Through the Doors of Perception: The Art of Eugenio Carmi

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If the doors of perception were cleansed,
everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.

(William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*)

Over the last twenty years, Eugenio Carmi has produced a series of austerely beautiful, abstract paintings constructed from a vocabulary of simple, basic forms and areas of flat colour. The apparent simplicity of these paintings is deceptive, however, for they encapsulate the experience of a long and singularly creative working life and they declare the artist's allegiance to the radical tradition in art that stretches back through the Russian Revolution to the eighteenth century. They incorporate deep reflection on the business of communication and the social function of art and they evolved as a result of a whole series of innovatory experiments in the field of the application of art and the practical engagement of the artist in society.

Carmi now works in Milan, though he comes from Genoa where he was born in 1920. He had already achieved a reputation working as an artist and graphic designer, when in 1956 he began to work as artistic consultant to the Italian steel firm, Cornigliano. This was the beginning of a fruitful collaboration that lasted till 1965. In 1958, Cornigliano became Italsider, the Italian state steel company, and through its representative, Gianlupo Osti, Carmi developed a close working relationship with the firm of a kind that was important, not only in his own career, but which was also widely imitated elsewhere.

It had many facets. The company's magazine, for instance, under Carmi's direction had its cover each month devoted to a different contemporary artist. These included Calder, Max Bill and many others, among them Severini — an interesting link back to the Futurists. If Italsider had bought all the works illustrated, they would now have a remarkable collection. Carmi also successfully produced and promoted prints by various contemporary artists at low prices for sale to the work force. Through him too, the firm was directly involved, not only in sponsoring the first European, city-wide public sculpture exhibition, organised in Spoleto in 1962 by Carandente, but the artists, including Carmi himself, David Smith, Calder and other international names, made their works in its workshops. It was therefore a key example of direct collaboration between artists and industry, both on the shop-floor and in an approach to a wide public, and it was much imitated in the later sixties and seventies.

Carmi still likes to work in collaboration and he remembers with pleasure the working relationships that he established at Italsider, not only in making steel sculpture himself, but also through his practical engagement with the whole business of visual communication within the firm. As a designer, for instance, he was involved in reforming the visual presentation of information in its publications and his most interesting enterprise in this area was in 1965, when he undertook to redesign all the safety signs and warning notices on the shop floor.

The results are striking examples of graphic art, but they are more than that too. Carmi's radical revision involved analysing in order to rethink from first principles, not only the content of such messages, but also

the relationship between the sign, the danger that it represented and the worker to whom its signal was addressed. At a fundamental level for instance, he shifted the content of the sign from a description of the danger, to an indication of the part of the body that it threatened. Thus he reduced the communication to its simplest and most immediate elements, but to do so he did not simply concentrate on content as it would be identified by each particular local circumstance. He analysed the whole structure of the communication and then reformulated it in the most visually economical, symbolic form.

In his book on Carmi published in 1973, his close friend, Umberto Eco, illustrated this reformed signing system alongside and in contrast to illustrations of a collection of the kind of signs then current in industrial workshops, loaded with all kinds of narrative and circumstantial detail[1]. It was a case study in semiology and by this choice of illustration, Eco himself implies the analogy between what Carmi had done and his own central intellectual endeavour, the clarification of communication through the study of semiology, defined by Eco as «the science of signs». This is notable, perhaps, as a case of the contiguity of interest of two friends working in the parallel fields of language and image, but it may also be more than that and reflect on the common origins of the endeavours of both men.

In the late fifties and early sixties, Carmi was working in an eloquent, abstract manner, mostly using collage to create images which, though they were essentially simple, used textures and random shapes in a way that was akin to the work of contemporaries like Tápies, Dubuffet or Alberto Burri. Even within the framework of this idiom though, his work was characterised by its simplicity. In 1963, he took an important step towards a more formal kind of art when he used as a kind of ready-made, sheets of rejects from the colour printing of commercial tin-plate. Superficially it was a step similar to that taken by Warhol, but for Carmi it stood for the possibility of a common language of universal forms rather than for the celebration of consumerism as the religion of the twentieth century, generating its own icons. A little later, he moved decisively in the direction of hard-edged, formal art in works that bore some resemblance to the forms that he had already arrived at in his reform of the signing system at Italsider.

