

BREATHING WALKING PAINTING

Francesca Pola & Niele Toroni

Francesca Pola: *I'd like to start this conversation regarding your work by talking about the method that is not only your work modality but is the foundation of the work itself. In other words, about your brush imprints which are always of the same measure impressed on the canvas at regular intervals. Right from the beginning they were not an external stylistic choice, a technical expedient in view of some sort of surface effect but the very meaning of your carrying out painting in a new way. They are your way of capturing a space and extended time for your painting which go beyond the perimeter of the painting: they are like the identical and diverse alphabet of a different pictorial language that moves forwards not by means of stratification of matter but due to expansion of energy. When did you begin to paint in this way and how was this method created?*

Niele Toroni: The first time I exhibited my *Impronte di pennello n. 50 a intervalli di 30 cm* [Imprints of a no. 50 brush at intervals of 30 cm] was at the Paris Biennial at the Musée d'Art Moderne in 1967 as the result of my work of previous months. One day in my studio I was observing a painting on which I had first "marked" the various colours with which I would have had to fill the surface in its different parts – merely brush strokes that I used as a tracer for painting. And then I realized that actually the painting was already all there, that there wasn't any need to go ahead to complete the painting. Although the stroke of the brush was still too expressive a residue, a tachiste modality, and so I distilled that gestural intuition into a repeated and controlled action. I was interested in filling all of the surface but not with the ordered gesture: my painting wanted to be an "all over" one. The brush imprint which I did by impressing the brush twice, the one on top of the other at fixed intervals, was my way of formalizing this demand to get out of the painting in order to carry out a pictorial work that was without limits and confines.

FP: Your work has never presented the problem of putting itself in relation to styles or tendencies, of historically placing itself with respect to a tradition – that of western painting – which you don't intend to reject but to open to its more extended possibilities, giving life to a pictorial universe that in its total operative neutrality becomes one that holds dialogue. I would like to try to trace out a sort of composite genealogy of your work: not in terms of direct filiation nor of imitation but by singling out some artists and intellectuals who have interested you during your career – not necessarily contemporaries – in whom one can recognize a syntony with your work founded on the non-analytical rational vision, on a kind of humanism of measure which in my opinion makes your way of painting stand out in its own right. In fact, even when your imprints occupy very extensive surfaces one always perceives this equilibrium which takes it to a dimension of possible experience and dialogue and not an alienated alterity: as if they were a pulsing organism and not a superimposed decoration.

NT: Before arriving at the formalization of the imprint I had carried out a whole series of works inspired by a horseman by Paolo Uccello, of interest to me precisely due to its mental dimension translated into very forceful painting. I had entitled this series *Attack*. On my part I wanted it to be an attack against traditional painting. My way of repeating the same image which, however, precisely because it was painted, every time took on a different identity. But then other components come to form part of the universe of my language: ranging from *Le dernier tableau* by Nikolai Taraboukine, the *Voyelles* by Arthur Rimbaud, the perspective lights as employed by Piero della Francesca and *Les Nymphéas* by Claude Monet.

Of course, all of this was translated by me in my relation to places, which is always dialogical. Let's say that I like 'taking' places as I find them. In the past I've carried out works which were also very different among themselves, such as a Vallese vineyard and at the Castello di Rivoli

(near Turin). In every case I have worked bearing in mind what was presented to me, deciding not to alter the existing structures but limiting myself to working in these spaces exactly as I had found them. What I wish to say is that – in my opinion – the dialogue of my painting with the space in which I create it is not a preconceived datum, made up of abstract mathematical proportions, but that it's beautiful to create it within the concrete situation. The important thing is to find that moment of exactness so that the relationship between my intervention and what already exists proves to function. It's necessary to proceed in such a way that the one reveals the other.

FP: Regarding this modality that is so free and flexible with which your painting places itself in relation to volumes and identities of different spaces, it seems to me that two interventions you carried out recently in Villa Pisani Bonetti in Bagnolo di Lonigo (a villa which is a juvenile masterpiece of the renaissance architect Andrea Palladio) are really quite emblematic in this sense. Would you like to tell us how these interventions came about?

NT: Palladio was certainly an outstanding architect and Villa Pisani Bonetti is indeed very beautiful. And notwithstanding its historical importance it has remained a house, a home, and in some way this interested me. When I went to see the space I looked for a wall on which I could work, that could be integrated with the architecture and which at the same time would allow my painting to show itself. I decided to intervene on three unusual elements: two small side doors used for 'service' purposes (not significant architectural elements which normally don't lend themselves as supports for art) and the very beautiful closed central arch element and large specular thermal window.

