MARIO DIACONO

Archetypes and Historicity
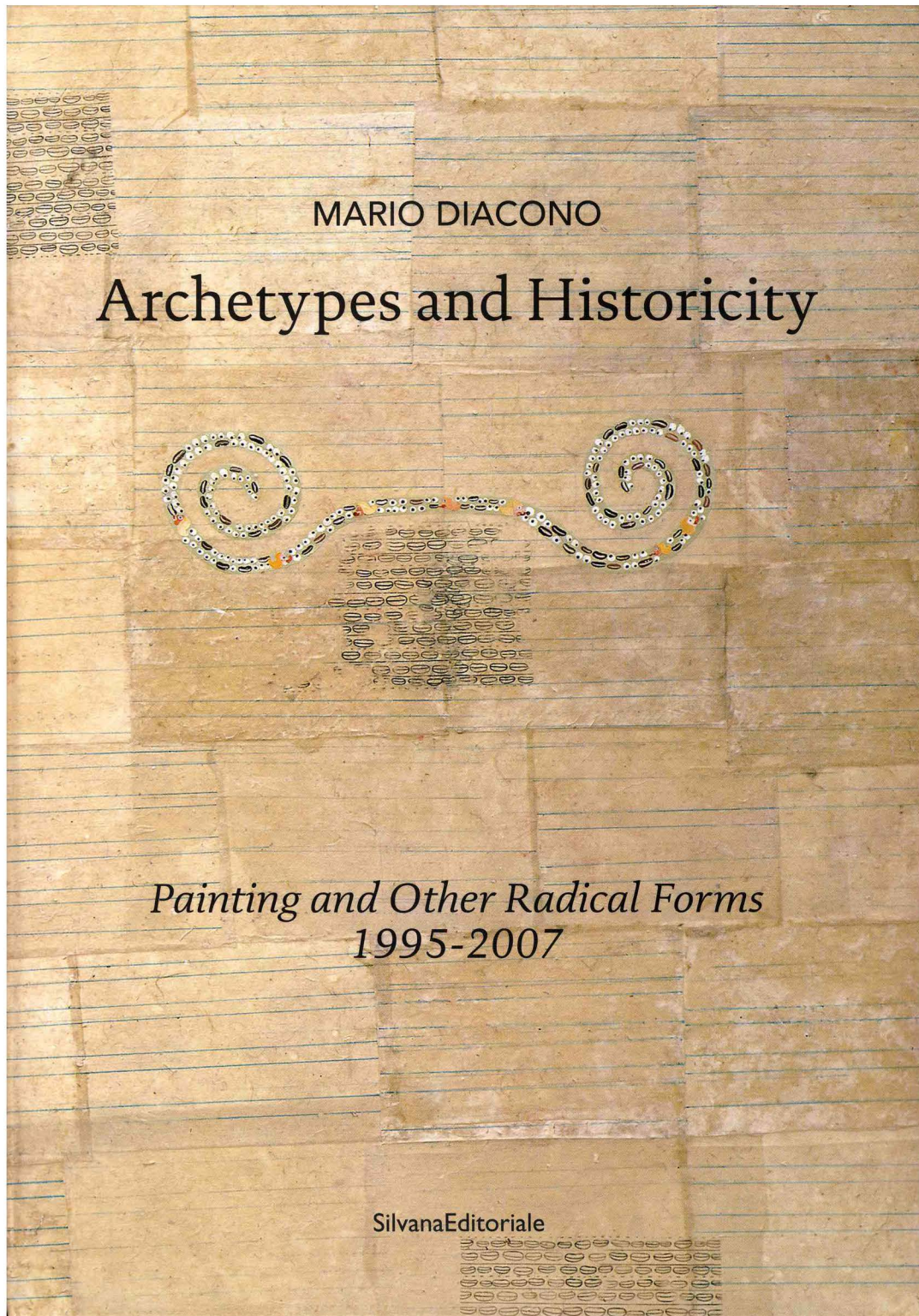
Painting and Other Radical Forms
1995-2007

SilvanaEditoriale

POST-ABSTRACTION, POST-REPRESENTATION: SCENES FROM THE COMPUTER IMAGINATION

The presentation of images, in Pedro Barbeito's work, at first (in)sight shows a radical change from the Modernist language that painting, from Manet and Impressionism through Mondrian and Minimalism, has articulated in the last 150 years: a language in which existence and visual representation are empathic fields of energy critically reacting to each other (sometimes copulating) on the symbolic bed (or window) of the canvas, in a constantly mutant relationship. The pictorial construction's grammar has undergone since *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* an incessant rephrasing of both the iconic and factural processes initiated by the Renaissance, when craftsmanship and shamanship were practically inextricable. Painting was then thought generated by painting (or antipainting); the handling of brush strokes, space, form, and color self-referential, born from an inner reworking of the history of picture making in which the eidology of the Object was fading and gradually evolving into the ideology of a Subject. Barbeito's pictures start by referencing, instead, another language, accelerated by cybermorphology to the point that at first (in)sight neither an Object nor a Subject nor even a concept or an icon (a visual archetype) appear located at the center of the work, but Technology itself is inscribed as a mother language, outmoder of all previous languages. These pictures are still made with paint on canvas, with abstractional forms in a perspectival and gridded space—sometimes reminiscent of early Bleckner works: *Gravity of Matter* and *From Organism to Architecture*, for instance, both from 1981—, with pixelated shapes painted in electrically charged colors (that's why they still speak of the necessity of painting and of the undeadness of art). But their imaginary is generated by computer software, simulates scientific (cosmographic) models and video-gaming textuality, inscribes a timelessness that looks very much like a closure of history.