The work of artists like Vasarely and Max Bill, with whom Carmi was friendly, was known in the sixties by the generic term 'Op-art' because of its use of simple shapes and the vibrant interaction of colour, exploiting the dynamic possibilities of optical effects. The pedigree of this kind of art went back to the very beginning of modernism and to the work of artists like Delaunay, the Orphists, the Futurists, Kandinsky and Mondrian, all of whom sought to achieve a more fundamental and permanent, artistic, intellectual and ultimately political revolution on the basis of the poetic revolution of Cubism. They were fired by the idea that it was possible to reach a point where art could somehow identify and portray the irreducible core of visual communication by breaking its language down to its essential components and thus freeing it from the value-laden, inherited burden of the conventions of representation. Delaunay demonstrated that this could be done without losing the power of painting to describe either matter or space — the essential dimension for the extended existence of matter. Most importantly though, through the vibrant

interaction of pure colour, Delaunay believed he could portray energy itself, the dynamism that animates matter.

The most far-reaching endeavours in this direction were those made by the Russians however. They were in close touch with the Italian Futurists, and the most radical painter among them was Malevich who in paintings of a black square and a white square, for instance, presented the ultimate a priori of the language of art. Malevich did this with an explicit revolutionary intention and it is here that the links that connect Carmi and Eco to this whole tradition can be most clearly seen.

Eco has dedicated himself to the demystification of language. Without for a moment underestimating its complexity, he has shown how it is possible to analyse it in a way that reveals its essential elements, processes and forms. This might seem a self-contained and self-fulfilling academic pursuit and is often so treated, paradoxically elucidated only to be obscured in a new hermetic jargon, but in Eco's case, it seems to be driven by a sense of purpose that is the opposite of such enclosure. In the discussion of aesthetic texts which he sees as exceptional forms of communication, for instance, Eco identifies their revolutionary potential:

«To change semantic systems means to change the way in which culture 'sees' the world. Thus a text of the aesthetic type which was so frequently supposed to be absolutely extraneous to any truth conditions (and to exist at a level on which disbelief is totally suspended) arouses the suspicion that the correspondence between the present organisation of the content and 'actual' states of the world is neither the best nor the ultimate.»[2]

Thus he clearly identifies the power that lies in the structures of language and art. This power he argues elsewhere (especially in *Interpretation and Over-interpretation*) has been protected and exploited by investing it in secrecy, treating language, not as transparent, but as opaque. So treated, instead of a medium through which we communicate, it becomes an end in itself. It becomes esoteric, not exoteric. Its significance is sought in its forms and constructions, not through them. It thus becomes self-referential and so capable of meaning anything, or, in the extreme stage of deconstruction, nothing. Its apparent opacity makes it a hiding place for secrets and pseudo-mysteries.

The unifying objective of Eco's semiology seems to be to break the power of the secret created by this objectification of language, the power that he identifies with the Hermetic tradition in which language slips from mystery to mystery as each secret penetrated reveals a new secret within. Eco describes this Hermetic position:

«To salvage the text — that is, to transform it from an illusion of meaning to the awareness that meaning is infinite — the reader must suspect that every line of it conceals another secret meaning; words, instead of saying, hide the untold.»[3]

Instead of elucidation, as Eco himself portrays it in *Foucault's Pendulum*, the enquirer gets ever more deeply enmeshed in apparent mystery where «the more ambiguous and elusive a symbol is, the more it gains significance and power.»[4] Eco's use of the novel parallels Carmi's public art projects and through it he disseminates his understanding to the widest possible audience. Socially, even politically engaged, in purpose if not perhaps in global impact, one might

compare his project to that of the early translators of the bible who could be said to have initiated the evolution of modern democracy. Their work laid open to all the central secret on which the power of the hierarchy was founded.

