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## ***Viaticum for Forty Years of Italian Painting***

**Giorgio Verzotti**

"In order to understand the fascinating meaning of the classical, I need to define, even if briefly, the meaning of invention. I would define it as follows: invention is knowledge in motion. But all knowledge tests a point at which it ends. Invention then disturbs the peace that has been achieved, it manifests dissatisfaction, poses the dilemma between quiet and stimulation. The classical is the invention that resolves the dramatic nature of these thrusts in an organic quiet. Thus the classical is knowledge in motion in the form of quiet. The classical seems to exist in order to serve as a rule, as a model to be followed. Donatello seems so clear, so conclusive, but his solution is elusive."<sup>1</sup>

This illuminating reflection by Luciano Fabro might serve as an emblem, even more than as an introduction, to the survey of Italian art that we are presenting here. It could be an emblem for this particular show and for the many possible ones that might be attempted, always constructing a genealogy that, if it doesn't claim to trace a historical truth, it does, however, attempt to individuate a character, a recognizable feature, that can tie together the most diverse experiences, making them comprehensible. We feel that this quality resides precisely in that oxymoronic figure that Fabro describes in his limpid writings. It is the search for an inventiveness that can, in itself, prefigure the classical as a balancing of contrasting tensions, or the necessity for a classicism capable, by its very definition, of being presented as a question more than as a model, as non-pacification, owing to the impossibility of recognition: "it is necessary to pull to pieces that which allowed the consolatory game of recognitions," as Foucault has said of "microphysics."<sup>2</sup>

The collection of work we are presenting here is meant to identify, within the persistence of that tension, the character of Italian art of the last forty years, bringing it together at an advanced point of international scrutiny. The proposed investigation begins with the consideration of the persistence of a linguistic specific, the specific of painting, which, by tradition, is the basis for art's legitimacy. From our perspective, one might say that pictorial language is assumed on the condition that it is discussed; it doesn't suffice on its own, it is not resolved within the pacified contemplation of self, but opens up to a reflection on its own legitimacy and on the tradition that underlies it.

These are the urgencies of an era that induces artists to intervene, in innovative terms, on the very body of painting. Contemporary culture incessantly places in the foreground its knowledge that it is taking part in the disruptive genealogy of the avant-garde, and its need to respond to cultural exigencies.

Our postwar period began with Lucio Fontana's spatialism investigations, which gave new meaning to the very concept of art, and, in this case, of painting. In the late 'Fifties, Francesco Lo Savio found himself on a similar wave length, and he continued, on an analytical and scientific level, what Fontana had worked out on an intuitive level. In both artists' work, painting is related to space, which is understood both as a phenomenological sphere and as an additional dimension that can only be investigated conceptually, and this relationship becomes unconditional, to the point of negating the integrity of the pictorial work.

Not only do all representative functions collapse and the expressive factors of language become eliminated, but the very body of painting changes as a result of the new demands against which the work is measured. For Lo Savio, light becomes the priority element in the qualification of the work, and for this reason painting is replaced by other processes of signification and by other materials. At first (beginning in 1959) there were applications of oil paint or synthetic resins, the color-light space of which then radiates outward; then there were the filter pieces (from 1959 to 1962), constructed as superimpositions of semi-transparent papers that introject light and create a spatial autonomy of their own. Then the metal pieces (beginning in 1960) employ black as the maximum potential of absorption of light, where the surface reaches a maximum destructuring of its codes and opens up to the real space, articulated in projecting planes or curvilinear profiles. Finally, the *Articolazioni Totali* (*Total articulations*, 1962) abandon two-dimensionality and take up a position in real space, indicating their own achievement within the world of functions, in the realm of architecture and design, toward which the artist, who committed suicide in 1963, was heading. An awareness of technological development pushed Fontana and Lo Savio to define new dimensions and functions for art, thereby making it capable of intervening even within the realm of an esthetic requalification of society. But Alberto Burri's point of departure was other presuppositions regarding the significance that the work must assume with respect to contemporaneity, and he intervened more with values that critics did not hesitate to define as existential. And yet it seems that he had a desire to experiment with new languages, to disrupt the traditional concept of making paintings, but without ever abandoning the pictorial, understood as an expressive category if not as a technical process.

