

Friedhelm Mennekes New Visual Concepts for Old Human Themes

The Chilean Fernando Prats belongs to a group of artists who strive to liberate their art from the confines of the purely formal and focus once again on mankind. Far from being something objective, for Prats art is deeply rooted in the living subjectivity of the human being. It is maintained, as it were, parallel to his conduct and thought. Since at least the beginning of the twentieth century, art has been conscious of the fact that it may approach man's situation and his world in creative terms. This trend has been stimulated by the discovery that the world, as man sees it through his own eyes, is determined in the last instance by the forms he uses thanks to his intelligence. This means that many artists have come to realise that since they are concerned with the construction of these forms of seeing, their work may lead to an extension of human awareness as a whole. This is what Paul Klee had in mind when he said that art does not reproduce the visible, it makes the invisible visible.

Early in the twentieth century artists were spurred on by the hope that precisely by paying greater attention to new elements of representation they could continue to develop and foster old schemes of sensorial perception. Then art created new visual concepts that were needed to model the ceaseless flow of consciousness. Art emerged, therefore, as a means by which to investigate and further develop our ways of plastically representing reality. It is an art that time and time again prepares to give form to the amorphous in proximity to the equally amorphous basis of the being. Consequently, artistic activity is concerned essentially with the creation of forms. Forms of an intellectual experience.

At the outset of this artistic activity lies the act of questioning, which raises doubts about the validity of existing replies and attempts once again to get to the bottom of problems. Here, questioning has in itself a transitory, transforming character. It describes in an abstract way the inner nucleus of artistic activity. In the question, man at last does without himself and without all private knowledge to accede to the ultimate domain in which all questions move; it is to question as an expectation of the senses and as an assertion of being; and it is precisely here, in the last instance, that the intellectual self-fulfilment of the human being lies.

Few philosophers this century have researched this aspect of the question as deeply as Martin Heidegger. According to him, "the question is an inquiring search into what one is in one's being here, and one's being thus... Questioning in itself has, as the behaviour of a being, of the questioner, a character typical of the being... What is sought, the object of the being's question, is... in the first instance impossible to grasp". Without submitting Fernando Prats's work to Heidegger's philosophy, this quotation nonetheless reveals a preoccupation central to his art. Prats searches ostensibly for ways to endow the question with artistic form. The question for him is an aesthetic object and it is here because he wants it to be. In his art, Prats questions the question itself and awakens in the questioner the singular quality of his consciousness. We are therefore in the presence of a being open "to the world" (Max Scheler), who examines everything with his eyes to be thus attentive to everything.

Questions have a method, they transcend and transform the state of knowledge and experience. They illuminate the unknown and provide chaos with elements of order. Although this philosophical approach is decidedly abstract, it determines the logic of Prats's artistic activity. Nonetheless, this logic is oriented towards the material circumstances of the world and towards the inner processes of its development. Consequently, what he investigates is the movement initiated by the question. This is the starting point of his art.

The goal of this movement is, generally speaking, substance, understood in dynamic terms and, in the last instance, the evolutive development of the world. In accordance with his etymology, the word substance refers to the subjacent, in other words, that which remains or subsists independent from ever-changing manifestations. However, according to the concept substance is what, beyond everything that moves and is moved, ultimately settles in itself. The concept of substance, which lies at the basis of this art, is not static, immobile, or unalterable, for like the German artist Joseph Beuys, Fernando Prats understands substance as essentially *movens*, that which moves in a determining way, although for the rest he contemplates the world in terms of its evolution. He finds strength in the chaotic; man responds to it on the plastic-mental plane through the discovery and invention of plausible, concrete concepts and forms.

As in the case of Beuys, Prats's artistic thought is related, and not only here, to general concepts of religion and, in particular, of Catholic theology, such as the transubstantiation of matter. It is the

representation of a symbolic conception of the world based on real events, which then builds mental correspondences on these events by which to better see and model basic realities.

