

Painting Without a Picture

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As a boy, one of the first shows I went to was by Pino Pinelli at the Studio Nino Soldano in Milan. I remember three small elements, three “bricks”, so soaked in blue paint that they were sponge-like. I didn’t know anybody there and I concentrated on that colour so as not to seem a fish out of water. Suddenly there was a slight variation of intensity, almost invisible, between the first and second element, and between that and the third. Then Pino, who at the time I didn’t know, came over to me, curious about someone who seemed so interested in a work as to be hypnotized by it, and explained that the first “brick” had been given five coats of blue, the second ten, and the third fifteen: all the same colour.

At the time - the end of the 1970s - things were concentrated on the concept of “variants” (and in fact each of those coloured elements was a variant of the other, a reciprocal variant that related to its kind...) as part of a larger linguistic system aimed at constructing a kind of “catalogue” or possible repertory of each human activity.

In that sense, painting partially gave up its romantically derived rhetorical armament in order to attempt to enter fully into a series of actions that were apparently useless but the scope of which was to become aware of the Self as a “producer”, as a social mechanism delegated to inquire into the relationship between the self and the world, between individuals and society, through an analysis of what was done while undertaking the act of painting. A highly ideological historical moment in which even the language of art was, in a certain sense, called into play to redefine social roles in order to understand, in the most objective way possible, what happened between you - the subject - and your means of expression and communication which, in fact, relates you to the world.

And so it was that, in a period of general protest, to abandon all traditional means had a meaning for art - above all for painting, the symbol of the past par excellence - because the only way still available for “making painting” was to question yourself about the very act of painting by limiting this kind of “scientific experiment” to the most essential “what” of painting, to its zero setting: a surface, a support, paint.

It is not by chance that the definitions of this current - which had strong political connotations in France and Italy, the two countries where it had most developed as a group trend and as a purposely social and political phenomenon - were as elementary as the factors on which it was based: “Support/Surface”, “Nuova pittura”, “Pittura pittura”, “Fare pittura” or, the most closely defined of all, “Pittura analitica”. The analysis began with the subject - the artist obviously - in order to arrive at the world, or the territory, as it was called then, through the chosen medium of pittura, i.e. painting. From halfway through the 1970s, in a climate where Pinelli had rapidly come to be seen as one of its most eminent figures, the artist tried to renew his own expressive means without giving up - or, rather, by experimenting new paths - what the means itself could still offer, despite the strong hostility of those who defined painting as, by now, a “dead language”.

And so, together with the basic elements of painting mentioned above - support, surface, paint - , in his extension of the possibilities of a painting aware of each minimal gesture, Pinelli concentrated on at least two further factors; they were not exclusive to him (theoretical and ideological confrontation between artists at the time was a constant), but they are certainly immediately characteristic of his whole activity: a breakout from the picture, and a breakout from the spatial context. Pinelli, in fact, after his first mature work in the early 1970s, from 1974 onwards abandoned the picture-form, in other words the form that tradition has made us consider to be the very idea of painting, so much so that in everyday language we easily conflate “painting” with “pictures”. But then, even the staunchest enemies of painting identified it with that form and held that, quite apart from any subtle theoretical considerations, this form was so strong, rooted, and unmoveable as to prejudice any possible realignment of painting.

Pinelli, instead, was at once a part of that thin scattering of artists - among whom we could also include Rodolfo Aricò, the famous Daniel Buren, or

Claude Viallat, as well as the extraordinary antecedent of Lucio Fontana's "Quanta": shaped canvases irregularly placed on the wall - who showed by their example that it was possible to push against the extreme boundaries of painting to arrive at where there exists - if there exists - painting but no picture.

This did not mean giving up the physicality of painting and of the painting itself: quite the contrary in fact. If a picture, even an abstract picture, is a "window", in other words a symbolic space of the imagination, then the solid elements, the supports that Pinelli uses, do not have that symbolic content: they are pure painting, "painterly objects" whose only aim is to coincide with themselves, to be both support and painting at the same time. In this way (I am thinking back to the three irregular "bricks" of blue...) the concept of "breaking out of the picture" is not just a rejection of a support (canvas and stretcher, usually rectangular) whose form is by now obsolete, but even more a refusal of any symbolic values linked to that form; it means staying united to the concreteness of painting, to its extreme physicality. And then these elements of painting have, over the years, taken on different forms - more or less dynamic, corrugated, velvety, thick, two-coloured, elongated, multiplied, dispersed like constellations or aligned in a trajectory - and are part of that area of variants of a single potent idea that for Pinelli has always been a point of no return. Of course, the forms derived from those first simple elements suggest something or other - in the 1980s, for example, the dynamism and contrasting colours, together with their chance distribution in space, could allude to stellar forms - but they never coagulate into something definite: they always manage to escape the formal and symbolic constraints they have broken away from, like monads of painting joined together by weak links (as they say in physics), and are far more concentrated on themselves, on their centre, in a centripetal way and, at the same time, they radiate colour and pulsate as though they were radioactive.

At the very moment painting decides to break out of the picture, the surrounding space takes on a decisive value and importance with respect to before: a picture is a defined territory, the boundaries of which are known; but an element in space - even if we are dealing with the two-dimensional space of the wall on which it is hung - is quite another thing, because it

becomes part of the work even though its boundaries are not precisely defined. And so a small element occupies a large space and has need of a “surrounding”, of a spatial context wholly at its own disposal, because it is not possible to delimit precisely the radiating strength of the colour or the space occupied by a trajectory. So the context of the work, which in the 1970s was overtly a political context, becomes a spatial context that is only apparently more neutral. It is not the work that has changed but the critical view of it: the “political” context of Pinelli’s work has something to do with a kind of occupation of space, as though the artist were to say while creating his work, “I am here and I exist!”, and in so doing were to affirm his wish for a living space, a physical necessity which, through the product of his talent, might colonize new territories for habitation. The view today is rather different, less ideological and more stable: today it is the painting and not the artist that calls for its own space, and it is the work that conquers its own context, not because of its will, but because of its condition as an actual fact, where the artist’s decided and decisive action counts for far less. What emerges is no longer the rebellious yet cognitive process undertaken by the artist, which is reduced to a distant recollection, to the memory of an initial painterly big bang lost in time. But then even the stars we see shining in the sky perhaps no longer exist.