Fabro's observations about the difficult relationship between invention and classicism apply more to Burri than to anyone else. Burri is indubitably a classic, and it is equally certain that this is thanks to the innovation introduced into his work, which entirely transformed its nature. Over the course of his activity we can see formal harmony emerge and act within the very core of material disharmony; as a result, and it is trite to emphasize it, the form is generated by the formless. And what we have, and this too is well known, is new forms, which evoke the classical thanks to their unusual but verified dignity.

The works chosen for this exhibition occasion date back to the late 'Sixties and are part of the cycle of works entitled *Bianco Plastica* (*White Plastic*). With the earlier *Sacchi* (*Sacks*), *Legni* (*Wood Pieces*), *Ferri* (*Iron Pieces*) and burned *Plastiche* (*Plastic Pieces*), the artist reinvented, not a new way of painting, but painting itself, introducing into his system signs that become new codes (which, we might say, function as organic anomalies in a system). The *Bianco Plastica* pieces articulate a new dialectic between absolutes (white and black, gray as mediation, according to Cesare Brandi in his essay, reprinted in this catalogue), drawing from the non-pictorial all the emotive suggestions that belong, by statute, to the pictorial. Pure formal values take root in the turning of material into metaphor: impeccable coats of bright white acrylic on broad surfaces of cellotex, onto which films of transparent plastic are spread.

On this almost gelid support, the combustion of the plastic (as artifice fallen into the organic world) induces the opposing values of heat on cold, black on white, formlessness on the structured form of the canvas. The work thus expresses its own autonomous process, which the artist has prearranged and regulated, but which is achieved without his direct contribution. It is in the emergence of this autonomy that Burri stands out as one of the most authoritative precursors of developments in subsequent years, and not just in Italy. The artist renounces any demiurge and becomes an operator of language, an inventor of signs that draw directly from the material. Furthermore, if Fontana and Lo Savio have inscribed the space in the work, getting to a point where they transcend its physicality, Burri visualizes the morphogenesis of material and introduces the dimension of time, as

in the red and transparent *Plastiche* from the early 'Sixties and in the *Cretti (Crack Pieces)* from the 'Seventies.

Among the many challenges that converged during the 'Seventies, a predominant one was to make painting that go beyond painting and, through these innovations, become classical, that is, to confirm the era's own relevance. Jannis Kounellis's work and declarations of poetics are a case in point. His rejection of representation implies a rhetoric based on pure presentation, that is, on the consideration of the work in its autonomous reality, which is, first of all, a linguistic reality. Analytical painting closely investigates the self-reflexive commitment inherited from reductionist and meta-linguistic requirements and subjects language to a verification of its own postulates, through a practice of dissection.

In Giorgio Griffa's work, which is one of the most significant examples of this detached approach, the linguistic system of painting becomes a dismembered body, the articulations of which, considered autonomously, expose its functionality. The canvas, first stretched and covered with monochrome coats of paint, is shown free-standing (from 1969 on) and in a raw material state. Like large pages flying in space, which will later become pieces of gauze freely arranged on the wall and superimposed one upon another, the surfaces bear pictorial signs placed contiguously, in a pure display of the basic elements of the language: lines, points, stripes, traces of the tool used. Here too, the subject loses its centrality and becomes an element of process, entitled, according to the artist, solely to the privilege of choosing how to organize the surface. On the canvas, presented with modalities that emphasize its nature as a matrix, the system of painting seems to come into being a new, every time, as if it were evoked in the operation we connect with the tools of the process. And if the narrative function is totally inhibited, what emerges and is accentuated are the emotive value of color and the energetic value of sign, factors which determine the incontestable beauty of works like these, and which motivate the excesses of the works to come.