In the first place we must mention fire and processes related to it. Fernando Prats begins all his art works by burning paper. In the kiln he built specially for this purpose, he colours the pieces of paper from grey to black, and then hangs them for as long as necessary in the top of the extractor hood. Thus, smoke particles are deposited regularly on the surface of the paper. Then, the smoke particles that have appeared on the burnt paper are transferred to another piece of paper. This, now in a new physical state, is transformed paper, as it were. Next the artist submerges the pieces of paper stratified in a basin full of a mixture of water and alcohol; this is a fixing bath. Then Prats works on the sheet of paper using graphite or his hands to create spontaneous drawn gestures.

To the same extent in which the objectivity of elements of fire and chemistry is physically present, these processes are also carried out simultaneously in a mythological way. For Fernando Prats, fire contains the ancient religious traditions of offerings of fire and smoke. For this reason, they occupy the centre of his conceptions, as they occupy the centre of worship in different cultures as purification rites. In the same way, the bath is related to initiation rites or to the phases of life. In the exhibition it is possible to see some examples of this group of works.

However, another work material occupies the centre of the exhibition with greater force than fire and soot. This is the host, that is, the bread used in holy mass according to the liturgy of the Church. Bread, more possibly than any other product, is an element of decisive transformations or, to be more precise, of transubstantiations of the faith. The choice of this product reveals, in its eloquent form, the artist's symbolic orientation. In his conceptual sobriety, Prats uses a cultural product that like few others points beyond itself; it illuminates as matter, and thus bread is transformed, for example, into luminous bread, to use a term coined by Joseph Beuys. Prats's forms open the eyes of the observer from Christian culture to the spiritual. Once Beuys presented a bar of chocolate in the hands of two little girls as something spiritual. Then he declared:

"Yes, this is, to put it very briefly, a direct reference to the spirituality of matter. Bread, that is, a substance that represents the most elementary substance of human food, acquires its meaning in the term 'luminous bread', because its origins are in the spiritual, that is, because man does not live by bread alone but also by the spirit; to be honest, in the same way as in transubstantiation, the transformation of the host in the ancient rite of the Church. Here we proclaim: this is only bread in its outward appearance, for in reality it is Christ, in other words, the transubstantiation of matter."

According to a similar concept, the matter bread moves between two planes united in a story. It is, in short, bread as the metaphor of all human nutriment and, at the same time, as the synthesis of all stories with Jesus and all his words as the central theme. He himself arranged this consecration in a symbolic act and made the repetition of the sacrament the central contents of his message: "Do this in my name". In the Last Supper, Jesus takes the bread in his hands and says: "This is my body", in other words, this is me. It is the bread that gives life to the world.

Hunger is invariably hunger for life, and hunger for life is insatiable. It is understandable, therefore, that Jesus should transfer the whole of his story to this expressive word, for in His message God defends life after death; and this is the life that man pursues. In accordance with the word that issues from the mouth of God, Jesus is bread for the life of the world.

Despite all the astonishing Christian religiosity of its materials and meanings, the work of this young Chilean artist is not exactly Christian art but rather the variant of a form of conceptualism determined to go beyond the plane of pure rationalism and provide it, through elevation, with a broader view of the world. Rationality attempts to strike an alliance with the intuitive, the present with the past, enlightenment with the romantic attitude.

This is not the first time that Fernando Prats has exhibited in a church. His presentation in 1997 at the Church of Nuestra Señora de la Divina Providencia in Santiago de Chile was truly impressive. We also recall his interesting project for the basilica of Santa Maria del Mar in Barcelona. Both involved spatial interventions. In Santiago he occupied the side chapels, thus creating eight stations of art. For their conception he used the holy spaces of the house of God and thus deepened, intensified and renewed liturgical elements such as altars, confessionals and baptismal fonts. Once again, however, I must insist that this is not Christian art; it is the force of art itself, with which Prats investigates ritual antecedents and spatial conditions in practical-artistic logic. Antecedents and conditions that he

consults, reconstructs, moves, revives and renews creatively as an artist. This is the specific, but also the unique and moving, aspect of his art.

