The Matter of Time

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I met Maria D. Rapicavoli in Paris more than twenty years ago. We were both there for a residency, she as an artist and I as a curator. Beyond the personal bond that deeply connects us, what won me over about her as an artist from the very first moment was the extraordinary coherence of her research and her ability to move across different languages and territories without ever losing sight of the essential questions that drive it. In Rapicavoli's works there is a quality I have always perceived as rare, a physical poetics, never separate from rigor of thought, through which the invisible becomes experience and what is distant, abstract or inaccessible finds a body. This plastic sensibility is not a mere aesthetic surface but a tool of knowledge that manifests itself through matter. It is a tension that runs through all of her research, from her investigations into the invisible geographies of power, migration routes and the apparatuses of political and military control, to *Low Tide*, where her gaze shifts toward a geography that is more intimate and at the same time universal: that of the body, of biological memory and of the legacies that inhabit us before we are even able to recognize them. Writing about *Low Tide* today means, for me, engaging with a body of research I have known for many years and which, precisely for this reason, I feel transforming before my eyes. Almost two years ago, a diagnosis of ovarian cancer and the discovery of an inherited BRCA2 gene mutation, passed down through the maternal line, broke into the artist's life, radically changing her relationship with her body and with time. I don't believe this work can be understood without acknowledging the magnitude of that experience, yet it would be reductive to read it only as the account of an illness. Knowing Maria, I knew that such a radical experience would inevitably open new questions in her research. Not because every pain must become a work of art, but because she has always been able to approach the most opaque zones of reality without shying away from their contradictions. In *Low Tide* this attitude takes on a new form, at once personal and universal, and what emerges is a reflection, both painful and luminous, on what we inherit, on what passes through us without our being able to choose it, and on the possibility of giving form to what happens to

us. The title leads us to the shores of Rockaway Beach, in New York, where the artist collected materials returned by the low tide. When the water recedes, the seabed resurfaces, revealing fragments and remains, residues the sea had taken from view. None of them is a transparent testimony; each element carries the history of a crossing, while its origin may remain unknown. The shoreline thus becomes an unstable archive, where traces accumulate and scatter without composing a linear narrative. Low tide is the provisional time in which the invisible can be approached, though not definitively revealed. Here a reflection on vulnerability takes shape, one that neither equates it with weakness nor celebrates it as a promise of rebirth. Exposure entails the temporary loss of protection, but it makes visible a structure that was previously hidden. The diagnosis and the genetic mutation fracture the perception of the body, because what we inherit is not only memory or story, but a history inscribed in living matter, transmitted before birth and manifested according to timelines we do not control. The past becomes a physical presence, a cellular trace acting silently in the present. The shift from the geographies of power to the cellular dimension extends Rapicavoli's research. In her earlier works, maps and routes made perceptible the hidden structures that regulate movement and organize control. In a similar way, in *Low Tide* the investigation moves closer to the body, yet continues to question the invisible forces that shape existence. The scale changes, but the question remains the same: how to give form to what acts without showing itself. In the large gouache paintings on raw canvas, *Intertidal I, II and III*, the artist paints her own altered cells before chemotherapy. The organic forms oscillate between scientific image and landscape, between cellular configuration and territory seen from above. The monumental scale, nearly two meters by two, recalls the total length of the DNA of a single cell when fully extended, creating a short circuit between the infinitely small and the vastness of landscape. The canvases do not try to explain the illness or reduce it to a definitive image. The cells that take shape in them belong intimately to the artist and, at the same time, retain an irreducible otherness, since they take part in processes that escape consciousness and individual control. Through gouache, Rapicavoli restores to them the density and complexity of living matter, transforming biological data into a territory of experience and reflection.