Some modern thinkers, equally conscious of the power inherent in language have sought to subvert that power by subverting language itself. That is a case of shooting the messenger, however, and in contrast, Eco's position could be compared to that of the 'common sense' philosopher Thomas Reid. For Reid identified Hume's scepticism as the result of a false objectification of reason.

In it, he argued, ideas, like language in some current views, had ceased to be the transparent vehicle of thought and had become instead opaque — not a medium, but a barrier between the mind and the external world.

Carmi's career suggests that his objectives are similar as he has worked to free pictorial language of the inherited constructions that have shaped it. Indeed the common ground between the two men was made apparent when in 1966, the first two children's books were published which they produced together, *The Bomb and the General* and *The Three Cosmonauts*. Eco wrote the texts and Carmi provided illustrations. Recently, they have produced a third, *The Gnomes of Gnu*. These stories are 'engaged'. They are fables told with charm, wit and irony to illuminate for children, respectively the absurdity of nuclear armament, racial intolerance and the world's ecological mess. In all three of these surprisingly, but very effectively, instead of conventional illustration, Carmi has used his current style of abstract picture-making, only minimally adapted.

Just as he did in his signs for Italsider, recognising that the story provides the context and that it is the context that provides in turn what is necessary for interpretation, he has eliminated all the redundant, circumstantial, narrative detail that illustration is usually expected to carry. He has concentrated our attention on the image and with a happy paradox, he has created 'abstract' illustrations. The result is an elegant case study in what Eco calls «the economy of signs.» It is also a demonstration of the transparency of the sign, of the separation between the sign and what it signifies and of how it works in the framework of communication.

Not only at Italsider, but elsewhere in the sixties, Carmi worked on public art projects dedicated in a similar way to the dissemination of a radical, but also lucid and accessible form of art. He was, for instance, one of a group of artists who founded a cooperative, the Cooperativa di Boccadasse, with a gallery in an old coal store called La Galleria del Deposito.

Reminiscent of William Morris, the purpose of the nine artists in the cooperative was to by-pass the dealers and reach directly to the public with inexpensive and readily available works. With the Yugoslav printer, Brano Horvat, for instance, they produced screen-prints, not only themselves, but also bringing in other artists like Max Bill, Soto, Pomodoro, Fontana, Capogrossi and others. Using screen-printing, which at the time was not generally used for artists' print-making, they were exploiting a cheap, industrial technique, capable of producing an indefinite number of prints without deterioration of the quality of the image. In the same way, the group also collaborated to produce multiples in a variety of other media, exploiting manufacturing techniques that

would allow indefinite numbers to be reproduced and distributed commercially.

Along similar lines, attracted by the existence of an economical and universally understood code of signs which was neither simply language, nor simply form, Carmi became fascinated by the onomatopoeia of the comic strip, which exploited form in the service of sound. The resulting essay in synaesthesia was *Stripsody*. Eco wrote:

«*Stripsody* represents Carmi's journey into the sound and visual landscape of strip-cartoon balloons.»[5]

It was not just a series of pictures which exploited the forms of sounds, however. Even less did Carmi simply do as Lichtenstein did at much the same time, and render iconic the visual language of the comic strip without significant modification. Instead, in *Stripsody* he generated new, elementary forms which fulfilled the original objective of Delaunay and the Futurists of expressing dynamism, but which also went further by drawing on a formal language which was both supremely simple and universally accessible. It was therefore both modern and democratic. *Stripsody* was in fact a whole performance too, for the images were also interpreted by the singer Cathy Berberian and were published both as a book and as a record.