At Vic Cathedral he confronts holy space and even takes a step further: he eludes the central nave and settles for five secondary spaces: the cloister, the treasure chamber, the chapter house, the crypt and the *alberguería* (lodging house). In this way, he displaces the accent of the exhibition. Now he no longer shows his works; but rather, through their presentation, he takes advantage of the opportunity to apply accents of counterpoint to the space that invite the observer not to observe but to interact and penetrate. Thus, the exhibition becomes transformed into action, so that the observer also participates in these transforming processes until he is lost in them. Here he becomes concerned almost exclusively with himself, with his questions and enigmas; here it is possible for him to forget and abandon both art and religion, although this will not prevent him in the end from re-encountering himself and recovering these two portions of culture. This process is not a new one in the Christian tradition, for there have always been therapeutic activities that take the form of processions and pilgrimages. The most important of all these is the *via crucis*, which in the exhibition seems to act as a kind of internal principle, although in the form in which it has developed in twentieth-century art. Here follows a brief summary of the story of the *via crucis*.

The manifestations that crystallise on the *via crucis* are to be found at the beginnings of Christianity, more specifically, in the pilgrimages to the holy places of Jerusalem. Despite changing political situations, the tradition continued uninterrupted and documents have come down to us from the fourth century that speak of the pilgrimages. Initially, everything was reduced to interest in visiting the Holy Places and to follow exactly the same path that Jesus had walked.

Although accounts of these pilgrimages, soon enriched with legendary elements, became widespread, for most people it was absolutely impossible to make a journey of such magnitude. So it occurred to someone to establish specific itineraries, according to particular accounts, so that people could symbolically travel the same road as the Saviour without moving from their home country. Thus the first roads were created. According to biblical reports and the *via captivitatis*, these roads began in the garden of Gethsemane and take in the authorities before whom Jesus had to appear to be interrogated: Anas, Caiphas, Pilate, and Herod, then returning to Pilate, who issued the final verdict. It is here that the *via crucis* begins. In accordance with the essence of the biblical message, it begins with Christ being condemned to death and continues with the scene in which he carries the cross, the allusion to Simon the Cyrenaic and the encounter with the holy women, and ends with the crucifixion, the descent and the interment.

The first *vias crucis* were marked out exclusively with crosses. Later, simple figures were placed along it that with the passage of time became embellished with all imaginable kinds of details. The origin of such figures was not aesthetic interest but rather the practice of specific religious exercises, above all in the form of processions. Here we locate the tradition of the falls of Jesus and, in local variations, the tradition of the falls in which Jesus kneels or else falls as a result of pain. On the basis of this hard road, people could create their own living image which, with the aid of preaching and contemplation, they converted into pictures. These sometimes numbered three, sometimes five, but in most cases seven. The mysteries soon came to be known as stations, originally a military concept that meant lookout post. Later station came to define standing to attention and the act of remaining motionless in processions. Thus it became a place and moment of contemplation, of recollection and of prayer.

The *via crucis* of fourteen stations is the result of a plural development process that took place later, the details of which it would be inappropriate to describe here. However, its dissemination in the form of a result is due above all to two factors, one literary and the other pastoral. At the beginning of the Modern Era, with the invention of the printing press, a wide range of religious writings disseminated the idea of the *via crucis*. Its transfer in the form of illustrations to manuals fostered its popularisation, while recommendations and spiritual assistance propitiated enthusiastic acceptance by wide sectors of society. Thus the *via crucis* became a widespread spiritual exercise in which people could take part with their preoccupations and needs. Here one could meditate on the secrets of religion, questions and doubts, intervene in the different scenes in such a way that in prayer and meditation everything that affected one would appear, then returning to life consoled, revitalised and renovated in spirit and body. Thousands and thousands of *vias crucis* set up in open spaces, on altars and in churches reveal that this spiritual exercise enjoys great popular favour.

