

Ugo Lapietra

## BEYOND PAINTING

*Afterthoughts on an exhibition held last year  
at San Benedetto del Tronto*

GILLO DORFLES

The situation in which contemporary visual art is being thrashed out may be seen as the product of two fundamental conflicting drives: the one, towards the world of technology, new structural materials, programming and mass production; and the other, *against* technology (even when it is used), seeking hopefully a return to nature, opposed to mass production and programming, placing importance more upon the idea informing the work and the *situation* in which creation takes place, than upon the product of that idea and that situation.

Observing the trends of the last few years, one cannot but recognise the truth of this summary. There is minimal art, primary structures, kinetic art, op, programmed art, all tendencies linked to technology and boasting new materials (Cor-ten steel, aluminium, plastics, etc.); the production of multiples (precisely to insist upon the affinity with the world of industrial design and mass production); and on the other hand, the new trends of "anti-form", of conceptual art, of "arte povera" (all of which could be grouped under the heading of "situational" art, as good a heading as any), decisively refusing the glitter of technology and, for the first time since Dada, asserting the pre-eminence of the conceptual in visual art, the importance of the metaphorical element, and calling for the abolition of servitude to a consumer goods-oriented society.

The show organised in the summer of 1969 at San Benedetto del Tronto by myself, Filiberto Menna and Luciano Marucci, was intended to be, as the title had it, "beyond painting". Otherwise stated, it was an exhibition that excluded painting hung on the wall and the sculpture on a pedestal in order to give the utmost importance to the two trends mentioned above. The aim was to establish visually (when placed in direct confrontation), the behaviour of some of the most interesting and committed artists of the last two generations in Italy belonging to the two opposed tendencies.

It was, I believe, the first time that anything

of the kind had been done. The large exhibitions of conceptual art (Berne, Amsterdam, Amalfi) had excluded all other developments, and, similarly, in the shows of the other trend, the technologists, kineticists and programmists dominated without let or hindrance.

It had not been easy to persuade the artists to this face-to-face encounter, especially as their weapons were unequal, those of the technologists, showy and gleaming; those of the conceptualists airy and imponderable. Besides purely "visual" works (each artist had his own space in which to carry through the operation he preferred), the exhibition presented other types of action "beyond painting", such as the continuous execution, in a special room, of electronic, "concrete" music by Boguslav Schaeffer, Giuseppe Chiari, Vittorio Gelmetti, Pietro Grossi; a musical happening by Chiari, Gelmetti and Lacy; the showing of experimental films by Barucchetto, Leonardi, Patella, Turi, Munari, Piccardo; and other "actions" which were dispersed in the surroundings of the exhibition and inserted in the urban and the natural landscape, such as the raft of Mattiacci, the self-measurement of Nanni, and various participational works of Contenotte, La Pietra, Marotta and others. Besides this, and precisely in order to give a succinct survey of international production, a show of multiples was put on, with items chosen from among the most significant in Italy and abroad.

Before coming to a short analysis of the works on exhibition, I would like to underline an interesting fact concerning the attitude of the general public (the ordinary public of a summer resort) towards the show. It was a test, not to be ignored, offering the possibility of response to works completely unfamiliar and having no connection with what official and academic culture calls art. And so it was possible to observe that, leaving to one side the hostile judgements of persons ossified in retrograde traditionalist positions, the reaction of the general public was good. Thus, for example, a great sun, drawn in red streaks on the pavement of the square in front of the exhibition palace by Nespolo, was quickly "invaded" by the children of the place and used in their games, transformed into a bright playground. The light projections that covered by night the exterior of the palace with evanescent amoebic figures [compositions by Contenotte created by enclosing fluids of different degrees of viscosity

between sheets of glass and enlarging them in the projection, a commonplace in the dance-halls of San Francisco four years ago.—Trans.] attracted the interest of passers-by through their very unexpectedness. The same could be said for the various rooms of the exhibition where the public revealed its clear preference, understandably, for the spectacular as achieved by the technologico-kinetic artists, especially as these most closely resembled certain aspects of our mechanised urban culture with its night lights or the new instrumentation for spatial exploration. But in fact, if a hypothesis is permissible, I believe one can foresee a future decline of interest in this type of work precisely because it too easily resembles what we find already in our day-to-day life in bars, jukeboxes and the moving illuminations of advertising.

The osmosis which has taken place between kinetic, programmed art and luminous advertising signs and, in general, the lay-out of the cityscape and the nightscape, has certainly been good for both; but once a certain stage is attained, it takes away from the technological-type "useless works" the science-fiction aspect they had originally and which constitutes a large part of their fascination. What has happened, in fact, is that which has befallen the so-called "cool science fiction" dealing with astronauts and space flight; as spatial exploration has become more and more a reality, interest in this kind of fiction has declined.