The Pop artists, like Lichtenstein and Warhol, exploited the cultural constructions put upon such manifestations, thus effectively endorsing them. Instead, Carmi presents these formal inventions, separated from their codified use, as somehow close to the basic elements of universal, visual communication. His position was again close to Eco's, elucidating the essence of a visual language in order to make it possible to identify and expose the way these same cultural constructions support a conventional hierarchy of values. It was just this kind of shoring up of redundant, or even pernicious, conventional values that Malevich was referring to when he wrote of how «by various allowances and allotments the strong stakes of the fences are pegged.»[6]

Such images as Carmi produced in *Stripsody* clearly parallel Eco's semiotic inquiry therefore, though their concern is the creative semiotics of art not language, the search for new forms and a new, visual semantics. Such a vision of new and expressly non-representational forms is an explicit identification with the revolutionary tradition. Much earlier, Blake had written: «No Man of Sense can think that an Imitation of the Objects of Nature is the Art of Painting, or that such Imitation, which any one may easily perform, is worthy of Notice.»[7]

and echoing Blake remarkably closely, one of Malevich's associates wrote:

«If we speak of a realism of the impression, which some are still inclined to clutch at, and which does not contain a creative principle, it becomes clear in the light of the new utilitarian and perceptional realism ... that the creative work of man is not to copy ready-made objects, but to make new objects».[8]

Certainly *Stripsody* played a key role in the evolution of Carmi's art. Eco says that it:

«...marks an important moment in Carmi's work: as though one could see that for a long time he would go on elaborating such themes; and still today it seems to me that now that he does not use tin-plate reject strips, make sculpture in steel, or make collages of newspaper letters, his paintings possess, now and always, the colours, the rhythms, the forms as they were for the first time in *Stripsody*.»[9]

Given the dynamism implicit in the images of *Stripsody*, it is not surprising that Carmi followed it by exploring the use of actual movement in art in a variety of experiments which included the *Carm-O-Matic*, a machine that used stroboscopic light to combine images on the retina, and a complex and ambitious, electronic machine, the *SPCE* — the *Struttura policiclica a controllo elettronico*, a kind of responsive kaleidoscope, made for the Venice Biennale in 1966, though in the event it blew up during the private view! Later, he produced a completely abstract television programme, allowing two television cameras to generate a sequence of images through interference.

The *SPCE* experiment and the use of power sources for movement led on to the exploitation of light itself, using an elementary formal language developed from *Stripsody*. In 1968, he made a series of imaginary street signs. These were illuminated panels composed of elementary shapes and simple colours. At one point, with mischievous anarchism, he contrived to replace actual street signs with his imaginary ones. Doing this and setting his signs in the street may have confused the tourists, but it also reflected a more serious intention, one which underlay the whole direction of his art and which he had specifically identified in an account he gave of his purpose in making his electronic, *SPCE* machine. It was from this point, both formally and ideologically, that his present art has evolved.

Carmi himself said of his objective with his *SPCE* machine:

«I want to move the images, though not as would happen in the cinema. [...] I want to decompose the images into elementary parts and recompose these elementary parts into new images. I want the decomposition and the recomposition to be decided by a basic programme, but linked in some way to the human presence of the public, for example, to the noise of the surroundings.»[10]

The two key ideas in these remarks are the breaking down of the image to its basic essentials in order to reconstruct, de novo, and the direct engagement with the public, in this case expressed in the vivid metaphor of an actual, physical exchange between the public and the work of art itself. The great champion of the ideal of public art was William Morris's ally, Walter Crane. In 1892 in his polemic, *The Claims of Decorative Art,* Crane set out an alternative to what subsequently became the dominant ethos of modernism. He argued for instance that the highest form of art was not private self-expression, but in the true sense public art. Nor by public did he mean the glorification of generals or municipal dignitaries with pompous monuments. He meant the formulation at the highest level of the shared values and experience of the community:

«All really great works of art are public works — monumental, collective, generic — expressing the ideas of a race, a community, a united people, not the ideas of a class.»[11]