I made a wooden structure to insert and superimpose on the historical wall, in this way avoiding to directly touching it. I then began to work on these three elements, trying to establish a dialogue between them although also in such a way that this triangular equilibrium generated a sense of the unity of this large wall with the rest of the preexisting pictorial intervention in the frescoed vault and the decorations of the arches. I then chose this colour, this rather dark red, precisely because I didn't want to do the classical "dark place". And neither did I want to play at using greenish or brown tones similar to those of the frescoes. I simply wanted to affirm a non-descriptive colour, something which always interests me, as do the so-called pure colours – yellow, blue and red. In fact this colour I chose proved independent from all the rest and at the same time was capable of enhancing the environment in which it found itself. I've the impression that this choice works: it doesn't disturb and its visible.

FP: It appears to me that something interesting and specific regarding your work is the relationship of painting with a dimension which is not only that of the surface, of the fresco and of the wall, but that in some way above all holds a dialogue with the architecture, with its volumes and the directrices of meaning.

NT: Yes, it's this that interests me. During my life I've also done more classical works on canvas and on other supports. I like working on diverse surfaces which react in a different way to my imprints. These paintings that I create – rather, these objects that I create – then go around alone, they're in no way dependent on me and how I'd like to use them. When instead I want to be precise I do the work directly on the wall, on the architecture. To go back to Villa Pisani Bonetti: perhaps as in this case I like to carry out different works in different zones. In this villa I was interested in the contrast generated between the intervention in the central hall which I would define as being classical, almost a homage to the architect – hence my subtitle A pictorial intervention for Palladio – and the other intervention which I instead carried out in the cellars. I feel the latter as being lighter, freer, although it equally plays on the different possibility which is given by the space and its morphology and, in particular, by these triangles of the little vela placed in the corners. Here I concentrated on the corners because the signs are made in the corners and go towards emphasizing the plan of the space which even if redone in part still nevertheless conserves the beautiful vault structure of the original cellars. However, these corners are

also like angel wings and I really didn't mind the idea of putting the angels in the cellar ... which gives the subtitle of Corners as angels in the cellar.

FP: You don't like defining yourself as an artist. Rather, you like to talk about your work as "travail/peinture" which is already the precise indication of a concrete vision which is always identified "in the situation" of your creativity. Materials and their physical-ness interest you. For this reason – notwithstanding its rational radicalness – your work cannot simply be defined as being conceptual or analytical. Tautology doesn't interest you. If anything what does is the rhythmical and reciprocal positioning of your imprints which comply with an internal regularity that as far as possible tends to annul the incidental individual variation, even if they're not created as forms/intentions to underline or highlight what is identical. This spatial progression indicates how you don't work on the form of what you create but on its internal volumetry which places itself in constant relation with what constitutes it (matters and instruments) although also with what lies around it (the empty and the full, proportion and equilibrium). Your thought is inseparable from its translation in work and it appears to me that this is the substantial difference of your work with respect to the serial hypotheses of Minimal Art and its "primary structures" conceived as pure project, indifferently realizable by an absent authorship and, in their turn, not casually the root and origin of conceptualism.

NT: For me painting is something material and above all something to see – it can't be a presumptive thought translated onto a surface, not can it be a pure formal speculation. For this reason I never carry out inspections of places, preliminary projects or preparatory drawings. When I have to carry out an intervention within a determined space I go there and when I'm there I perceive the energy of that space, its volumes, its tensions and, sometimes, also its ambiguities. The different possibilities of my always identical method are never exhausted in the number of its supports or the contexts of its destination because each and every time I feel the space in a different way.

FP: In this sense I think it's possible to say that from the outset your work has always been characterized by an attitude that is both anti-rhetorical and anti-monumental: it doesn't tend to propose itself as assertive and imperative centrality of an "other" image, autonomous and independent, but as a dialoguing presence which works on discarding, at the limit, on the margin that separates and unites painting and space and on their reciprocal positioning.

