

Fabio Mauri as Philosopher

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the intellectual legacy of Fabio Mauri, proposing a rigorous "technical" reassessment of the artist as a philosopher. By analyzing Mauri's extensive writings and seminal works, the author identifies five distinct philosophical branches—history, politics, meta-philosophy, language, and art—arguing that Mauri's methodology aligns him with the prominent figures of late 20th-century Italian thought. Central to this analysis is the tension between ideology and form, and the transition from the "saying" of philosophy to the "showing" of avant-garde art. The text delves into Mauri's engagement with Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein, particularly regarding the "German question" and the impossibility of traditional thought after Auschwitz. Furthermore, it examines Mauri's early 21st-century reflections on anthropocentrism, the "apocalypse" of the European spirit, and the museum as a crystallized site of Hegelian reason. Ultimately, the essay characterizes Mauri's philosophy as an "Aesthetics of Experimentation"—a diacritic, autobiographical, and phenomenal approach where art functions as a "regime of truth" capable of deconstructing the linguistic and ideological ownership of the world.

Keywords: Fabio Mauri Aesthetics of Experimentation Ideology and Art European Philosophy Body as Screen Post-Auschwitz Thought Meta-philosophy Language and Silence Wittgenstein

It is impossible for our knowledge to extend beyond what is strictly necessary for the preservation of life. Morphology shows us that the senses, the nerves, as well as the brain, develop in proportion to the difficulty of nourishment.

Friedrich Nietzsche

1. Introduction: Can We Speak of Fabio Mauri as a Philosopher?

First of all, given the title of this piece which also encapsulates its objective, the obvious but necessary question: is there a possibility of speaking of Fabio Mauri "technically" as a philosopher in light of a careful analysis of his numerous writings? Within this presumed philosophy of his, let us immediately identify a few intellectual escape routes:

1. A philosophy of history
2. A political philosophy
3. A meta-philosophy
4. A philosophy of language
5. A philosophy of art

These five branches—identifiable starting from his most relevant texts—are not the rhetorical incursions of an artist into philosophical terrain, but actual arguments, styles, and methodologies. Through these, it is my thesis that it is absolutely scientific and coherent to include Mauri within the broader assembly of late 20th-century Italian philosophy.

By changing the meaning of the word "philosophy" from how it is usually understood within academia, what emerges is not only a theoretical and argumentative thought but also a style that impacts life as a space for verifying those very theories¹. Here, rather than attempting a list of more or less argued theses within these five macro-categories, I would like to attempt an analysis of the general sense of this philosophy. Specifically, I want to explore why it is characterized as extremely interesting in its ability to bring together images of names (concepts) with actual images.

In 1989, at the "Quarto di Santa Giusta" multimedia center, Mauri staged the work *Che cos'è la filosofia. Heidegger e la questione tedesca* [What is Philosophy. Heidegger and the German Question]. Intending art as the definitive content of the order of discourse—within a profoundly Hegelian and anti-Kantian wake—Mauri attempts, so to speak, to answer the most philosophical of questions from the outside. Ultimately, in his thought, as he also demonstrates in the text composed for the work itself, philosophy becomes the metaphor for one of his obsessions: the reflection on the specificity of European culture understood essentially as ideology. This is an important starting point for us, given that here the answer to what philosophy is is not conceptual but material. Philosophy becomes Europe, and Europe is also Germany during Nazism, which Fabio Mauri would confront continuously. These are the paradoxes of reason and of the concept which, when taken to their extreme consequences, lead to the unexpected abyss of thought captured in Adorno's famous question-motto regarding the impossible possibility of thinking after Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Art—as is evident throughout Mauri's interpretative trajectory of the Roman avant-garde—says things that cannot be done or heard elsewhere; yet, this suggestion of discourse reaches the artistic dimension precisely from philosophy. "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent,"² is how Ludwig Wittgenstein concludes his *Tractatus* (a phrase very dear to Mauri), and upon this silence begins the "saying" of avant-garde art: philosophy becomes poetry. This is why Mauri constantly engages with Heidegger and his prophecy on "poetizing" language (*dichtende Sprache*); yet, this becoming-poetry does not save us, but rather suggests the technical dimension of European Nazism... "Good and evil," Mauri says, "speak the same language."³ This is a philosophy deeply anchored in Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, in the moral idea that is the most dangerous of all yet the most liberating: the space for the "beyond-ethics" belongs more to aesthetics than to legislative moralism. Philosophy—and I would say let us begin precisely from here—is exactly all these things together: a continuous suggestion for the concept to become an image, without ever translating into a practical norm, but occasionally, and with a speculative air, caressing politics.

