

Analytica

Projects for a New Painting

by Alberto Rigoni

The word “crisis” has many meanings. At school we’re taught that it comes from the Ancient Greek verb κρίνω, “to divide”. “Crisis”, as well as “crease”, means a sort of division, a threshold, a passage from a side to the opposite, a break between a “before” and an “after”. It’s often a painful walk, though not always a negative one, especially in case a brighter phase begins. In its multi millennial story, painting has passed through many crisis, the most recent one running between the Nineteen-Sixties and the beginning of the Seventies.

During the Cold War, some artists ideally crossed the Iron Curtain, searching for affinities in both sides of the aisle. A galaxy made of exhibitions, groups, biennials, manifestos, made the European art change: “le Mouvement” in Paris in 1955, “Gruppo T” in Milan in 1959, “Gruppo N” in Padua in 1961, “Dviženje” (“movement”) in Russia in 1962, up to the New Trend exhibitions in Zagreb, all of them intrinsically showed the will to go beyond the academic art, to set the old manners of painting and sculpture aside. Had president J. F. Kennedy set the goal to bring man on the Moon? Well, art had to open its eyes to the future, too, disown improvisation, use new stuff, get out of the ivory tower. It had to move (“Kinetic Art”) and program (“Programmed Art”).

In this process, painting, queen of the academic disciplines, was the main defendant. Furthermore, in 1967 “Arte Povera” was born, and the technique and the materials adopted to create a work of art had ceased to have importance at all (from the tree to the old car engine, everything could be used, as freely as possible); in 1969, Joseph Kosuth, front man of Conceptual Art, verified the death of painting, already expelled from international museums: in the future – he wrote – we will not need canvas and brushes anymore, just an idea or a concept. He, himself, could not understand the ones still thinking «in terms of painting».

Though, in 1969, some painters had not only learnt the lesson, but had also started to draw down new proposals. In France, Louis Cane, Marc Devade, Noël Dolla, Claude Viallat of “Supports/Surfaces”, had already surpassed Arte Povera, claiming the need to go back to the “zero degree” of painting, to the primitive imprints of a hand in the caverns, to colors spread on nature or on raw canvas freed from frames, or on fishing nets, or even directly on frames. While a society is being disassembled and reassembled by the protests started in 1968, a painter – they said – cannot evade from the revolution: he must contribute, disassembling and reassembling the language of painting.

In Germany, pictorial research was focusing on structure and perception: programmed and kinetic art had not lived in vain. Ulrich Erben, Winfred Gaul, Rupprecht Geiger, Raimund Girke, Gotthard Graubner, Edgar Hofschen and others were working on a new idea of geometry and on the reduction of the chromatic range to a few colors, in order to solicit the observer’s attention: who watches the work – they explained – must be an active part of it. This particular kind of resistance of painting was noticed, among the first ones in Italy, by Filiberto Menna. The Salerno-born critic explained that art is like a pendulum: it always swings between two positions, a “synthetic” one (in which expression and vitality prevail) and an “analytic” one (in which introspection and reflection prevail). Painting was in the

“analytic” position: this assumption was confirmed by many artists who, despite everything, were still using colors, canvas and frames as job tools, pointing an unusual attention on the procedure and writing down their thoughts. This was happening in France, in Germany and especially in Italy: at the dawn of the Seventies in this country, the exhibitions about this kind of “resistance” were multiplying. Menna named this phenomenon “New Painting”: after the old (and emptied) one of the total freedom, a new phase asked the artist for a planned approach to the work. He wrote it for the first time in 1973, in the essay for an important group exhibition in Acireale, and then he enlarged and structured the idea in 1975, when his book *Analytic Line in Modern Art* was published by Einaudi.

Menna read it right. This “a priori” project to approach art was an actual transnational wave, the same way New Trend had worked a few years before. In March 1974, at Westfälischer Kunstverein in Münster, the exhibition “Geplante Malerei” (“Projected Painting”) opened. A preeminent critic and a Conceptual Art expert, the exhibition curator Klaus Honnef had been intensely studying New European Painting for some years. He was the one who, in December 1974, restricted the situation and baptized “Analytic Painting” a small number of painters working on a small and coherent number of issues. Common goal was a profound study and reform of the painting-language, disassembling it in basic grammar elements to restart from the “zero degree” with a new project of art.

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The word “critic” comes from the Ancient Greek κρίνω, too. A “crisis” divides two moments, the “critic” discerns opinions, divides and classifies issues. It should do this on actual facts. Here comes an interesting one.