NT: Certainly, with respect to the profusion of monumental interventions which are done today, to this giantism that invades our living spaces, it's true that my work is really something different. I'll give you an example. Were size the index of quality then one ought to say that the most beautiful sculpture that one finds in Paris is the panoramic Ferris wheel in Place de la Concorde, that amusement ride which people take in order to look at the city from above. It's certainly a fantastic structure but it's not sufficient for things to become gigantic for them to be interesting. Today there's a growing tendency that indulges in these ways of doing things. To me, instead, it seems evident that even if one makes a bottle that is twenty metres high and one puts it in a city square it nevertheless always remains a bottle. Sometimes, instead, suffice to put three imprints of a brush in order to reveal a space. The hairs of this instrument, dense with painting, leave their mark: it's as if you placed your finger leaving your fingerprint and these patches of colour in a corner, whether they're green, yellow, red or white, they show you something and also allow you a certain freedom to intervene – very different from what there is to be found in other types of more 'composite' installations. I like wandering around with a bag in which I put my three brushes, a bubble level and a compass. But then I can also buy the colour where I am. This is sufficient to give me at least the illusion of my own independence, of a freedom. You'll say that we have increasingly less freedom, that we're all controlled. But what interests me is to have the chance to work in this way, without disturbing anyone, leaving any passer-by with the possibility of looking. Perhaps here's the problem: looking at things again in their simplicity.

FP: I like this image that reduces the dimensional excess of the showy society to the minimum measure of the individual imprint of a paintbrush where it's factors of regularity like position and rhythm which by way of their simplicity define the extension of space. In this sense I think I can state that emptiness in your painting plays a fundamental role: not in the sense of the abstract and separate space that you look for but, on the contrary, as the connective element of this space-time energy which is the sequence of the imprint.

In fact, what interests me about your work is also this search on your part for a material and physical dimension that tries to constitute, to establish a relationship between the individual and the universe which however becomes a skin undergoing mutation: a painting that is dashing away, that's escaping from places where, in fact, we often trace it again at the edges, at the margin.

NT: Yes, perhaps this is also tied to the fact that I don't systematically cover all of the surface, whether pictorial or architectural. I'm interested in the relationship between the painted and the unpainted because the one serves the other in order to enhance each other. Paradoxically this tie would allow the former to escape because from my point of view there isn't an ideal format that connotes painting. I always say that my work should be considered as an indivisible totality and not as a series of individual works: substantially speaking, it will be everything I'll have done up until the day I stop doing it. For this reason the concept of "masterpiece" doesn't have sense, in my opinion. If you can do a tiny masterpiece then when you've done one it's as if you've done everything you were able to do – so you quit, you simply stop. So at the end of every day I'm pleased with what I've done during the day. I'm satisfied because what interests me is not just conceiving the work but seeing it physically: because, as you put it, painting is a physical thing. I once wrote something in this respect in which I used some words by Leonardo da Vinci, affirming the material essence of painting rather than its mental application/ occurrence. To me this concept has always seemed very clear. What I mean is that it would be like maintaining that wine is a mental thing. In fact, today there are people who think they are able to talk about wine because they've seen a television programme about it or because they've learnt the wine list by heart at the most chic restaurant in Paris. Sipping it, however, they're not capable of distinguishing the different vintages or simply the year of production. In short, it's like someone who goes for a stroll in a wood but isn't interested in the variety of the trees. Or quite simply, there exists another vision of the world with respect to mine which allows the person to say that trees are all the same ...

FP: This perspective of your painting – let's call it concrete and relational – results in the fact that it doesn't reduce the painted space to a purely visual image but opens it up as a limitless image: your painting neither occupies nor fills the space but wants to free it by way of this open volumetry which is the imprint of its always different materialization with its regular and ordered cadence. In general the imprint is associated with an individual and individualized identity although in your work, instead, it at the same time becomes something universal. Do you think you could paint in another way?

NT: I progressively found these imprints by starting out from my ideas which have developed by observing very different things: these range from the horseman by Paolo Uccello, which I saw at the Louvre and always reproduced, to the drippings by Jackson Pollock which was/is nothing other than painting that created itself, only by means of a gesture. So I arrived at this brush imprint which is simply the imprint of a brush, a sign which anyone could do but which would always and only remain the print of that instrument. To say this today isn't allowed, or at least one always tries to hide it because everyone wants to affirm his or her authorship and his or her wanting to be an artist. I simply feel I'm a painter: I have three instruments, those that serve for painting. And perhaps I'm completely wrong because what I do no longer interests anyone ... but it interests me: I could do cinema or photographs but on my part it seems right to continue what I'm doing. You know, today one is no longer a sculptor or a painter or an architect:

today you're a plasticien, as they say in France, which means that at last one can do everything. Although I continue to think that perhaps it would be better to reinstate art schools where students learn to draw a nude or sculpt a block of marble along its correct vein even if perhaps they won't do it again in their lives. Instead now in art, in the name of a pseudo-freedom, one sees such a pot-pourri that at times it only seems that one wants to gratify that middle class which asks for simple things, not too hard to digest but that are spectacular. And my work, that perhaps could become spectacular, quite simply is not.

