

PLUS ULTRA

AS HE BOLDLY WENT TO STEAL THE RED OXEN OF GERYON, THE GREEK HERAKLES APPROACHED THE WESTERN SHORES OF THE INLAND SEA AND TOUCHED THE EDGES OF THE KNOWN WORLD. THEN, HE RAISED TWO MOUNDS TO DELIMIT IT: THE ROCK OF GIBRALTAR AND THE JEBEL MUSA, WHICH HAVE SINCE BEEN CALLED THE PILLARS OF HERCULES. MODERN TEXTS REPORT THAT THEY ONCE BORE THIS INSCRIPTION: *NEC PLUS ULTRA*, NOTHING BEYOND. THIS MYTHICAL EPISODE ECHOES THE VAST COLONISATION OF THE WESTERN MEDITERRANEAN, DURING THE TIME OF HESIOD, COMPARABLE TO THAT OF AMERICA TWO THOUSAND YEARS LATER. THE ADVENTURE OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS IN THE INDIES ALSO GAVE CHARLES V'S SPAIN THE HONOUR OF RESPONDING TO THE LATIN PHRASE. IN 1516, THE KINGDOM ADOPTED IT AS ITS MOTTO, AMPUTATED BY ONE WORD, BUT INCREASED BY ONE HOPE: *PLUS ULTRA*. FURTHER AND FURTHER.

IN ANY FIELD, THE QUEST FOR PROWESS AND SELF-SURPASSING ARE AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THE MANLY DEMONSTRATION. THE HERCULEAN AND CLASSICAL MODEL OF MASCULINITY HAS ENDURED DYNAMICALLY THROUGH THE AGES BY EMBODYING A MULTIPLICITY OF IDEOLOGIES. COURAGE, POWER AND ANCIENT COMBATIVENESS ARE TODAY PART OF A STRUGGLE CENTRED ON THE INDIVIDUAL. TO NEGOTIATE WITH ONE'S OWN LIMITS IS AN ART THAT IS TO BE CULTIVATED. ROCKY BALBOA: A CHARACTER WHO RESPONDS TO HIS FUNDAMENTAL VULNERABILITY WITH A DETERMINATION TO WIN; A MAN WHO WORKS FOR HIMSELF AND THUS FOR THE DREAM OF AN ENTIRE PEOPLE. AS A HERO, HE CARRIES THE VALUES OF THE NATION OF THE UNITED STATES AND, IN FACT, SHINES ON THE WHOLE WORLD. HOLLYWOOD USUALLY PRODUCES FICTION, AND OCCASIONALLY LEGENDS.

THE BIRTH OF GREAT STORIES IS QUITE NATURALLY ACCOMPANIED BY A FLOWERING OF ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS. JUST AS NATURALLY, THE BRONZE STATUE OF THE BOXER THAT THOMAS SCHOMBERG EXECUTED FOR *ROCKY III* WAS LATER DONATED TO THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA BY SYLVESTER STALLONE. IT IS STILL ON DISPLAY IN THE VICINITY OF HIS MUSEUM AS AN UNUSUAL GRAFT OF ART HISTORY. IN 2007, THE SMALL SERBIAN TOWN OF ŽITIŠTE ALSO ACQUIRED AN EFFIGY OF ROCKY BALBOA, A REVIVAL OF SCHOMBERG'S WORK BY THE CROATIAN ARTIST BORIS STAPARAC, LESS EXPENSIVE THAN THE ORIGINAL SCULPTURE. IN THE FORMERLY COMMUNIST COUNTRY, THE YOUNGEST PART OF THE POPULATION GREW UP IDENTIFYING WITH THIS CHARACTER DETERMINED TO SURPASS HIS CONDITION. THE POPULAR ICON HAS GAINED THE STATURE OF AN OFFICIAL MONUMENT.

AN ALMOST OPPOSITE OPERATION TOOK PLACE WITH THE SCULPTURE *SPIRIT OF ECSTASY* (1911) BY CHARLES SYKES, FAMOUS AS A RADIATOR CAP BY ROLLS ROYCE. THE COMPANY HAD SPONSORED IT IN ORDER TO DISSUADE THE OWNERS WHO DECORATED THEIR RADIATOR GRILLE WITH FANCIFUL AND SOMETIMES RACIST FIGURINES. IT WAS SIGNIFICANTLY INSPIRED BY THE DIVINE EFFIGY OF ATHENA NIKÉ STANDING ON THE BOW OF A SHIP IN THE MONUMENT COMMEMORATING THE VICTORY OF SAMOTHRACE KEPT IN THE LOUVRE. THE NOD TO THE ANCIENT SYMBOL IMPLICITLY CONTRIBUTES TO THE BRAND'S IMAGE OF NOBILITY AND DURABILITY. MINIATURISED, CAST IN SILVER AND MULTIPLIED ON THE SCALE OF AUTOMOBILE PRODUCTION, IT HAS BECOME THE INDELIBLE EMBLEM OF CLASSIC LUXURY. BUT IT IS ALSO PART OF THE TRADITION THAT GIVES FEMALE FIGURES THE ROLE OF MUSES OR ALLEGORIES RATHER THAN REAL ACTORS OF EVENTS.