2. History, Destiny, and the Apocalypse: Beyond Anthropocentrism

In 2002, on the occasion of the work *La Resa* [The Surrender], installed on the grounds of the Ostia Synagogue, Mauri reflects on what "apocalypse" signifies—understood as the end of a *type* of world, not of the world itself (a warning that should be recovered in the era of those anthropocentric apocalypses we call the "Anthropocene").

In the early 2000s, many of today's contemporary philosophical reflections on posthumanist ecology were still far off; yet, with surprising lucidity, Mauri presents a daring and unconventional critique of anthropocentrism. He speaks of something that arrives *after* the catastrophe, rather than something that creates or rides it, as seen in the more reactionary interpretations of Nietzsche.

Human life itself, in its relationship with the end and the fate of the planet we inhabit, runs swiftly along the boundary between that relationship of "saying" and "showing" identified earlier. "Tenderness has been shattered,"⁴ Mauri declares. Surrendering to new ideas regarding forms of human life can open up unsuspected scenarios of peace and new forms of humanity. Who is to say that changing course when faced with a limit does

¹ his, partially and paradoxically, contradicts Mauri himself, for whom his writing activity was a simple clarification of his work as an artist.

² L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, §7

³ F. Mauri, "Che cos'è la filosofia. Heidegger e la questione tedesca" (1989) in *Scritti in mostra. L'avanguardia come zona 1958-2008*, il Saggiatore, Milano 2008, p. 75.

⁴ Id., "La resa", in *Scritti in mostra. L'avanguardia come zona 1958-2008*, il Saggiatore, Milano 2008, p. 127.

not provide more unexpected resources than the stubborn determination to overcome it through culture and the blindness of force?

Ideas about history—which are, ultimately, ideas about destiny—intertwine with those about politics: is it within the European destiny (that is, the destiny of technique) to have the possibility of hoisting a white flag and surrendering under the weight of "becoming"?

I believe Mauri provides an answer that same year with *Un utile esperimento negativo* [A Useful Negative Experiment] (Certosa di Padula, 2002). A search for the meaning of things does not necessarily have to lead to finding it (here, the obvious polemic is with another artist-philosopher, Pablo Picasso). The most interesting point of the "transvaluation of values" enacted by Nietzsche—which serves as the constant backdrop to my reflections—is not the transvaluation achieved and brought to completion, but the process that should guide the search itself... a *mystical* process, to use a word dear to Mauri. It is within this process that one of the primary knots we are highlighting in this text tightens: if philosophy is Europe, but philosophy is above all reason that surrenders itself to art at the moment of its failure, how can the mysticism toward which art should strive not be, essentially, an anti-philosophy and therefore an anti-Europe? This is an exciting paradox for any artist and philosopher—a paradox that runs faster than life itself and tends to outpace it along the paths of daily practice⁵.

3. Ideology: The Allied Enemy and the Body as Limit

Ideology—allow me an oxymoron—is the most "allied enemy" that existed for Mauri's historical context in the 1970s. It was subsequently harassed by postmodern thought and the so-called "end of grand narratives" denounced from the late seventies onward by Jean-François Lyotard—a shift that, in Italian art, also took the form of Achille Bonito Oliva's *Transavanguardia*.

The philosophy of television and the techniques of the era through which Mauri attempts to trace a positive critique of the concept of ideology deserve a few more words: art, within ideology, risks leaving unanswered the question we asked earlier regarding "anti-Europe." It is a question that, for the sake of convenience—and following the arrival of American consumerist ideology—we simply stopped thinking about at a certain point. Within ideology, art loses its form and becomes tame. This is why the relationship with philosophy becomes so central and decisive: because it is precisely through and within formal survival that art instead produces images of authentic knowledge.

Philosophy, by deconstructing ideology, restores to art the form it deserves. The friendship between Mauri and Pier Paolo Pasolini—sublimely captured in the 1985 text *"Rapporto di un curatore. Pasolini"* [Report of a Curator. Pasolini]—is articulated precisely on this point: a new history of knowledge demands an exit from everything that previous systems of knowledge considered knowable. It is a paradigm shift, to put it in a philosophical terminology contemporary to Mauri's intellectual trajectory.

And what is the ultimate limit upon which an ideology can operate? Where is it that the great dictatorships, for example, failed? It is in the use of bodies—a metaphor made literal in the performance *Ebrea* (1971) and mirrored inversely in the unforgettable use of Pasolini's body as a screen for *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* at the Bologna Gallery of Modern Art in 1975. Pasolini, sitting on a chair in a white shirt, had his own 1964 film projected onto his chest: the body, the ultimate limit of others' "will to power." Against ideology, a philosophy emerges that strips bare art itself.

