Mystery and Art

Eugenio Carmi, May 2009

During a recent interview, I was asked the following question: what is creativity? Because I had to give an immediate answer in front of the television camera, I said: 'Instead of killing the bison, paint it.'

I have suddenly thought of the reply: it is if I had seen in a dream the bison of Lascaux painted in the cave 17,000 years ago. Only visual vestiges remain from this period: we know nothing of the spoken language. But I'm certain that the bison painter and I, as an image-maker of the twenty-first century, may regard ourselves as contemporaries as far our creativity is concerned, with all the emotions, the desire for spirituality and beauty and the sensual pleasure of invention.

I would to think that, over these thousands of years, nothing has changed in the human mind, which seems to me to be one of the fascinating and mysterious creations of the universe. In other words, I feel I am contemporary with the bison painter, and it doesn't matter that he painted in a cave and I've got a computer and telephone. It's the cosmic time that reduces our distance to nothing: it's the mystery of our brain that unites us.

In this respect, I have reread an essay entitled 'Pulsioni e arte' by Mauro Mancia, published in the single issue of *Res Publica* of September 1979 — 'oneiric work and artistic work are very similar' it says — and I think of dreaming. When dreaming, I sometimes see images lost in time, places and people, images that were hidden (saved, we say now) in a microscopic place in the mind and that were visualized without the aid of sight. The modern computer is, in reality, a pale copy of the brain where every image of our lives is saved and kept and appears to us in the mystery of sleep.

And the bison painter, our contemporary of 17,000 years ago, recorded everything in his mind because his brain was exactly like mine. This is how Mancia put it: 'Both (oneiric work and artistic work) use perception as a function intended to make up for the lack of the object; both give a meaning to chaotic and uncoordinated elements that represent the deep hidden meaning of the dream and the work of art; both dissolve the thin semipermeable membrane separating reality from fantasy, the thought of our waking hours from the thought of our dreams, the conscious world from the unconscious world, and behaviour from desire.'

Now I realize that perhaps we can attempt to give an answer to the question 'What is art?', which many scholars have attempted to answer without success. Dino Formaggio wrote: 'Art is everything that people call art.' But this doesn't solve the mystery.

When writing these lines, I understood that art is the hitherto unknown activity, produced by the perfect computer that exists in our brain and that, unbeknown to us, transforms the unconscious into reality. Perhaps it is the desire for the myth of beauty, perhaps it is the desire for a meeting with our god, or perhaps it is the desire to discover the mystery of the universe.

From the catalogue "*Eugenio Carmi. Harmonies of the Invisible. Imaginary Beauty*." Silvana Editoriale. MAR, City Art Museum of Ravenna