The corollorary of this was that the artist should work like a craftsman, as one of a team, even anonymously on behalf of the community much as Carmi had done at Italsider. Crane's ideal was the medieval cathedral, not the steel works, but, *mutatis mutandis*, the essential idea is the same. Nor could art hope to attain to such high ideals if it was merely a commodity and so, much as did Carmi and the artists of the Cooperativa di Boccadasse, Crane also argued that

the high value of art in the market place was a corruption. He prefaced the remark quoted above by saying quite simply, «The decline of art coincides with its conversion into portable forms of property.»
In Scotland, Crane's contemporary, Patrick Geddes, extended these arguments on the basis of his idea of society as an organism. He proposed that as such, if economics were its belly, its highest faculty was its capacity for reflection and self-expression. Crane, Geddes and Morris were all responding in part to Ruskin and Carlyle who were in turn developing the ideas of the eighteenth century which had inspired Blake. An essential element in this came from the Scottish Enlightenment and the identification, first by Francis Hutcheson of aesthetic with moral judgement, then by Hume of the role of the imagination in both perception and morality and finally by Thomas Reid of the function of intuition as the single faculty that articulates both moral and actual vision. In one of the first steps in the evolution of modern art, Reid made it possible to see the artistic cultivation of pure intuition as a moral objective. At the same time, he also took an important step toward the place of modern semiology in the discussion of art by proposing the absolute distinction between the sign and what it signifies. Crane's alternative was therefore set in a much wider tradition in which art was a vehicle for the radical discussion of morality. It is a view that has been far more influential than the apparent triumph of modernism as a non-moral discourse might suggest, a discourse as Eco puts it, «frequently supposed to be absolutely extraneous to any truth conditions.»
The link between the radical simplification in the work of some artists of the later eighteenth century and that of their counterparts in the twentieth is therefore a link in intention as well as in an occasional coincidence of form. In this continuity, echoes of Crane's arguments and Morris's practice can be found in the manifestos of the Futurists, in the work of Mirò and Léger and, too, in the history of Carmi's own projects.
These ideas were restated most radically, however, by the Russians in the years on either side of the Revolution when Malevich, Tatlin and their colleagues saw their task as artists as part of the fundamental objective of the whole Revolution, to discover the a priori that would stand, not just as the basic elements of a visual language, but of the whole value structure of the new society, freed from «the last stays of the ancient logic.»[12]
Malevich wrote in 1924:
«Through Cubism, which smashes the interrelation between forms in art, the artist achieves Suprematism. By destroying the century-old habitual forms, the Revolution similarly destroys the objective world.»[13]
Commenting in conversation on such radical, revolutionary sentiments and on the fate of the artists who made them, but who were eventually disowned by the Revolution itself, Carmi himself said:
«Malevich was the real revolution — not just in art but in everything. The Revolution failed him and what he stood for by deciding that the workers could not understand that kind of art. Instead they said they could only understand a recognisable image, an image of a house, a tree, or a ship. The workers were conservative and the result was to separate art according to class — to reintroduce the class system through art.»

Malevich and his colleagues were eventually ousted, partly because of their stand against simple materialism, a stand which allied them with Crane and Geddes, and partly on the grounds, ironically, that they were insufficiently popular. Thus the conservatism of the wider public was exploited against the original objectives of the revolution. Elitism was reinstated, though by an inversion of the usual process, and art risked either marginalisation, or being re-enrolled as a tool of mystification and non-meaning in support of conservative power structures.

The lucid clarity and pure non-objectivity of Carmi's recent work is a declaration of loyalty to this revolutionary tradition. In addition, also within that tradition he has continued to work outside painting in the field of applied art and exploring new technologies. He has recently made mirrors, carpets and tapestries for instance, and at his retrospective in 1990, he sent drawings round the world by Fax. Looking at the clarity of his painting itself, though, one is reminded of Blake again and so of the length of the revolutionary tradition that Carmi represents, for Blake could have been describing Carmi's paintings as much as his own when he wrote:

«Clearness and precision have been the chief objects in painting these pictures. Clear colours unmuddied by oil, and firm and determinate lineaments unbroken by shadows, which ought to display and not to hide form.»[14]

With *Stripsody* Carmi began to use a structure of elementary shapes and pure colours, reminiscent of Malevich's Suprematism. By the early seventies, the elements of his present pictorial language had evolved. His paintings at the time were hard-edged, using black and white, clearly demarcated scales of grey and prismatic colours in bars... «firm and determinate lineaments unbroken by shadows» in fact. He had taken even further the economy of the sign that he had achieved in *Stripsody*. Now the image achieves the same dynamic effect itself without need for the addition of words or music. Instead, Carmi exploits the two dimensional intervals of overlapping and intercutting shapes, extended into the third dimension by the interaction of colour and tone. These elements create a subtle and complex interplay which is never static and so is truly akin to music. In recent years however, his painting has become softer. He has taken to using jute as support. It has a rougher surface than canvas, thus giving a gentler texture to the picture and a more broken line. As he puts it, the effect is more 'human'. Indeed, some of his most beautiful, recent works are small watercolours in which this humanity is even more immediate because the elements retain the mark of the artist's gesture as he made them.