His two most recent pictures, *Z.O.E.* (2001, his last elliptical work) and *Skirmish in the Mountains* (2002, his first rectangular ill. 54, 55 one), mark the end of a cycle and the beginning of a recycling.

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Z.O.E. appropriates from a video game (*Zone of the Enders*) not only its title but also its narrative and its imagery, or whatever abstract imagery is left from the computer rewriting of topical moments of the game. "The painted images are taken from stills where the game's image has lost its representation and has become abstracted due to excessive calculations the computer had to make", the artist has pointed out. Since the game's story is about robots navigating in a future world, the artist's acronymic reduction of its title to a word corresponding to the ancient Greek name for life, existence, *zoe*, seems fitting for a picture of the end with images of the future. Anyway, the work's foreground is dominated by four principal forms, deriving from stills of the videogame: two pixelated flat shapes, one yellow the other blue, caught in a mesh like fishes in a net and floating over a both gridded and non-gridded background that denotes the environment of the game (the non-gridded sections are a perspectival simplification of the gridded ones). They are contrasted by two geometrically exploding white forms, consisting of a 3D re-inscription of the blue and yellow shapes as actants sparingly wobbling through the abstract fiction of a cosmodrama (a *répétition différente* signifying the coexistence of both flat and deep space in the picture's multidimensional world). Along the elliptical surface's edges are scattered small multicolored, pixelated forms seemingly born from the explosion of the yellow and blue shapes inside the meshes, while all over the picture's black, gray, red flat and deep space moves an inordinate web of thin red lines. Under this constellation of contrasting forms resulting from different times/places of the game conflated in a single futurescape, the grid structuring the ground appears made of black lines diagonally radiating from the picture's edges toward its center and vertically intersected by parallel lines, with the distance between the lines incrementally decreasing as they move inward.

These pictorial strategies—an elliptical canvas (alluding to a planetary otherness), a gridded ground, a pixelated representation, a videogame derived imagery with science-fictional (futuristic) connotations, the reduction of such an imagery to iconic forms tied in to the discourse of a hypergeometric abstraction— push Barbeito's *Z.O.E.* to the limits of a locked-in, self-referential, upended hermeticism. *Skirmish*

in the Mountains, instead, as if to rationalize *Z.O.E.*'s hyperfictions, appears immersed in history (in *art* history) and brings into sharper play (if still through the accelerated, pixelated abstractions generated by a computer remaking of the videogamic imagination) the artist's fundamental preoccupation: the creation of a landscape of ulteriority, of an ulteriority of landscape. *Skirmish* intertextualizes with videogame-like imagery Peter Bruegel's *Return of the Herd*, 1565 (now in Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum), a picture from the so-called "Series of the Months", considered "a landmark in the development of European landscape painting" (Marijnissen and Seidel, *Bruegel*, New York, 1984), seemingly representing a scene of human activities in the months of September/October. In the pixelated, visionary land- and humanscape (re)created by Barbeito's picture, the details of Bruegel's narrative appear as if cellularly de- and/or re-constructed in their atomic structure. The sky, clear on the left and cloudy on the picture's right, the valley surrounded by rocky mountains, the fields along the river with peasants at work, the herdsmen pushing their flock forward, toward the woods and then the village—all these figural elements are inscribed as an all-over grid of tiny squares, decreasing in size toward the vanishing point at center and repeating in their shifting colors the pictorial mood of Bruegel's Autumnal archetype. The hyperlanguage that Barbeito enacts by grafting the memory of history onto the computer memory attempts to bridge not so much the gap between art and science as the one between painting and its future (via its past).

With *Skirmish in the Mountains*, he goes well beyond the mise-en-scène of a technopoiesis, as in the previous ellipse-shaped paintings. The grid of color squares generated by the hermetic, almost subliminal inscription of Bruegel's image provides the work not only with a homogeneous, all-over, modernistically (and minimalistically) flat pictorial ground on which to build new adventures in (art) history, but also with the first of many layers of representation-*cum*-abstraction which make possible that grafting of visionary painting onto the imaginary of technology. To begin with, a square, white section of the picture is cut from the right side of the primed canvas before the actual painting is started and is placed on the opposite side as a sculptural, 3D

geological rendering of the landscape. Then, after Bruegel's images of nature (the landscape) have been (re)painted as a grid of color squares that from a distance comes into focus as an historically fading icon, his images of culture (the humanscape: herdsmen with their flock, the village, the buildings on the mountains) are graphically superimposed on the grid as black (in the picture's upper half) and white (in the lower half) linear recreations of the original composition using computer programs. On top of these descriptive outlines, a large section of the canvas is covered with a glassy, semi-transparent, thick layer of acrylic connoting images of videogamic landscapes. This multiplicity of layers, of meanings, of modulations of a medium to denote meaning, while adding to painting a new level of cyberconceptuality, also makes the case for a sharper interrogation of Technology's incessant provocation of the subsistence of art.