THIS MALE HEROISM WAS ASSIMILATED BY PIERRE DE COUBERTIN WHEN HE FOUNDED THE MODERN OLYMPIC GAMES ON THE PLANS OF A FANTASISED ANTIQUITY. IN 1910, HE WROTE THAT THIS COMPETITION CONSTITUTED «THE SOLEMN AND PERIODIC EXALTATION OF MALE ATHLETICS WITH [...] FEMALE APPLAUSE AS ITS REWARD». WHILE IT HAS SINCE BEEN FORGOTTEN, ARTISTS ALSO COMPETED IN THE GAMES FROM 1912 TO 1948. IN PAINTING, SCULPTURE, ARCHITECTURE, MUSIC OR LITERATURE, THEIR CHALLENGE WAS TO EXCEL IN THE EVOCATION OF SPORT. AT THAT TIME, THE ATHLETIC VIRGIN OF THE VICTORY OF SAMOTHRACE WAS A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION FOR MANY ARTISTS AND WRITERS. BOXING WAS ALSO A FAVOURITE SUBJECT IN THE ARTISTIC AVANT-GARDES AS WELL AS IN THESE MORE OFFICIAL COMPETITIONS.

PERHAPS COUBERTIN HAD ALSO UNDERSTOOD THAT CREATION WAS TO ARTISTS WHAT BOXING WAS GOING TO BE TO ROCKY BALBOA: A WRIGGLE IN HEADWINDS, A DOORWAY TO A WIDER HORIZON. FOR BOTH OF THEM, IT IS THE NARRATIVE QUALITIES OF THEIR TRAJECTORIES THAT CAPTIVATE US, THE SYMBOLISM THEY MOBILISE AND THE UNIFYING CHARACTER OF THIS OR THAT ACT, MUCH MORE THAN THEIR SUCCESSES. THE FAILURE AND DOUBT THEY ARE IMBUED WITH APPEAR, AS IS RARELY THE CASE, TO BE STRUCTURING FORCES. THE FIRST LOVE RELATIONSHIPS, FOR EXAMPLE, THEIR OUTDATED RITUALS AND THEIR PERSISTENT NOSTALGIA ARE OBVIOUSLY PART OF IT. IT IS PERHAPS TO THEM THAT THE FIRST FEELINGS OF DEFEAT ARE ASSOCIATED, THOSE TO WHICH ALL THE GREAT TRIALS THAT FOLLOW WILL INEVITABLY REFER.

AND WHILE MANKIND PROGRESSES BRAVELY, THERE ARE ALWAYS A FEW INDIVIDUALS WHO PREFER TO WATCH ITS FOOTWORK. MATHIAS PFUND IS ONE OF THOSE LESS INTERESTED IN THE EVOLUTION OF ARTISTIC FORMS THAN IN THE MECHANISMS THAT PROVOKE THEM. FOR ADMITTING THAT THE WORLD WAS ALREADY FULL OF OBJECTS, HE CHOSE NOT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE COMPETITION OF NEW PRODUCTIONS BUT RATHER TO ADVISE ON WHAT ALREADY EXISTS. HIS WORKING HYPOTHESIS, WHICH BORDERS ON THE SOCIAL SCIENCES, IS TO UNEARTH IN ARTISTIC OBJECTS THE SYMPTOMS OF THE MORES OF THE TIME. DRAWING ON THE CONSECRATED BLUEPRINT OF ART GALLERIES, HE ARRANGES HIS SPACE JUST AS HE COMPOSES HIS STORIES, GIVING FULL SPACE TO ISOLATED ANECDOTES AND ALL THE ATTENTION TO THE LINKS HE DEVELOPS BETWEEN THEM.

MUSCLES AND MONUMENTS ARE THE BASIC GRAMMAR OF A HEROIC MASCULINITY THAT MATHIAS PFUND HAS UNDERTAKEN TO UNRAVEL, AND OF WHICH THE *PLUS* AND THE *ULTRA* ARE THE CONSECRATED MODALITIES. WITH A MOOD THAT BORROWS FROM CARICATURE, HIS WORKS HIGHLIGHT GENDER STEREOTYPES. GENDER IN THE SENSE OF SOCIAL ASSIGNMENT TO A BINARY GENDER, BUT ALSO IN THE SENSE OF THE HIERARCHY OF ARTISTIC GENRES. HE IS ALSO INTERESTED IN THE PRESUMPTIONS IN USE ABOUT WHAT A NOBLE CULTURE SHOULD BE AND THE CODES THAT UNDERPIN THEM. THE PRIVILEGE USUALLY GRANTED TO UNIQUE WORKS MAY FINALLY FALL AWAY. FOR HIM, NOTHING IS EVER SELF-MADE: NEITHER THINGS, NOR PEOPLE, NOR GLORY. THE MOTIVATIONS OF HEROES ARE MODELLED ON THOSE OF POLITICAL STRUCTURES. THEIR ANATOMIES ARE THE SUBLIMATED IMAGE OF THE SOCIAL BODY.