The relationship between body and cosmos comes into sharper focus in the porcelain work bearing the mathematical formula for the harmonic analysis of tides. The equation describes the movement of water through periodic components linked to gravitational forces and astronomical rhythms. On porcelain, the formula brings mathematical abstraction into contact with material fragility, measurement with surface. Tides respond to forces that reach beyond any single place; the body, too, belongs to a wider network of relationships. Without literally equating tide and organism, the work suggests a continuity of rhythms and interdependencies, because the body is not isolated from the world but is one of the places where the world manifests itself. In *Ecdysis*, a sculpture made of hundreds of crab exoskeletons collected on the beach, transformation takes concrete form. To grow, the crustacean must shed its shell and pass through an interval in which it remains unprotected, until a new exoskeleton forms. Empty casings are left on the shoreline, imprints of a life that has continued elsewhere, bearing witness to a transformation without showing its completion. Gathered together by the artist, these remains form a constellation that is both fragile and resilient, a deposit of abandoned forms that continue to make themselves present. The crab also introduces a linguistic and mythological layering. The Latin word "*cancer*" and the Greek "*karkínos*" both refer to the crustacean and are the origin of the disease's name. In classical mythology, moreover, the crab sent by Hera against Heracles is defeated, but finds a place among the constellations. These references do not establish an equivalence between the animal and the disease; rather, they open a dialogue between the biological dimension, cultural memory and the mythological imagination. It is precisely in the molt that this plurality of meanings finds one of its most incisive expressions. To grow, the crab must abandon the shell that protects it, passing through a phase in which its body remains exposed and vulnerable. This is not a consoling transformation, nor the promise that every loss can lead to a better condition, but the experience of a threshold where the old protections have already fallen away and the new form has yet to take shape. *Ecdysis* gives body to this uncertain time, without telling a story of healing. In *To Rosalie*, another fragment returned by the beach introduces a story unrelated to the artist's own. The urn contains the ashes of a woman, of whom only an object

and a name remain. Rosalie enters the exhibition as an unknown presence, a life impossible to reconstruct but not entirely vanished. The encounter with the artist does not erase the distance between their two paths, because it is precisely the impossibility of knowing Rosalie's story that makes the discovery so intense. The sea is an archive without order, capable of bringing lives close together without reducing them to a single narrative. Rapicavoli does not invent a biography to fill the void; she recognizes a trace and rescues it from indifference. Even an unknown life leaves a mark, one that can enter the present without becoming the property of whoever encounters it. The artistic gesture safeguards the mystery of the other. The analog photographs *My Darling* and *Lido Don Bosco, 1965*, from the artist's archive, introduce a further temporal layer. These images are neither a nostalgic refuge nor a portrait of an identity that has remained unchanged. It is the gaze of the present that transforms them, bringing out meanings that may once have gone unnoticed and introducing a new distance even from what is most familiar to us. Memory thus reveals itself as something alive, which changes along with us and through which we reread our own history. In these photographs, the body of yesterday and the body of today meet, allowing the trace of time to surface, along with the transformations that have redefined the artist's relationship with herself. In *Low Tide* every material holds a form of time: the cells, the marine remains, the mathematical formula, Rosalie's urn and the photographs. Their proximity creates resonances between the biological and the cosmic, between personal history and the unknown. Without superimposing art and science, Rapicavoli questions biological inheritance and epigenetics, asking how what we receive takes part in what we are. Inheritance does not necessarily coincide with destiny, because the traces of the past act in the present, but they meet new circumstances and unforeseeable meanings. Thinking back on the artist I have now known for so many years, I recognize in this work the same tenacity in seeking a form for what remains at the margins of visibility. Her practice has always investigated the forces that produce what appears and the stories that continue to act beneath the surface. In this exhibition, however, vulnerability cannot be observed from a distance, because the artist's body is both the site of the experience and the point from which it is questioned. Transformation is

lived through without an outcome being imposed on it. Low tide does not reveal everything; it is an interval in which some presences become accessible while others remain hidden. The water will cover the seabed again, but what we have seen will have changed the way we look. *Low Tide* does not turn vulnerability into victory or illness into a lesson; instead, it recognizes that we are made of stories that precede us, of changing materials and of bonds we cannot always name. To resist does not mean returning to an original condition or erasing the wound, but giving form to what has changed. Like the sea that withdraws and returns, the body preserves, exposes and transforms. What surfaces, even for just a moment, can reveal what still escapes us.