Ultimately, as Mauri argues at length throughout his writings, every social rehabilitation occurs within art—in the way that (to touch upon the fifth chord of his philosophy) perception makes concepts more or less digestible to the brain, whether they are new or previously obsolete, and finally oriented toward the future with that spirit of anticipation typical of art.

⁵ F. Mauri, *Nel 1960 gli anni 50 avevano 10 anni*, in "Flash Art", n. 112, marzo, Milano 1983, pp. 32-39

Art and ideologies are, in their own way, "fraternal enemies": everything that an ideology has demolished, an artist can re-sacralize. The echo of Walter Benjamin's philosophy of art is an evident yet highly original reference in Mauri; here, the "aura" is a salvation and never a limit.

Ethics as aesthetics—to recall Wittgenstein once more—because both are transcendental and belong to spheres where the division between concepts of beauty or goodness blurs into singular and indistinguishable existential fragments. For instead, as Mauri writes, "metaphysics is the matter of stone... it is concreteness and competence."⁶ Images are stones; using them well is a responsibility.

4. Language, Silence, and the Regime of Truth

Ethics and aesthetics, after all, are still part of that unspeakable realm that Mauri pursues, circling the idea of a European spirit that nonetheless clashes with its intrinsically linguistic nature. As the artist himself would frequently recall, language is the primary form of the spirit's ownership over the world. Furthermore, as Carmelo Bene would have said, the "stench of the ego" never brings anything good, except perhaps for a bit more work for the most European theory ever conceived: psychoanalysis.

Language, therefore, is a fallacious property—yet property nonetheless—within which Mauri's faith in poetry emerges ever renewed: "the last to abandon the raft of meaning." A raft that, however, I would add, will eventually sink anyway. In this philosophy of language, it is no coincidence—as I mentioned at the beginning—that Mauri is strongly Hegelian, reminding us of the cardinal points of Hegel's phenomenology of art and its general revolution against the Kantian system.

Art is not the world's decor, nor is it the pursuit of an imitative sublime regarding natural things. Art, as the sensible manifestation of the spirit's work, is a spasmodic search for truth—a function, almost mathematical, that lives and must survive well beyond the artist. Art is an "extra-language,"⁷ a way to detonate this linguistic possession of the world toward a visualization of human affairs within the *sensibilia*. Hegelian yet contemporary, Mauri's path—in which the described and verificationist limit of art's languages is far from a limit of the impossibility of a "truth-world" junction—becomes instead a capacity to shatter identity. The idea that a true relationship exists between words and things, beyond the shifting conventions of our orders of discourse, is definitively discarded⁸.

Art does not merely describe the truth, Mauri argues—exasperating the revolution of the Hegelian "end of art"—it creates its own regime of truth (and there is a profound Foucaultian spirit in these ideas).

It is through this lens that those five branches of Mauri's philosophy—philosophy of history, political philosophy, meta-philosophy, philosophy of language, and philosophy of art—while distinct, actually hold together: art pierces through language and "originates something very similar to the other-than-itself."

Mauri's twenty-year tenure as Professor of the *Aesthetics of Experimentation* at the Academy of Fine Arts in L'Aquila (1979–1999) seems, based on documents and testimonies, to have been entirely marked by this idea. The knowledge of the harshest reality to ever exist—that of war—the same reality that annihilated major philosophies like those of Adorno or Arendt, forces one to settle accounts with an unconventional answer to the question we recalled earlier: "How can one still do philosophy after Auschwitz?"

The answer: by inventing it, by experimenting with new and imaginative regimes of possible truths.

5. The Museum, Interpretation, and Diacritic Philosophy

To create truth, to produce horizons of meaning—political ones as well—against the response of bourgeois and intellectual banality: this was the aim, even in his final expressionist and colorful drawings that he never wished

⁶ Id., "Diario secondo performance", in *Scritti in mostra. L'avanguardia come zona 1958-2008*, il Saggiatore, Milano 2008, p. 247

⁷ Ibidem

⁸ Id., "Fini e confini dei linguaggi come luoghi unitari", 1995, p. 263.

to exhibit during his lifetime. Like any political philosophy, that of Fabio Mauri is, above all, a philosophy that invites action, yet does so through a general rewriting of mental categories. "The intuition of the mind,"⁹ Mauri argues, "produces the myth of reason": Europe (which is to say, reason), reason (which is to say, philosophy), and the European myth (which is to say, the museum).

It is perhaps through the analysis of the idea of the museum that Mauri conducted around 1998 that his general philosophy becomes clearest: what is a museum if not European philosophy crystallized in a physical space? The myth of universal and archaeological knowledge of the history of ideas collapses every time we build a space—whether conceptual or material, like the museum—with generalist pretensions. Europe, and the philosophy generated by the European spirit, has also produced this: a claim to hegemony, a showcase of all possible wonders that, with a colonial and curatorial spirit, must be kept alive but trapped¹⁰.