The harmonious simplicity of geometric shapes and pure, flat colours in his paintings is still reminiscent of Malevich, but it also has a much longer pedigree, back even beyond Blake and the eighteenth century. One of the most frequent motifs that he uses is a circle overlapped by a square or rectangle. When he does this, the dramatic focus of the painting is usually in the area that is demarcated by this overlapping and in it there is a shift from the broader, surrounding areas of more neutral colour to a concentration of prismatic, colour bars.

Perhaps Carmi's unconscious memory is at work, but this is what also happens in two Renaissance paintings of outstanding beauty which are in the Brera in Milan, the *Sacra Conversazione* by Piero della Fran-

Sacra Conversazione by Piero della Francesca





Marriage of the Virgin by Raphael

cesca and the *Marriage of the Virgin* by Raphael. These pictures are closely connected historically and in both, the subject conveyed by the disposition of the figures seems to be no more than the temporal clothing that humanises and makes accessible an inner, geometric harmony so pure that, like the music of the spheres, it is above the contingent imperfection of this sublunary world.

It is most explicit in the Raphael, but both these pictures depend on the intersection of a circle and a square, the two purest and most basic forms of Euclidian geometry. In both too, the dramatic centre of attention and the greatest visual variety comes where the circumference of the circle passes through the intersecting diagonals of the square. Such images suggest that by the transparency of painting, we can see through the transient world of subjective experience to something that is more permanent and more definite.

Contemplating the failure of the French Revolution to achieve the purity of its original aims, Blake's contemporary, William Godwin, argued that true revolution would only be possible through the work of the writers and artists and all those who could work to elucidate society's true values and to forge new and better ones. In other words, if the reform of society was likened to the task of Hercules in cleansing the Stables of Augeas, then the first task would be to cleanse the doors, the Doors of Perception: «If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.»

Blake's infinite, it should be said, is the opposite of the infinite obscurity of the recession of the serial secret. As it is with Malevich and Carmi, it is the infinite possibility to be opened up by the achievement of true clarity. Carmi is close to Blake and Godwin as well as to Malevich, but he is in a tradition that also reaches right back to Piero and Raphael, for the origins of his art lie ultimately in the Renaissance ideal of clarity, then embodied in geometry and restated in our time by other artists of the radical tradition who have seen it as their task to help us all to see more clearly.

1 Umberto Eco, *Eugenio Carmi: una pittura di paesaggio?* (Milan, 1973).
2 Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1979) p. 274.
3 Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge, 1992) p. 390.
4 *Foucault's Pendulum* (Picador, London 1990) p. 432.
5 Umberto Eco, *Eugenio Carmi...*, p. 56.
6 Quoted by L. Zhadova in *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art* (London, 1982) p. 304.
7 Blake, *Public Address* in *Complete Writings of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London 1957) p. 597.
8 Lazar Khidekel, 'The New Realism', 1920, quoted by Zhadova, *Malevich etc*, p. 301.
9 Umberto Eco, *Eugenio Carmi...*, p. 58.
10 Quoted ibid. p. 70.
11 Walter Crane, *The Claims of Decorative Art* (London, 1892) p. 16.
12 Malevich, *Declaration*, 1918, quoted Zhadova, *Malevich*, p. 303.
13 Quoted ibid. p. 293.
14 William Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue, Complete Writings*, p. 564.

Text from "Eugenio Carmi", catalogue of the exhibition "Eugenio Carmi", Talbot Rice Gallery - The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, 1992