

*Interview between Barbara Garatti and Alessandro Roma*  
*The target is yourself<sup>1</sup>*

BG: As you will have noted, repetition is a crucial part of Phara's work. Certain elements crop up in all her works in a repetitive or even redundant manner. From an artistic viewpoint, this approach seems to come from a certain tending towards order that Hans Prinzhorn talks about in relation to "the principles of repetitive succession, regular oscillation, symmetry and proportionality"<sup>2</sup>, all elements clearly found in Phara's work.

On the other hand, when you think about her career as a fashion designer and, more specifically, her working partnership from 1978 with Gianni Versace, this repetition inevitably conjures up the idea that an iconographic feature can be both a sign and, at the same time, the distinctive symbol for a certain style, like Versace's Medusa.

The repeated elements seem more like a trademark than just a redundant gesture; while always remaining themselves, they transform from being a main subject into an icon and ultimately a decorative pattern.

AR: Do you think she was really interested in being recognisable or do you think that repetition of signs allowed her to achieve her own stylistic freedom?

BG:

BG: I think any kind of artistic identity wavers between these two aspects: being recognisable in order "to objectify yourself in harmony with others"<sup>3</sup> and finding the stylistic freedom required to meet an inner need. Never having met Phara, I do not know if and how she found her own balance. But I can say that the consistency and exuberance with which certain elements are reiterated in her works, the repetition and speed of execution, indicate an all-encompassing stylistic drive. We know that her ambition was to work with galleries of an international standing. So, recognition as an artist was a real need.

What intrigues me about reiterated elements like these is that they are always recognisable but, at the same time, always different, their form has evolved over twenty years' work without losing their identity. What does stylistic freedom within this self-imposed limit actually mean for an artist?

AR: In answer to your question, what immediately comes to mind is a canvas or, better still, a pictorial surface. My material boundaries depend on the scale on which I decide to work. And even without a frame or when working across a large surface, it still has a certain perimeter. This perimeter or "self-imposed limit" is the work's real strength. The stylistic signs are all focused within that surface. In Phara's work too, the boundaries of the canvas, paper or fabric seems to me to reinforce the image created.

The reiteration of signs seems to wipe out this boundary, forcing you to see this repetition endlessly reiterated.

Why did Phara decide to paint at some point?

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on free thoughts on Phara's work. The conversation between Alessandro Roma and Barbara Garatti took place from 4<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> January 2019 while the artist was completing his work about the Atelier Archive.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Prinzhorn, *L'arte dei folli. L'attività plastica dei malati mentali*, Mimesis 1991, pg. 46

<sup>3</sup> Mario Perniola, *L'arte espansa*, Einaudi 2015, p. 53

BG: Phara grew up in a family that was very interested in art. As well as running the family business, her father was also an excellent painter and sculptor, who was well known locally<sup>4</sup>. She studied at a high school specialising in the arts and, after attending a fashion academy, she always treated fashion design as art<sup>5</sup>. Perhaps the right question should be: why did she give up fashion to focus exclusively on painting? (I do not think any of us can answer that question)

I would like to go back to the subject of repetition, which, as you have suggested, forces you to see a sign endlessly repeated. In Phara's work this system can also be seen on a bigger scale, these works are often designed as series, which, in turn, can be traced back to nuclei. I do not know whether this is a premeditated operation<sup>6</sup>. You can definitely grasp this aspect just by studying her entire archive of work. How, in an artist's work, does working constantly within self-imposed boundaries slowly present itself, piece by piece, as an overall vision tending to give shape and form to the totality of their work? Is it just a matter of style or is there more to it than that?

AR: Personally speaking, I do not think it is an attempt to find her own style. It is more a question of how the work process is conceived and carried out. It is as if it were a flow whose forms are altered by the process itself without any premeditation, while leaving room for the unexpected. Of course, each individual work has its own body, but it comes from a process and not from its singularity.

BG: Perhaps style comes from the process not as premeditated experimentation but as "a system of forms, whose quality and expressiveness carry meaning"<sup>7</sup>. The special thing about Phara's archive is that it contains all the material she has ever produced over a period of approximately 20 years, nothing is missing: this allows us to grasp the consistency of her style, aside from inevitable diverging tendencies, interruptions and anticipations of future developments. But this is always viewed with a certain suspicion in artistic realms, possibly because it gets confused with formalism. It is, however, a familiar concept in the realm of fashion and other neighbouring disciplines. The Antwerp Royal Academy of Arts' fashion department can count numerous internationally famous fashion designers among its students, who have focused on research extending into the realm of "pure" visual art. Do you think the concept of style can allow painting and fashion to interact on an even standing?

AR: I have not the faintest idea! But as I was compulsively flicking through some Instagram pictures, I came across this quote: "As your skills increase, you will see your unique style, become firm and recognizable. Guard it, nurture it, and cherish it, for your style expresses you, As with the Zen master-archer, the target is yourself" Betty Edwards.

I thought it was perfect.

BG: Michele always remembers that the first time he saw her she was sitting in the back of a pickup busy stringing Kyudo bow.

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<sup>4</sup> See Bert Van den Broeck's work, a self-portrait from 1944 and two portraits of Hilde from 1952 and the late 1950s.

<sup>5</sup> Digital recording of a television interview with Pharaïdis Van den Broeck, Linda Loppa and Nelly Nooren from 1993 that was broadcast at the presentation of Antwerp as the European City of Culture.

<sup>6</sup> In relation to this, see Matt Mullican's work, an attempt to organise knowledge by bringing the micro and macro together based on fractal thinking.

<sup>7</sup> Meyer Schapiro, *Lo Stile*, Donzelli 1995