Mauri the philosopher has a very particular relationship with the museum: "I like having coffee in the museum bar," he writes, as if one could lose oneself in light breakfasts amidst a viewpoint that, by claiming to recount all perspectives, has in fact ended up crushing them. There is a clear reference here to Bertrand Russell's paradox of the set of all sets—an unexpected theoretical implication for museology that remains largely unexplored and misunderstood.

When Mauri discusses, for instance, the debate over the restoration of artworks—starting from his 1999 dialogue with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev¹¹ regarding the restoration of the Sistine Chapel—perhaps his most radically philosophical thesis emerges: nothing, not even a restoration, is purely technical. Every act of knowledge, linguistic interpretation, or political action is essentially an interpretative act with an aesthetic nature, implying a system of choices. This is a significant position where the system of knowledge is entirely built upon phenomena rather than objects.

It is Wittgenstein, once again, with the pivotal opening phrase of his *Tractatus*—"The world is everything that is the case" (*il mondo è tutto ciò che accade*)—and everything that happens is never a simple fact, but above all a fact *by* and *for* someone. It is a personal, irreversible restoration, where any museum's claim to recount a presumed objective fact becomes instead another piece of the human endeavor of interpreting other interpretations. He seems, ultimately, to surrender to the idea that every pursuit of knowledge is, in any case, a misunderstanding.

Mauri's is a philosophy where Nietzsche and Wittgenstein walk hand-in-hand with the Frankfurt School. Within this framework, foundations and "ultimate things" are nothing more than acts of phenomenal complicity, never Kantian "things-in-themselves." Thus, so-called fiction is not merely a means of complicity with the spectators of Mauri the artist, but also an awakening to a world made of quantum realities—non-ordinary and non-homogeneous—and of relativisms that make epistemology and ontology much more similar than artists or philosophers of realism would care to admit.

There is an inescapable relationship between thought and the world in Mauri, derived from the fact that we cannot help but understand thought *as* the world. Because of this, Mauri becomes the bearer and precursor of a philosophy that is extremely widespread today, capable of reconnecting the expressive styles of Kierkegaard with the contemporary digital world characterized by intense individualism.

We might define this as a diacritic philosophy, where a work—even one as extremely complex as a historical or encyclopedic essay—becomes, above all, an autobiography. An individual, the philosopher Fabio Mauri, who, through the unfolding of an individual life, becomes multiple and acute in his listening and attention to the world contemporary to him. His is an analysis—like every philosophy since the dawn of time—compressed and

⁹ Id., "Appunti. La raffiguratività", 1997. p. 271.

¹⁰ Id., "Musei", 1998, p. 277.

¹¹ This text was commissioned by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev specifically for the *catalogue raisonné* on Fabio Mauri, but it was subsequently excluded due to censorship regarding the author's biography. This demonstrates a total lack of understanding on Bakargiev's part regarding the very themes of the artist for whom she compiled the catalogue.

stretched between the individual destiny of humanity in search of a narrative, and History, which transcends those narratives and encompasses them all.

There would still be much to say about the philosophy of Fabio Mauri. I would timidly consider what has been written here as the beginning of an open and shared research site, starting from the writings of a writer and an immense artist.

CONCLUSION

Towards an Aesthetics of Experimentation

Fabio Mauri's philosophy emerges as an "Aesthetics of Experimentation": rigorous yet open, material and speculative, autobiographical and universal. It navigates post-Auschwitz impossibility by inventing truths through art's showing—projections, bodies as screens, installations confronting history's residues. Far from nihilism, it affirms art's civil role in deconstructing ideology while sacralizing remnants, fostering surrender to new forms amid technical destiny and anthropocentric crisis.

Mauri's legacy—spanning performances like *Che cos'è il fascismo* (1971), writings in *Scritti in mostra*, and late reflections—prefigures contemporary concerns: media manipulation, memory politics, posthuman ecology, and the museum's crises. As teacher and thinker, he modeled philosophy as lived verification, where concepts become images and ethics merges with aesthetics. His work remains a site for ongoing research: an invitation to experiment with truth regimes against banality and hegemony. In an era of resurgent ideologies and digital screens, Mauri teaches that art must persistently question the ownership of language, history, and the world—caressing politics while refusing easy norms. This philosophy does not console; it awakens responsibility toward the stones of images and the universe's enigmatic evil.

His trajectory from war trauma to avant-garde mastery underscores art's power to re-enact and resist, making the unspeakable visible. Mauri as philosopher compels us to inhabit the paradox: Europe's reason both poisons and redeems through experimental surrender.

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