During the experimental 'Seventies, the denial or impossibility of representation allowed painting to address other functions, not only meta-linguistic ones. "Boetti has always laid claim to the title of painter", according to Anne-Marie Sauzeau,<sup>3</sup> and we moreover know from a statement by the artist that sculpture or objects as such never interested him. We can see many indications in Boetti's work that we might construe as pictorial, even if, weakened by pathos and having become repetitive, they are apparently insignificant, like the act of faithfully tracing in pencil, or covering sheets of paper with ball-point pen strokes, or embroidering, beginning with pre-existing images. Boetti also evokes painting as a practice of communication, but he does so metaphorically, from within a loss of the specific that results from the radical loss of centrality of the subject, an ideological need that the artist has embodied (before doubling himself into Alighiero e Boetti) and brought to extreme consequences. In the paper pieces made monochrome by pen strokes, as in the embroideries on canvas, whether the various versions of the *Mappe (Maps)* or the *Tutto (Everything)* pieces from the 'Eighties, which are included in this exhibition, we are witnessing the execution of a multiple subjectivity, where the artist is only one of the exponents. The thousands of individuals who create the project, expressing, in the case of the embroideries, a particular knowledge of craft, are the nameless community where identity is dispersed. This dispersion, or in any case its definitive relativization, correlates with the work's extreme vitality, which, in the case of the *Tutto* pieces, is explicated on the level of the chromatic richness and the invention. The small colored outlines, like so many pictorial touches, saturate the surface, wedged in one against the other and creating a sort of large puzzle; and in order to emphasize its playful character, the work can be observed from any point of view.

Vettor Pisani also resorts to metaphors, and he introduces painting into his multiform work of reflection and revitalization of cultural archetypes. In his installations and performances, common

objects are invested with symbolic value, like the images that recur in the work and which belong both to the history of art, from Symbolism to Klein, from Duchamp to Beuys, and to the emblems of esoteric science, which thematically persist throughout all this artist's work, from the early 'Seventies to the present. The material, too, particularly the pictorial material, undergoes the same cross-evaluation. Beyond the actual paintings that the artist made in the early 'Eighties, painting is present in all his work as an element subjected to mutation; it is liquid, pigment and glass, in an ascending development whereby the material is sublimated into immaterial transparency, and thus the physical into the spiritual. The color blue, which recurs so often, openly refers to the color of Klein and the way in which the latter alluded to pure sensibility as a realm where true consciousness is explicated, to the conceptual sphere as a realm where the artistic realizes its full meaning.

Mario Merz is not very far from these assumptions, and for him, painting fulfills a need for complexity. The artist has stated: "I could not execute a work on complexity without using the languages that human beings have had available to them in order to understand it. Painting is a language used by artists, from time immemorial, to develop this theme, and it interests me as a method for formulating complexity."<sup>4</sup> After the early 'Fifties, when he devoted himself to non-representational painting, Merz returned to this approach in the late 'Seventies, when he delineated free figures of cones and trees and images of animals in his large canvases. Rhinoceroses, tigers, fire-flies and crocodiles painted in extremely lively colors and with great richness of detail interact with the natural materials and with the neon that has always played a significant role in the artist's installations.

The complexity of which Merz speaks is that of his universe of meanings; like the spiral, the igloo and the Fibonacci number series, the painted animal becomes the emblem of naturalistic dynamism, and it is chosen by the artist as the image of a primordial living being, an organism that predates the appearance of human life.

This sense of breaking through time, which Merz emphasizes by introducing the attribute of "prehistoric," allows the lure of myth to emerge, the mythical idea as a form of consciousness prior and alternative to the one of technological specialism into which contemporary subject has fallen. This is expressed through archetypes formulated at the origin of our culture, the resonance of which has yet to be fully plumbed. On the other hand, the myth to which the artist refers is not only that which anthropology can interpret, but also that which concerns a rediscovered epic function of art and the possibility that art has gone back to speaking to a collective humanity: "our position, at the end of this century, is one of absolutely recovering all the great myths of humanity from other times", says the artist, quoting Delacroix.<sup>5</sup> As one can see from the examples we are giving, however brief these may be, the statute of the work of art, and in particular pictorial work as it has developed within the realm of Italian neo-avant-garde movements, has come to assume a dual aspect. The rejection of merely referential function removes it from the regime of representation and inscribes it, as we have said, within the realm of presentation. However this sort of proof of self-signifying autonomy is accompanied by a strongly evocative or allusive potential. The work does not replicate the world external to it, but evokes a possible world, one that would not otherwise be definable, except through such evocation or allusion.