Fairly different was the attitude and the reaction of the public to the works of the other group where comprehension was more difficult and the sophistication of the ideas often rendered them elusive. The "code" necessary to their deciphering was not in the possession of the majority of the visitors—which shows that more often than not the forms of "anti-form" enter the category of metaphorical constructions nearer to a literary than a figurative mentality. The absence of the spectacular—of modern materials—and the difficulty of seizing the idea or the situation upon which the artist bases his work, both operate in a way that even fully realized and cohesive creations cannot be completely grasped except after a mature preparation.

We were able to see, on the other hand, that projects based upon the direct projection of visual works (slides projected on a plexiglass dome by Patella, film images by Pirelli, etc.) were easily accepted and understood precisely



because of the immediacy of their visual expressiveness.

I wished to note briefly these reactions of the public because it seems to me that often one gives far too little importance to "popular" reactions, neglecting them and contenting oneself only with the opinions and judgements of the experts and the cultural élites, without being aware how often the judgement of these might be vitiated by fashion or by reason of intellectual snobbery.

But let us try, now, to examine more closely some of the works shown. Above all the operations upon the landscape (like Nespolo's sun and Mattiacci's raft, already noted) demonstrated the possibility for artists of invading the field of urban environment. And in the second place, the use of tape recorded music by numerous artists (Patella, Panseca, Pirelli, La Pietra, Nannucci, Nanni) gave actuality to the problem of the interdependence of different artistic languages and the utility of "inter-media" shows. Even musical compositions which are generally considered hermetic and unpalatable (like those of the composers here represented), once mixed with visual works and presented at the same level of exhibition material, were seen to be easily acceptable. The public which, entering the rooms of certain artists and witnessing kinetic and luminous projections with sound in the background, was carried on to listen, with equal comprehension, to the same works executed in the recital room.

A series of metal disks and circles, hanging from the ceiling and crowding the whole room, comprised the environment offered by Mario Nanni. The interest of this work derived not only from the structure of disks and circles, but also from the fact that interfering with them provoked echoing sounds more or less intense according to which group the visitor moved.

In La Pietra's audio-visual environment sound had a structural importance. As the visitor progressed along the plexiglass route to a sort of transparent dome, the sound became louder or quieter, causing strange interferences with the intensity of the lights and the transparencies of the tunnel. Into this work, La Pietra had inserted some of the more constant elements of his recent work in order to realise a construction in which fantasy was married with a possibility of architectural utilisation.

Another environment based upon light and sound effects was Panseca's, where a skein of transparent tubes, containing fluorescent liquids lit by ultra-violet light, created a

dynamic, luminous situation of a markedly "informal" type far from the usual creations of kinetic artists.

The sole representative of this trend, De Vecchi of the Milan Gruppo T, created in a completely black environment a play of perspectival oscillations obtained through the movement of a luminous trajectory geometrically ordered.

If the environments of Panseca and De Vecchi were predominantly kinetic, and that of La Pietra typically "programmed", Alfano's great cylinders upon which the rays of a multiple-apertured light source fell, dematerialising the space, entered into the type of spatial-kinetic environment in which Getulio Alviani also finds inspiration. Alviani opposed two reflecting walls at different angles and curvatures, between which ran a neon strip, and created for the visitor a dimensional ambiguity which was further accentuated by the reflections of the visitors themselves.

Nannucci, however, in his "occultation", made of a neon-tube arabesque suspended from the ceiling and corresponding to a similar arabesque traced on the floor, maintained a formal link with his previous work while liberating himself from the three-dimensional sculpture which had interested him for some time.

Even in those environments created for the projection of slides grouped according to some narrative scheme, the images deformed by the plexiglass domes on the surface of which they played, or for film projections, the prevalence of a "situational" element was noticeable and contrasted, in a certain sense, with the mechanical aspect of the devices used. In the case of the projections of Marinella Pirelli, the images, taken from the plexiglass sculptures of Marotta and sagely distorted and deformed, were shown on a sort of multiple draught-screen within and through which the spectator could enter, right into the middle of the image-flux produced by the projector. In this room, too, the sound effect was produced by the action of the images upon photoelectric cells linked to oscillators and thus, though aleatory, had certain ties with the images.

The artist who might be considered the link in this exhibition between the technological and the situational artists was Gino Marotta. In his darkened room he placed some constructions of very thin marble sheets and others of plastic, lighting both of them from below and from the side, so as to throw on the walls their finely notched and serrated shadows. The union

of artificial and natural (the artificialised marble and the plastic used for a natural effect creating the ambiguity) is at the base of this and other recent experiments by Marotta and demonstrates the possibility, while using new technological materials, of continuing the dialogue with nature.

