls exist, of artists and poets, that can never live very far from trees, because they know they are trees themselves, in addition to being minerals and animals, and they would never chop off a part of themselves (an arm, for example) in order to run towards illusory material worlds where no spirituality exists. The splitting of material/spiritual unity lies behind every self-created catastrophe. Art re-unites the two, mends and heals the fracture. Crisis - which has become a permanent installment in Western life - can offer, as Einstein once said, a wonderful opportunity, but "we cannot expect things to change when we go on doing the same things ourselves". Art shifts points of view and instills creative possibilities as alternative to the mechanics of the system of production and accumulation. American land-artists placed themselves in relation with the enormous dimensions of nature and its frozen lakes and deserts, impressing their own human signs onto the continuity of the territory; Mario Merz assembled wood and raw material to give shape to the energy. Beuys planted seven thousand Oak trees in Kassel. Way out in the wilderness, Ana Mendieta reproduced the silhouette of the Earth Mother, covering herself with mud and grass in the process before burning the shape. Nicoli is a part of the same tradition of those who have wanted to celebrate and glorify the creative power of the plant world and raise the level of public awareness in regard to art's social responsibility.. In her feminine, silent way that recalls the work of nuns in a convent, she appears to be concerned, above all, with the narration of detail. Nicoli does not offer the physical leaf but instead engraves it on a sheet of metal to leave the trace, and then intervenes by hand to either expand the energy or make it implode.

Her work proceeds in cycles, as mother nature herself is cyclical. The leaf represented is not always harmless, handsome, or hearty, it can suddenly become unsettling or dramatic. The image she returns is comprised of both good and evil, poetry and destruction, life and death, but it is always royal. In the cycle entitled *Impronte digitali*, we see the superimposition of a hand over the

leaf. The idea of the encounter between two worlds that permits the reading of both human furrows and vegetal ribbing is both moving and alarming at the same time because the fingertips – which to a certain extent vegetal anatomy – seem to touch the Divine in Michelangelo's way, on one hand, and to soil the drawing, on the other. It's hard to tell which of the two impressions is more vulnerable. The human one, perhaps.

In the cycle entitled *Espansioni*, the leaf and the pine branch are at the center of an energy that bursts from the interior to expand in every direction. There is an intricate interlacing of lines that depart with all the precision of a plant's nervation to invade the white space on the page. The result is a sharp, clear, vitally festive pulsing. Stormy, in some works, *Espansioni* is a process of revealing the invisible, a reading of the sign that starts from the trajectories of the lymph to extend outward into the surroundings. The work contains both the immobility of the plant rooted in the soil and the intense motor activity of the process of photosynthesis. The artist presents the "plant's invisible ends" mentioned by Beuys and evokes their expansive power. Through these decisive, daily and repetitive gestures, she reduces the distance between humanity and nature, revealing their beauty and fragility. The act (or art) of collecting the leaves, cutting them, and tracing their forms is a path of knowledge in itself. "From the very first leaf I ever cut – the artist explains – I've always wanted to know how they would have reacted to what I do. I look at a leaf and wonder what it might become". The works in the *Espansioni* cycle present the subtle worlds, the personal energy of each body, the relationship of its form to space. Also the *Intarsi* cycle copies the woodgrain design. But the lines are not only engraved, they are embroidered, accentuated by thread that adds depth and three-dimensionality. The main trajectories emerge, as in *Espansioni*, from the perimeter of the leaf, but these leaves are not intact, they've been torn. The artist makes an arbitrary gesture that changes the configuration and strips it of its integrity. Her intent is to study the way the plant's energy would expand in the absence of the part that defines its arc. The result is an unpredictable expansion of the realm of action: a conquest made by the leaf.

Nicoli *re-natures* nature. With the infinite patience of a seamstress she retraces the plant's fiber with needle and thread to re-create its tactility and then depart from the pre-established traced path to unleash its energy. Embroidery here is a process of liberation and research: abandoning the domestic realm to enter the real world, the world that in the cycle named *Scomposizioni* – divides the surfaces of the leaves into white geometric spaces impressed into the sheet of paper. The strong sign of separation of the various parts of the plant modifies the perception of the plant. "Leaves – the artist affirms – are not simply divided into different parts and then left out in space; the portion is removed but not denied, it is restored in the empty space of the leaf. The image can be perceived in its entirety only by seeing the missing part". In this case as well, Nicoli acts arbitrarily in depriving the leaf of one of its parts. Her intentions are speculative, the intention of the

artist that attempts to establish a relation with a world perceived as alive but still undecipherable. The challenge is won by the plant, which despite the rational intervention on its organism does not lose its own identity as a whole.

The repetition of the subject is constantly varied by the method of representation and desire to re-create a humanized personal nature. This is the way in which Nicoli performs a sort of re-creation in the *Artifici* cycle, her most organic and visceral series. Here, the artist, like a surgeon, slices flowers in order to analyze the color of the lymph that would never match the plant's external color. With her mastery of various types of tree, she has recreated – with ink – the shades of color that do not correspond to the color of the petals of the flowers. Tenuous and fluid twigs do not create reassuring floral patterns but give rise to alarm instead. The outlines are undefined. In this case, the plant expands, but it is an expansion that stains, one that creates disturbing shadows that do not correspond to the form. There is a sense of decadence in the outpouring of the sap, a poetics of dying light. This is the theater of leaves and flowers dancing before art. Goethe wrote: "He to whom nature begins revealing her manifest secret feels an irresistible nostalgia for her most worthy interpreter, 'arte". It is by combining various branches of scientific (cataloguing), artistic (liberating), political (regulating), and spiritual (understanding) experience that a collective awareness destined to become humanity's most important conquest may be created.