In Italy, Piero Manzoni is the most explicit case of this double nature inherent to the work; his achromes are undoubtedly and simply what they are, portions of canvas treated with kaolin or polystyrene foam or fiberglass. At the same time they stand in for something else, that is they indicate a dimension that transcends their pure factuality. Manzoni speaks explicitly about infinity, about a dimension of which the work is a metonymy and, precisely, an index. The concept of space intuited by Fontana and, as we have seen, developed by Lo Savio, is rather close to this ontological density. The themes of the infinite, the invisible, also recur in the work of Giovanni Anselmo. From

the compasses inserted into blocks of granite in the early 'Seventies, to the pieces where ultramarine (as a color and as an indication of space) appears, to those included in this exhibition, created in recent years, the artist always locates the work within a tension that determines its configuration and that is a result of the properties of the materials employed and their relationships, beginning with the law of gravity. The works exhibited in this exhibition refer explicitly to a reflection on painting, where the body of the piece becomes the weight of the stone placed in relation to the supporting canvas. The position of the stone or of the slab is determined by its weight and by the action of the metal cable and the slip-knot that connects it to the support. The slabs or stones are presented in their full physicality, the effects of which are placed in the foreground, and, at the same time, are brought to the attention of the viewer as pure chromatic values. Thus the work transcends itself, almost dematerializes into a relationship of formal values, and allows the viewer to perceive the tension upon which it is constructed (the material's "breath," the artist says, its micro-structure). Without ever ceasing to be that which it is, the work, even here, becomes an index of another state, an ideal elsewhere that superimposes the geographic "beyond the sea," probably indescribable, which can be frequented only in the mind.

The first half of the 'Eighties is well known as a period of renewed interest in the techniques and traditional functions of painting, on the part of artists who began showing in the late 'Seventies.

The pre-eminence of concept in art activity typical of the previous decade undergoes a re-evaluation with the questioning of the optimistic and evolutionistic hypothesis of the "tradition of the new" as an ideology of the avant-garde. Artists experiment with the crisis of ideologies as a possibility for a different sort of cultural orientation, directed toward the reinterpretation of the past, distant or recent, and toward the revival of local cultures. It is equally well known that this period is marked by an international climate that has no intention of resuscitating an international style, but, on the contrary seek to bring out differences between cultures, in a free intersection of suggestions. Francesco Clemente has developed a stylistic eclecticism that is the most significant characteristic of these tendencies, along with an esthetic stance that once again proposes subjective values. Clemente has devoted himself to manual techniques such as oil painting, pastel, tempera, fresco and mosaic, which can more immediately be put to work in the cause of an ambiguously sensual expressiveness. His images are characteristically ambiguous in that they describe an erotic and perverse phantasmagoria and escape recognizability by appearing in the enigma of an ideogram (the artist speaks explicitly of images as hieroglyphs, and *Emblemi* [*Emblems*] is the title of a cycle of works from the early 'Eighties, the period examined in this exhibition).

The self-portrait, a theme that persistently recurs in Clemente's work, elaborates the idea of self through a self-denigrating rhetoric, literary in feeling and dose in lineage to Egon Schiele, to a strongly intellectualized accursed nature. The artist is portrayed as an agonized body, an eroticized object and location of degenerate desires.

For Nicola De Maria, another protagonist of this same creative period, painting is the vehicle for an overheated sensibility that employs a chromatic richness to express its high emotional temperature, which disintegrates any precise figuration in favor of abstract applications where manifestations-signs (flowers, stars...) or enclosed forms announce the image as pure possibility. As Achille Bonito Oliva has said, De Maria's painting "tends to appear as an externalization of a mental state and as an internalization of possible vibrations that emerge during the execution of the work."<sup>6</sup> This reciprocal and harmonious relationship between the emergence of the impulse that becomes language and the emotional resonance of the latter, grasped at the moment in which it is practiced, strengthens the artist's inner world and, likewise, the construction of the work, its spatial organization. De Maria is unconcerned whether the space is that of a small sheet of paper, that of a large scale canvas, or even that of the walls, as long as the vitality of the painting doesn't hesitate to