The fourteen paintings by Barnett Newman grouped together under the title of Stations of the Cross have entered the history of art and of the via crucis by virtue of the great impact they have exercised on many people. Executed between 1958 and 1966, they are now at the National Gallery in Washington. Although initially Newman did not know that these paintings would become a complete series, later he realised, as he himself confesses, that the theme was one of great conceptual unity, and little by little this unity found expression in the paintings. Neither is this series an illustration of traditional themes, for what Newman in fact does is trace black or white vertical strips on the blank canvas, differently executed and confronting each other from left to right. Then, at the ninth station, everything becomes white to be dominated by black in the twelfth and thirteenth stations. Finally, in the fourteenth station, the dramatic composition entirely dissolves once again into white.

Newman conceives his series as a plastic representation of Jesus's via crucis. He took its unity from the first verses of Psalm 22: *Lema sabachthani - why?* The different stations represent not anecdotes but rather a single event, which his paintings serve exclusively, as he explains in an interview contained in the catalogue of his 1966 works: "Why have you forsaken me? Why do you forsake me? What is your purpose? Why? This is the Passion. These are Jesus's cries. Not the painful itinerary of the Via Dolorosa but the question that has no answer".

Newman's via crucis, as a series and as a variation on a single idea, has aroused uninterrupted fascination in the art of our time. This is due, among many other reasons of greater or lesser importance, to its history, the origins of which go back to representations of the Passion in Western art. Looking back no further than the nineteen-fifties, besides Newman and in the first place we should mention Henri Matisse, followed by James Brown, Günther Förg, Markus Lüpertz, Francesco Clemente, Bill Viola and Jannis Kounellis, all of whom conceive the via crucis not as an illustration of a maximum of fourteen individual scenes but rather as a variation on an integral and integrating concept. This might be of a theological, existential or therapeutic nature. The persistence and permanent topicality of the via crucis is most probably based on its essentially transforming character. Here thoughts, states of consciousness, states of mind and feelings are shaken up and modified, and this is precisely the point that Fernando Prats takes and uses as the basis for the *mise-en-scène* of his exhibition. Here he places visitors on a path that takes them not only to the world of art and of faith but also, and above all, to themselves, to their questions and hopes, to their inner barriers and shadows so that they may be freed from them. In accordance with his art, Fernando Prats is here interested in movement and transformation, basic concepts which, in the sphere of faith, have their correspondence in transubstantiation.

His via crucis is entitled *Deambulatorio (Ambulatory)*. It has five stations, first the *Alberguería (Lodging house)*, second the *Cripta (Crypt)*, third the *Sala Capitular (Chapter House)*, fourth the *Sala del Tesoro (Treasure Chamber)*, and fifth the *Claustro (Cloister)*.

At the first station, *Alberguería*, a selection of drawings, objects and models is presented that introduces us into the artist's expressive system. They are objects from his creative processes such as soot drawings, hosts, wax, and so forth. They will all astonish and irritate the visitor. They will come out to meet him and express their agreement with him, on his road, and with the world in which he wants to enter.

The road to the second station leads him through a side entrance to the church and, from here, through an access nave, to the crypt. Here he is in the Romanesque church. Between the four central columns arranged in a square there is a paved circle that points towards the centre. In front of the altar the artist defines a kind of magic centre with its nucleus empty. The circular arrangement of the stones around the central point is now opened through the use of 1,022 small pillows spread over the entire holy space. They are made from unleavened bread and inflated from within. Thus they mark the transforming character of the act of the Eucharist on the altar and symbolise inspiration and incarnation.

The pillows describe taut radial lines, like a net, on the floor of the crypt, as if attempting to capture the attention of the visitor and lead him to the centre with undefined frankness. This point was empty, it was an empty centre, a sacred, untrodden space. In philosophy it is said that these points are needed for thought, and their acceptance and maintenance as truth foster the activity of thinking. The circle, which grows out from a point of maximum density and is linked at all times with its centre by a backward movement, is presented as the representation of what cannot be represented, of the empty centre, the dwelling place of the Divinity.