Forty years ago, on September 16, 1973, the exhibition “A Possible Future – New Painting” opened at Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara. The group show was curated by Giorgio Cortenova, who had invited 28 artists from all over the world. Seventeen of them came from Italy. Among them were Paolo Cotani, Riccardo Guarneri, Elio Marchegiani, Claudio Verna and Gianfranco Zappettini. Though having them all a good curriculum, the full quintet had never been invited at the same exhibition. This circumstance occurred for the second time three years later, in the summer of 1976, at “The Colors of Painting”, an exhibition curated by Italo Mussa at the Italian Latin-American Institute in Rome: and, as far as the Seventies it concerns, this second time together was at the same time the latter.

Many years have passed and our five artists have been protagonists of tens of personal and group exhibitions. Nevertheless, only in recent times, thanks to the critical and historical rediscovery of Analytic Painting, the five of them have been invited at the same exhibition. It occurred in 2008, in the group show “Analytic Painting. The Italian Ways 1970-1980”, curated by Marco Meneguzzo at Museo della Permanente in Milan, and “Aniconic Painting. Art and Critic in Italy 1968-2007”, curated by Claudio Cerritelli at Mantegna’s House in Mantua. It happened again in 2009, at “Structure-Painting”, at Musinf, the modern art and photography museum in Senigallia. For the fourth time it occurs today at Valmore Studio d’Arte in Vicenza. So, these five artists have exhibited together six times, since the Nineteen Seventies until 2000s.

They may appear as mere historical references, but they do suggest some thoughts. For instance, it's crystal clear that Cotani, Guarneri, Marchegiani, Verna and Zappettini have never been an independent group: from the very first time in Ferrara until the second and the latter one in Rome, their destinies have often crossed and parted. By the way, even Menna, Mussa and Cortenova's "New Painting" and Honnef's "Analytic Painting" lived on a roller coaster: from the international success between 1974 and 1975, the borders of the movement turned to be foggier in 1976 thanks to bigger and more confused exhibitions, and in the 1977 sixth edition of Kassel's "documenta" the dawning of a new figurative painting was seen. In 1979, Transavantgarde was born. The pendulum that Menna had talked about had already reached the opposite position, the "synthetic" one: the time to reflect was over, now it was time to express.

Each of these five artists gave his personal contribution to that analysis on the language and its grammatical elements. The issue of surface, for instance, attracted Cotani's and Marchegiani's interest. Marchegiani was fascinated by caoutchouc, rubber of natural origin showing, when transformed into sheets, tactility and new characteristics, absolutely different from canvas and similar to an animal skin. Cotani demonstrated that the surface itself, intended as a place, is not necessary "a priori", and it can be created by soaking elastic bandages in the color and, with them, forming a surface directly on the frame.

The perception of the internal structure of a work was an issue on which Guarneri and Zappettini worked at the dawn of the Seventies: slight differences of color outlined geometrical forms in their paintings and the observer could perceive them only after a long effort. In this way, colors ceased to be just a cover and became an element that the painter used to compose the inner structure of the painting: in order to do that, Verna often used bright colors, suggesting with them other forms and fields, not immediately visible (or invisible at all) in the painting.

A new awareness during the process was necessary. In his "white" paintings, Zappettini wrote down first that he would use a certain number of coats of white to cover a black-painted surface, although in the end only outlining the last coat in a single and simple stripe of "white light". With its "grammages", on plaster or slate, Marchegiani aimed to rediscover the artisan dimension of the job: if the rods on plaster seemed close-ups of a traditional Italian fresco, slate reminded the handicraft side of the job.

The tools themselves did not belong to the old academic painting anymore. Guarneri obtained his fields through common crayons, Zappettini's white was similar to the whitewasher's one (and also spread with a roller), Cotani demonstrated how to paint by subtraction rather than addition (taking away from the surface the ropes on which he had painted first).

In spite of different provenances and, after the Seventies, different destinies, all these five artists understood that painting, even in its prolonged introspection, did not deserve to suffer from an inferiority complex, confronted to other disciplines.

«Thinking in terms of painting», a blind alley according to Kosuth, was no more blind: Zappettini made his motto of it, and also the title of some statements and an exhibition in Germany. And Verna, to those asking him «why still painting?», answered «why not?», refusing to be cornered and counterattacking by saying that painting, «in order to exist, always rewrites its story and renews the codes that have come before».