invade it. To paraphrase Bonito Oliva, the space, in any case, is an energetic field where a rhythm, a breath, is expressed uninterruptedly, which ties the artist's subjectivity to the sense of belonging to the cosmos. This breath alternates with the fluidity of the monochrome grounds on the wall or those on large canvases with the density of impastos, and with the superimpositions of pictorial material on small scale canvases, such as those included in this exhibition. The latter pieces, created during the past decade, are explicated through the artist's unconditional empathy for his expressive material.

Stefano Arienti is one of the most significant practitioners of the movements that, beginning in the second half of the 'Eighties, brought together the previous generation's iconophilism and love of painting with a renewed interest in the experimental practices of the 'Seventies. But the utopian thrust of the latter is replaced by a sense of disillusion, with a (self)ironic cast that, in Arienti's case, is manifested in the playful re-use of pre-existing images, in large part tied to the history of modern art. With a vaguely derisive stance, Arienti intervenes on reproductions of paintings of Corot or Monet or Van Gogh, already transformed posters or into wallpaper. Or he works with portraits of rock stars and movie stars and adds fragments of colored play-dough or puzzle pieces. He perforates the outlines of the images in such a way that they are legible from the back of the reproduction, or he erases them or transforms particular details with the use of normal pencil erasers. He uses slides taken from photographs that he has shot; he then modifies them with cuts, burnings and scratches. In other words, he displays an ambivalent feeling toward the image, marked by an aggressiveness that, however, becomes a matrix for unexpected formal values.

The youngest generation of artists confronts pictorial issues much as their elders have, traditionally or tied to advanced technology, but without those issues assume the preponderant role it still played in the 'Eighties. It is interesting to conclude this brief analysis with a discussion of the work of two artists, Eva Marisaldi and Grazia Toderi. In their work, painting persists as an object of reflection, comparison or experimentation more than as an espousal of conventional tools. In Marisaldi's polyphonic and hermetic work, painting appears as a significant practice, along with photography and object-related installations. But painting appears within formal processes that are in part delegated to chance or to the partially unconscious intervention of the viewer. At a determined time, a mechanism causes metal circles to roll toward a surface covered with sand, upon which the circle falls and leaves its imprint. In the work shown on this occasion, a drawing made with iron dust can be modified by the spectator, who uses a remote control to activate a mobile magnet below the surface where the iron dust has been placed. The action occurs without the spectator being able to control it, since the remote is located in a different space from the one where the drawing is visible. For Grazia Toderi, painting is a process that is not practiced, but recalled explicitly in two videos, both shown here. The first metaphorically ties pictorial language to the body of the person who formulates it, to his or her primary biological rhythms, signified by the breath and testified to by the mist that forms on the glass where the artist writes. That is, it gives both form and meaning to material. Via metaphor, painting is also liquid, the water that refills the container where two small objects are found, and which slowly transforms from transparent to white, due to the constant drops of milk that, in the second video, accompany the playing of a *lied*.

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<sup>1</sup> L. Fabro, from *Lettera ai Germani*, in G. Celant, *Arte Povera*, Electa, Milan, 1985, p. 190.

<sup>2</sup> M. Foucault, *Microfisica del potere*, Einaudi, Turin, 1977, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> A.-M. Sauzeau, "*Gli undici sensi*" in *Alighiero Boetti 1965-1994*, Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin - Mazzotta, Milan, 1996, p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> M. Merz, in G. Vincenzini, "*Incontro con Mario Merz*", in *Mario Merz*, Palazzo Congressi ed Esposizioni, San Marino - Mazzotta, Milan, 1984, p. 187.

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<sup>5</sup> M. Merz, in J.-C. Amman, S. Pagé, *"Intervista a Mario Merz"*, in *Mario Merz*, op. cit., p. 160.

<sup>6</sup> A. Bonito Oliva, *"Il nichilista compiuto"*, in *Transavanguardia: Italia/America*, Galleria Civica, Modena, 1982, p. 8.