The road of the Deambulatorio now leads once again to the main cathedral nave through the side nave opposite. Here we reach the third station, the Sala Capitular. In front of a painting that depicts the coming of the Holy Ghost a kind of mattress has been placed inside which there are 72,500 hosts. The Alfombra de Hostias (Carpet of Hosts) is fixed in the middle of the painting beneath the tongues of fire of the first community – consisting of Jesus's disciples – and seems to want to transfer them to the interminable mass of human beings that follow, to whom this breath of the spirit passes.

Just beside this we come across the fourth station, the Sala del Tesoro. Here robes are kept for the celebration of mass, chalices, monstrances, crosses and other valuable objects from the rich history of the Cathedral. They are exhibited as lifeless relics of bygone times. In different display cases, Fernando Prats exhibits some of his works: Medulla, sores, hosts... They fill the space with mute objects insofar as they charge the different display cases with energy which then becomes transformed into tension, so that, together with the old exhibition objects, not only do the artist's strange works attract the observer's attention but also the tension is perceived between the old and recent artworks, which endow each other with new connotations.

The fifth and last station is the great Gothic Claustro, and this is where the artist has made his most radical intervention in the architecture. The visitor literally treads on it. Over the entire cloister floor Prats has placed large host-shaped gypsum plaques. Since they are loose, when the visitor walks over them they move, and some even break. Thus walking generates a noise that causes irritation and concentration on the process. The installation produces the effect of a second plane in space; walking over this surface is almost like sliding over ice, or like sliding over the water as described in the Gospel. On the walls of the cloister there are sarcophagi, some of which have been opened by the artist and black cloths hang from down to the floor, reminiscent of the shrouds of the dead whose bodies are undergoing transformation in the resurrection process.

Contemplated retrospectively, the road through the stations appears like the procession through a great transformation. Equipped with the visual concepts of the art of Fernando Prats, the visitor proceeds along his road with concentration and transparency through the tangle of practices and ignorance. What he is given illuminates and his concepts are transformed. He questions the enigmatic and seeks new replies through artistic intuition. Prats's major concern is to question conventions of perception and comprehension, the tension between appearance and reality, between concealing and revealing. He attempts to break the circle of visual and conceptual expectations so that people may meditate on things in a new way, as they have never done before.

This is the reason why, in the final analysis, visitors to the exhibition perceive themselves as mysteries, but also the reason why, in any case, they will be stimulated not only to meditate on art and faith but also, and above all, to reflect on themselves to discover their future and its possibilities once again. For them, these possibilities are related to all aspects of knowledge and experience, in which religion and art perform a special function. By virtue of their dialectical relationship they emerge as an exceptionally ideal means to renovate and transform the usual, since regarding religion art has the disconcerting power to split the religious nucleus and, once split, infuse it with new life. Art snatches all self-fabricated confidence away from religion and casts it to the pathos of that deeply incisive way of questioning. As we see in the work of the North American James Lee Byars, art finely tunes the question and presents it as a question in space, as philosophy that questions, in short, as the question, and impassably confronts it with the ultimate goal of all questions, the question of death. Thus art compels religion to reveal the bare nucleus of its existence, to investigate the being in creative terms with an integrating purpose: inspired pictures, stories, rites, views and visions of the world... even visions of God.

God is the object of the experience as a question, for what the Word of God says may in the first instance be described only as a question. However, this question can be asked only when the questioner becomes the object of the question and raises the act of questioning to the status of a respectable principle. To the questionability of religion as its most private principle art contributes by "inflaming", ever new, the question of God and life and keeping it "inflamed". This is autonomous art, art made from art and only from art, that incites religion to live off itself, open and credible. The lemma art for art's sake thus forces a moving correspondence in religion for religion's sake.