FP: One can say that your work always appears to be formally similar but intrinsically different. How do you live this relationship between the identical and the different in your work? What type of relationship can it have with what is done today in contemporary art?

NT: Let's say that my imprints are not preexistent forms because, otherwise, I'd fall back into all that research regarding geometry which now even seems to be somewhat fashionable. At the moment it seems that everyone rediscovers triangles, circles and squares. Those are preexistent forms. Consequently, to carry out a little square painting in a geometrical painting rather than an apple in a still life makes little difference. Having said that, however, it's clear that often my work is 'similar to itself' and moves in a more or less geometrical fashion although its specific identity lies in the fact that it is not reproducible. At the most one can take photographs of it although then one will have to make a choice of preferring one shot of an imprint rather than another one. Around me today I too often see "things" that don't interest me in the slightest and I think: well, given all the talk and interest surrounding it, that character in a book by Samuel Beckett is right when saying "the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something". Like so many others I work with a traditional tool, the brush, and with a matter – also traditional – which is painting. I see art works done with the most modern and revolutionary instruments and things, done to stupefy ... Unfortunately they're things already seen that people want instead to be modern but are only the vehicles of an old ideology. One used to say: "Learn art and then put it aside". Today we could say: "Don't learn anything but make art".

FP: In this materiality of the individual imprint, as the concentrate of a controlled gesture, it appears to me that a fundamental role is played by time. I've seen you work and you do it in a very rapid and concise way. On observing you one perceives on the one hand how this creative method is by now something intrinsic in the way you naturally act. On the other hand one notes incredible concentration on your part, almost a ritual obsession in trying to combine these two dimensions of an absolute time with another, more relative and contingent one.

NT: Yes, there's also a little of that although for me also the time of the work and of its being done is above all bound to purely material facts: the paint dries and when you use a brush you have to know how to utilize it. Anyone could do it, it's true, although one needs a modicum of expertise. It's also true that on my part there's a lot of concentration: I'm completely immersed in the act of painting because there's a rhythm to respect ... and besides that, there's also the desire to see the result! At the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea all'Aperto in Morterone I did a number of external interventions which even also take on the stylized form of an hourglass: like seeing a flowing of time which is then our way of passing through life.

Then there's another concept of time, besides the time of creation: this is duration. There are some walls on which I have carried out interventions: the walls flake and so the imprints 'disappear' on their own. There are also works that are planned for a very precise period of time and then one covers them with a coat of white paint – but that's also part of the game. It's normal. Though there's a reflection that makes me smile: as the years pass I realize that the imprint ages less than I do. It sometimes happens that I go to certain places where I did something twenty years before and I still find the work as if it had just been done: for example, at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin or at the Castello di Rivoli. The colours are always 'fresh'. It's the part

behind the wall that presents the most problems because the white yellows or flakes and at that point there's no point in restoring everything. The decision, if anything, is to redo the work. I'm not a great believer in this concept of duration in relation to artistic value. One work isn't more interesting than another simply because it's forty-years-old instead of having been done only one day before. If anything, it can be interesting on the plane of a purely personal non-progression on my part: that is, that from 1967 I have always and only done the same paintbrush imprints. But things are done and that's it, I've always said this. It's like walking: you put one foot in front of the other in order to go and see what interests us, or else you decide to stand still. Instead, many of today's artists often make me think that at all costs they would like to find a new way of walking and so I ask myself just what can one positively obtain from that ...?

FP: I like this metaphor of walking because on seeing your work it brings to mind the act of breathing, like something that has its own necessary regularity. To walk inside the painting, to breathe it: metaphors that when faced by your imprints become concrete experiences.

NT: You know, I reflected about this many years ago: I would quote sentences which I have always found interesting during my life which I think were the words of Henri Lefebvre. In talking about repetition he said that everyone is afraid of the term "repetition" but don't realize that this repetition is our life because if the heart didn't always stupidly beat in the same way we'd be dead. Breathing is a similar gesture. In short, in my opinion we are this repetition. After all, what is the individual if not an entirety of solitude and repetition?

Translated from Italian by Howard Rodger MacLean
First published in Italian: Prix Meret Oppenheim 2012, Zürich 2012.