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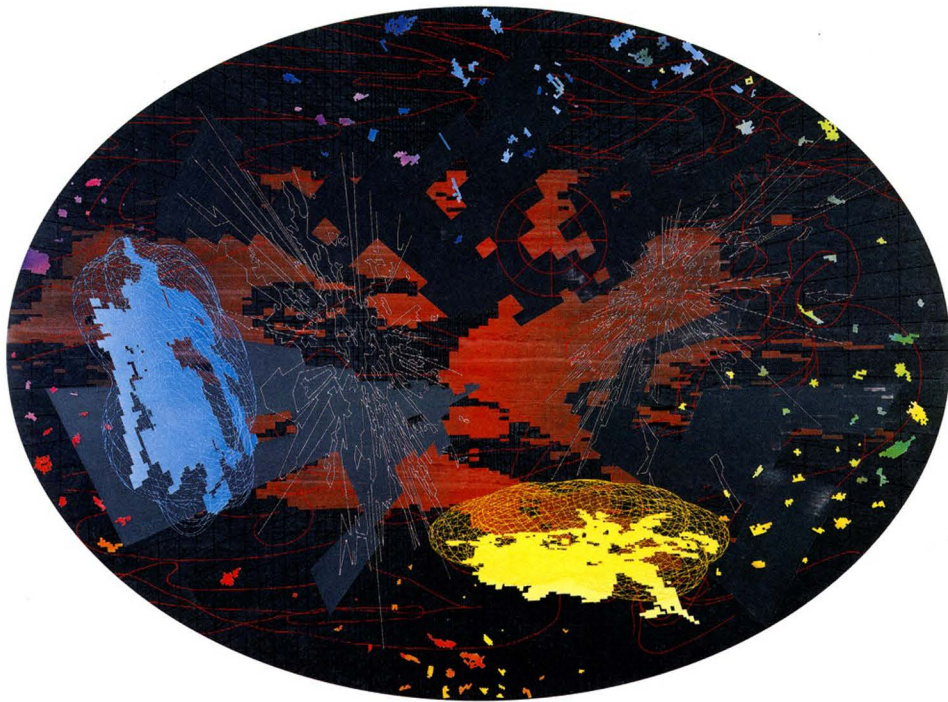
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54. **Pedro Barbeito**, *Z.O.E.*, 2001
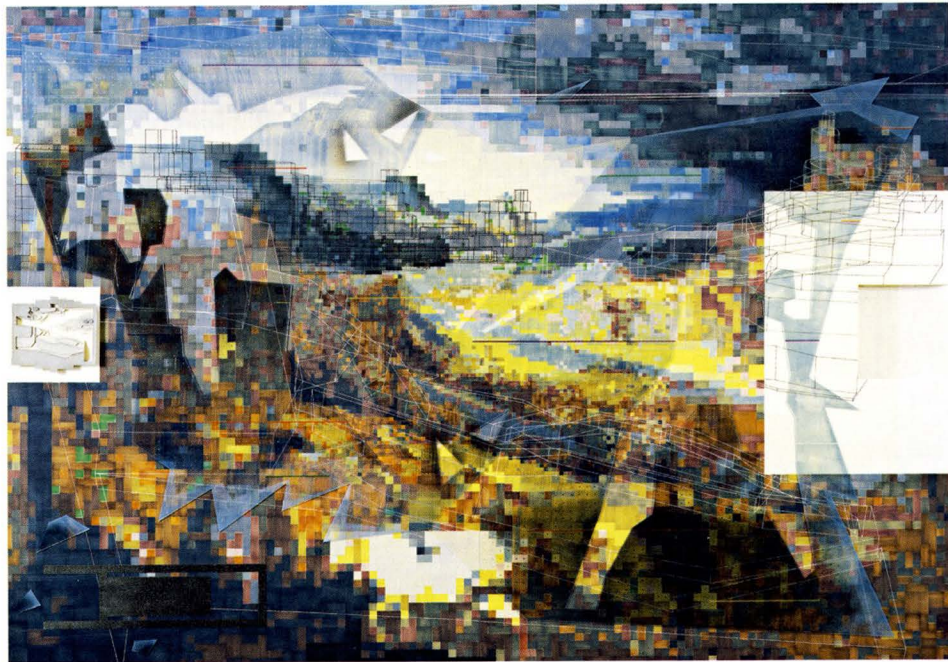
55. **Pedro Barbeito**, *Skirmish in the Mountains*, 2002