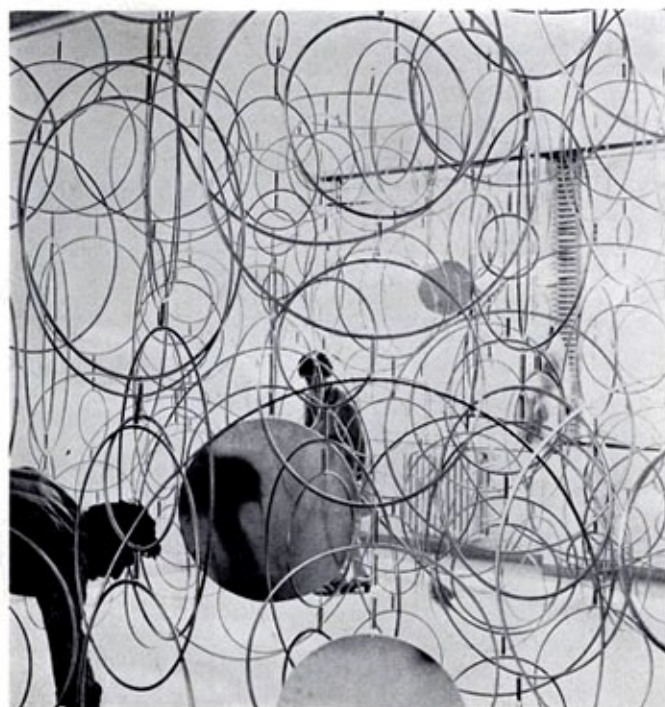
It is this dialogue with nature that was taken up in the rooms of the "situationists", Calzolari, for example, bringing together a palm leaf, transparent plastic and thin sheets of lead, and thus introducing into his environment an element of naturalness, metamorphosed and not without charm.

It is natural that the public reacted with some diffidence towards combinations which it found gratuitous and superfluous. In reality, Calzolari—like Kounellis with his bricked-up door on which hung a photograph of a view of the room one might have had—pursues in these actions a precise aim: the reversal of the process by which art is bought and sold at so much a point and turned into commodity; the wish to cut free from the manipulable aesthetic fetish of the dealer and the museum. Mario Merz does the same thing when, after a long meditation, he traces on the bare walls of his room a series of tiny scratched marks, like subtle outlines of birds—almost as if to indicate the presence of an imaginary flight that did happen and left this fleeting vestige.

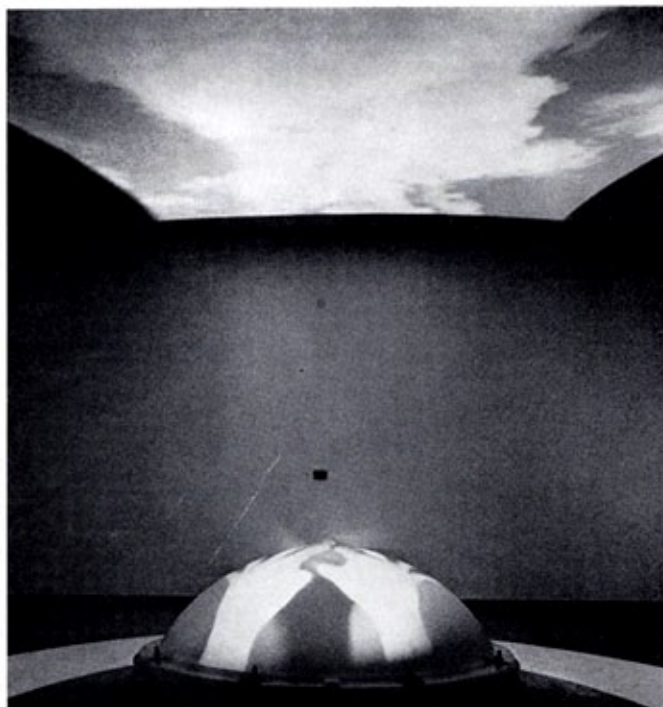
But when these and similar actions (like some of Richard Serra, Oppenheim, De Maria) are photographed, recorded, signed, the merchandising element is reintroduced as, unfortunately, is happening with many conceptual works in the U.S. and in Europe. The sign traced on a wall, on a freshly mown field, on a frozen river; the clot of earth carried from one place to another, the furrow of fallen leaves in a wood . . . all are conscious acts performed by artists with the same magical and apotropaic purpose as that with which ancient priests and tribal witch-doctors traced their magic circles to call up the Great Spirit or to mark the sacred boundaries for the construction of the Temple. But should this magic sign be captured, signed, and put into commerce, then its every value, mythic, ritual, artistic, will be lost, and we have one more fetish in place of a creative work.