THIS IS WHAT APPEARS WHEN THE TWO BLOCKS ARE SIDE BY SIDE, THE TWO MINIATURE MASSES OF FLESH IN *YOU'RE GONNA LOVE PICASSO (AFTER SCHOMBERG & STAPARAC)*. IN THE WEST AS WELL AS IN THE EAST, AND INDEED IN BOTH DIRECTIONS, THE SHAPES CIRCULATE, EACH TIME BEING RE-IMBUED WITH THE AESTHETIC MARKERS OF THE AUTHOR AND THE CULTURE THAT ASSIMILATES THEM. MATHIAS PFUND POINTS TO THIS HIATUS IN POLITICAL DISPLAYS, WHICH MAINLY RESEMBLES A FEINT. THE NATION THAT APPROPRIATES ANOTHER'S EMBLEMS PLACES ITS PRIDE IN THE SPECIFIC DESIGN OF THE WORKS. ITS IDENTITY LIES IN THE HAND OF THE ARTISTS: IT IS ABOVE ALL A QUESTION OF STYLE. BUT IT IS ALSO A WAY FOR IT TO SALUTE THE UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLE OF COPYING AND IMITATION WHICH, TO A WELL-MADE FIGURE, GIVES MANY DESCENDANTS.

HE PLACES HIMSELF ON THE SIDELINES OF THE BATTLES OF FORMAL INVENTIONS. HE PROCEEDS BY MOULDING AND REPRODUCTION, BECOMING A COMMISSIONER, A COMPILER, TRANSFORMING WHILE HARDLY MANIPULATING. SOMETIMES POLYSEMIES MAKE SENSE, SOMETIMES THEY MAKE PUNS. THE DEGENERATED COPIES OF *SPIRIT OF ECSTASY*, LINED UP ON THE RADIATOR FOR *AFTER ECSTASY*, ARE ALUMINIUM MELTS *AFTER*, AS MUCH AS MELTS *AFTER* ECSTASY. HEAT OF AN EROTIC ROAR OR SMALL DEATH OF THE STATUES AND THEIR SYMBOLIC WEIGHT. THE WOMAN APPEARS IN ANY CASE AS A REWARD: WHERE NIKÉ COMMEMORATES A MILITARY VICTORY, CARS CROWN A SOCIAL SUCCESS (BECAUSE IF YOU DON'T OWN A ROLLS ROYCE AT FIFTY ETC.), AS DOES THE POSSESSION OF WORKS OF ART.

WITH « *AT LEAST WE STILL HAVE THE VENICE BIENNALE* », HE DIVERTS THE MEDAL DESIGNED BY ANDRÉ RIVAUD FOR THE 1924 PARIS GAMES. HE MADE A CAST OF IT BY REPRODUCING FOUR TIMES THE SAME PART OF THE REVERSE SIDE, THE ONE SHOWING THE TOOLS SPECIFIC TO SCULPTURE (Mallet, PUNCH, CHISEL), CURIOUSLY CLOSE TO OLYMPIC SPORTS EQUIPMENT (POLO, JAVELIN, OAR). MATHIAS PFUND THUS MAKES AN AMUSED COMMENTARY ON HIS OWN RELATIONSHIP TO THE INVENTION OF SHAPES. FOR HIM, IT IS ABOVE ALL A FORMALITY TO BE CIRCUMVENTED IN ORDER TO REFLECT ON THE MEANING OF SHAPES ALREADY IN CIRCULATION. THE RESTORED OLYMPIC GAMES OFFERED ABOVE ALL A PEACEFUL TERRAIN FOR THE SYMBOLIC EXPRESSION OF GEOPOLITICAL RELATIONS, AND HE EMPHASIZES IN PASSING THE CONSTANT COMPLEXITY OF THE IDEOLOGICAL ROLE OF ARTISTS.

THUS MATHIAS PFUND THWARTS THE GRANDILOQUENCE THAT CERTAIN BIOGRAPHICAL PASSAGES OF PUBLIC CREATORS AND FIGURES CAN HAVE. *MATHIAS + ELLA (10TH ANNIVERSARY REMASTER)* BELONGS PRECISELY TO THIS INTIMATE REGISTER. IT IS A BRASS PLATE MOULDED ON AN INSCRIPTION HE CARVED IN CONCRETE IN 2010 WITH HIS GIRLFRIEND AT THE TIME. THE ARTIST RESTORES AND REHABILITATES THIS GRAFFITI, AN ELEMENTARY GESTURE OF SCULPTURE AND AFFIRMATION OF EXISTENCE, TO INSERT IT WITH DERISION IN HIS SPARSE SELECTION OF COMMEMORATIONS. READY TO DISCREDIT ALL VICTORIES, STARTING WITH HIS OWN, HE COUNTS ON THE EDIFYING POWER OF FAILURES TO REWRITE THE VIRILIST LESSON OF THE *PLUS* AND *ULTRA*.

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TRANSLATION: TARIK LAZOUNI