Art is invariably in movement. Typically restless, it always strives to surpass a work executed at a given moment. And, once this objective has been attained by dint of laborious effort, the new work is invariably inserted into a search devoid of any security. Artistic activity, like all intellectual activity, is

carried out in the dialectic of affirmation and negation, of declaration and investigation, of confidence and doubt. This doubt is the true *movens* element, the motive force behind creative movement, restless, ever dissatisfied creativity.

Nowhere are art and religion closer together than at this point. Here they follow parallel courses. But moreover they share the inner fragility of their knowledge. While it is true that faith rests on a collectively sustained creed, the individual must constantly revive it for himself, for like all mental processes, faith is hounded by the dangers of routine and satiety, by extreme situations and the insinuations of vanity, or simply by intellectual fatigue. All inner surety is exposed to crises as it develops. And this is also valid for religious convictions, whose purpose is to remain firm in the face of the unfathomable mystery. All acquired knowledge must resist the insecurity of learning by feeling one's way. For this reason religion, on the basis of this twofold experience of desire for knowledge and impotence, seeks the proximity of science and philosophy, of literature and the plastic arts, of music, theatre, dance... And, in the last instance, this insecurity is precisely the reason why all religions are exposed constantly to change. Archaic forms become rigid and obsolete; convictions that at other times were solid weaken; repeated objections eventually heeded and acted upon. Only through renewed understanding and the recovery of securities that become familiar and are incorporated again does religion reach itself, as it were, in the sorrows of its permanent illumination.

Insecurity and doubt are inherent in faith; indeed, at the end doubts were more important than solid faith for humanity. Nonetheless, in practice things do not seem thus. In the pulpit and in the everyday life of most believers doubt plays a secondary role.

Doubt is incorporated into art more and more and in an increasingly systematic way. Here, doubt has become culture. Here it reaches down to the nucleus, down to doubt itself, doubt in art. Exactly at this point, in the dissolution of false certainties or surpassed certainties, in constantly reformulated questions avid for replies and, lastly, in affirmative self-confident answers a closer relationship is forged with art, with creation, with God. For me, herein lies the point of tension and of contact, at once sensitive and creative, of art and religion in an ascending circle: question, answer, doubt, question again, answer again, doubt again... Certainly the answer is in the heights: inspired art and faith through inspiration which, nonetheless, immediately after their illumination, adopt rigid forms and must be dissolved once again into doubt. Replies are never possession, rather they generate new questions and the search for a new reply.

To follow this itinerary, as it is mapped out by the exhibition and the artistic thought of Fernando Prats, is no easy task; it is not easy for art, it is not easy for faith and it is not easy, above all, for those who dare to follow this path. It is certain that it is full of emotions, but there is something about which there is absolutely no doubt: it is a *via crucis*. In the long run, however, it leads to a land where knowledge and experience are manifested in liberty.

Some twenty-four years ago a theologian, who was then young and now occupies a high position in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, formulated a very promising view of in relation to the fundamental unity between art and religion as activities of the spirit: if the primordial form of intellectuality and the existence of the human being lies in the fact that the human being only finds the certainty of his existence by believing and doubting, only when he is attacked, "then, perhaps, doubt, which protects one and the other from the temptation of shutting themselves exclusively in their own concerns, might become the place of communication. Doubt prevents them both from becoming totally cloistered in themselves, it makes the believer open out to the doubter and the doubter open out to the believer. For one doubt is his participation in the attitude of the unbeliever; for the other, the form in which the believer, despite everything, continues to be a challenge to him". The author was none other than Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

The Anglo-Indian artist Anish Kapoor formulates the same desire as follows: "Art and religion coincide in that both place the world upside-down, as man sees it. Thus, man is compelled to capture it from inside and, by doing this, to see himself as his god". These words possibly formulate the quintessence of this exhibition by the Chilean artist Fernando Prats and his ecclesiastical collaborators, who have had the courage to create the *mise-en-scène* for this unique form of interaction.