Among those I have defined as "situational", Mondino was the only one not to be satisfied with direct elementary expressions and to have recourse to an exhibition based on a self-portraying puppet, some writings and a true and proper picture "*alla Turcato*", that seemed to

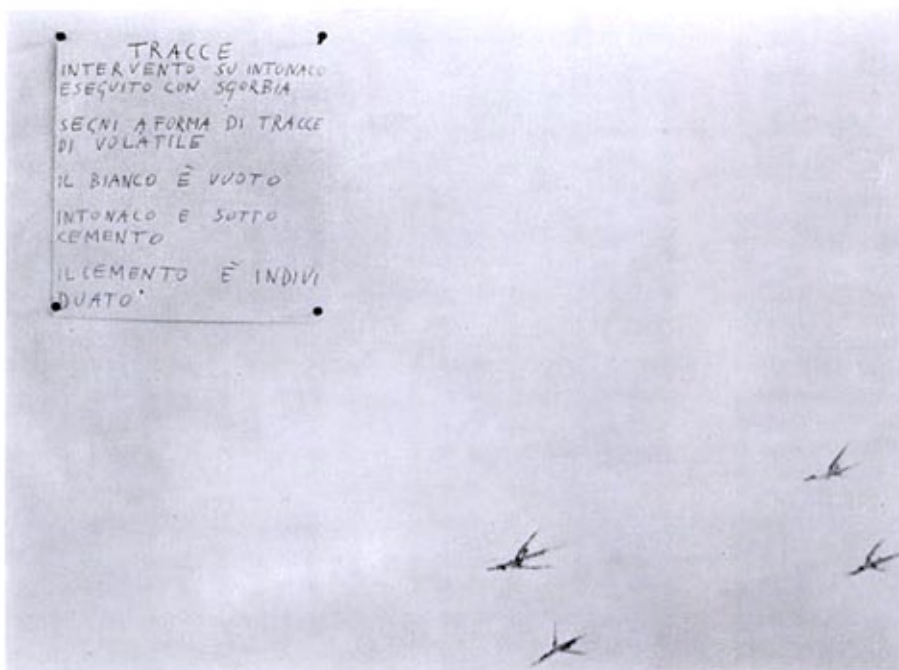
Nanni. Audiovisual tactile environment



Luca Patella







Mario Merz. *Tracce*

relate somewhat to pop-art. It was a disappointment that he did not seize the occasion to offer some of those inventions (which he was one of the first to commit himself to) based upon the fixation of a specific situation, often playfully simulated, like his "Balloons" or his curious "levels".

Another artist who brought into his work certain pop manifestations was Pisani who crowded his environment with a set of plastic

mannequins: headless dolls wrapped in their transparent envelopes in confrontation with plaster twins; a "unicum" beneath a glass bell which slowly crumbled to indicate the transitoriness of the unique work and its translation into the solid but no less ephemeral copies realised in the new materials of consumer civilisation.

What evaluation can we accord to the overall achievement of the exhibition at San Bene-

detto? Even though the number of exhibitors was small, I believe it was sufficient to establish, in a certain sense, the orientation of certain major currents in present day Italian art and, indeed, without exaggeration, of all art today. Thus, for example, the use of natural materials (Marotta's marble, Ceroli's rough wood, the palm leaf by Calzolari, Mattiacci's tree trunks and Kounellis' stones) demonstrated a striking desire on the part of artists very different from each other to return again to the suggestions (if no longer to the representations and the imitations) of Nature.

On the other hand, the use of new materials (the metacrylic of Marotta, the aluminium and steel of Alviani and Nanni, the neon tubes of Panseca and Nannucci, the light and palm projections of Patella, Contentotte and Pirelli) demonstrated the importance of the incitements artists today constantly receive from the technological environment in which they are immersed, and the urge to avail themselves ever more of these media even on an architectural and urbanistic level.

And the presence of certain figurative tendencies should not be forgotten: Merz's outlines of birds in flight, Mondino's self-mocking puppet, Pisani's headless dolls, the anthropomorphic wooden structures of Ceroli, all indicate the urgency for much recent visual art to avail itself once again of the emblematic and iconological aspects of figuration.

We cannot and do not want to make forecasts on the durability of technological art, or of the art we have provisionally called "situational". I believe, however, that the confrontation of opposing trends and the osmosis between the arts are always beneficial and enable one to hope for a future integration of the means of artistic expression, apparently opposed to each other but, after all, all reflecting the peculiarities of the moment in which we live.

(Translated by Toni del Renzio)

Ugo Lapietra. Audiovisual environment



Alfano. *Studi di un percorso circolare* (detail), 1957/58. Height 3 meters

