

Pino Pinelli. Painting as a Fragment and Unitary Tension

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INTRODUCTION

For artists, an exhibition is often the occasion when, after having executed a certain number of works or simply having focused on an aesthetic question that interests them, they feel they can display the results. Thus, from one episode to another, through public confirmation, the artists' work clarifies their identity, underlines the significant stages of their conquests, proclaims possible shifts, innovations and changes, or just coherence that is not always synonymous with the absence of a problematic approach, but, on the contrary, may highlight the fact that first intuition at the outset of their career has opened up an inexhaustible spring that continues to flow throughout the rest of their lives as artists.

This last condition seems to be that in which Pino Pinelli's work has manifested itself for about forty years: we must recognize his faith in the assiduous practice of a type of painting that - with its original capacity for emanating light and space that has been elaborated over the years, in the certainty of conferring on it increasingly complex but also more explicit and transparent levels relating to the values characterizing it - has allowed him to produce the present undoubtedly effective results. In fact, in the two spaces at A arte Studio Invernizzi, where this new paradigmatic statement of Pinelli's work is on display,

we have an opportunity to observe a double cycle of works marking a significant development in his artistic career that is certainly laden with consequences. But if we reflect specifically on these latest works, we must necessarily re-examine the basic reasons for the etymons of the fragment, sign, colour, form and their supports, all equally involved in the space housing them, where they exercise their spatial action.

In this essay it will also be possible to reveal how a reconnecting tension, which first appeared around 1986, has been present during the last twenty years with different aspects, gradually leading the form to the exemplarity of the present situation, together with a disquieting yearning for reintegration that is, however, always postponed.

THE FRAGMENT

After Pinelli's monochromatic beginning, documented by the works of 1973-75, in which he worked with acrylic on canvas, the change that fractured and modified the support of the painting - as well as its very consistency by opting for mixed technique (this was susceptible of further elaboration, resulting in the present formula) - took place with "Pittura GR" (1976), which was emblematic of the subsequent conception of each of his works. In this painting, in fact, a number of the basic elements of Pinelli's artistic language were already evident: first and foremost, the fragmentary nature of the work, with the challenge to the traditional canvas support, as well as - perhaps evoking the structure of the stretcher - the covering of the of the new form-support with painted fabric, almost as if he wished to perpetuate his irrepressible desire for a type of painting from which he could not, or did not want to, separate himself. These new characteristics of Pinelli's painting received their first significant international recognition firstly in the exhibition 'Tendenser i Europaeisk Kunst', which took place in Copenhagen in 1976, and then, above all, in the exhibition entitled 'Fractures du Monochrome aujourd'hui en Europe', held at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1978, which sought to investigate fragmentary forms in monochrome painting.

But what inner need does art's interest in the fragment reveal? If we ask this question, we soon become aware that the nature of

Pinelli's choice from the time of "Pittura GR" has not been that of merely seeking to satisfy formal or decorative objectives; on the contrary, it internalizes a dramatic resonance that has precise scientific and historical archetypal references. Insofar as it is a partial entity, it is the fragment that has a dramatic genesis: in fact it declares a residual state, the result of the previous division of the original unit. The archetype still present in each fragment draws resonance from the mists of time, where physicists have, up to now, identified the initial explosion of the big bang. Following this, the whole universe was created from an infinity of constituent fragments of the galaxies and the stellar and planetary systems, one of which comprises our earth. Here, as elsewhere, the unit has continued to split for thousands of millennia. Imperceptible to our eyes, all the material reality subjected to the second principle of thermodynamics has continued to collapse, with the irreparable loss of its integrity, due to the entropy that is as resolute as it is indifferent, undermining in its inmost recesses any illusory state of rest with regard to matter.

In art, the most notable aesthetic awareness of this phenomenon occurs implicitly in the iconography of ruins and its many analogical derivations. While, from the early fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, ruins symbolized, first of all, the end of the classical world and, with this, paganism, and later simply represented the greatness of antiquity, from Romanticism onwards they took on other meanings susceptible of dramatic awareness. Piranesi's civil pathos, expressed in dozens of etchings of Roman ruins ("Antichità romane", 1756), was joined by Charles-Louis Clérissseau's *Ruin Room* (in the convent of Santa Trinità dei Monti, Rome, 1765-66) and such works as Henry Fuseli's "The Artist in Despair over the Grandeur of Antique Fragments" (1778). In painting, however, the theme of anatomical devastation may be regarded as analogous to that of ruins in such works as Francisco Goya's "Disasters of War" (1814) and Théodore Géricault's anatomical fragments (1818), continuing right up to Georg Baselitz's "Füss" (1963).

And, while these examples illustrate the role of the fragment in figurative art, the fragmentary form made its appearance in abstract

art in the work of Kandinsky (1908) and Schwitters (1918) and, in particular, in a totally non-objective context, in that of Malevich (1914-20). But it is well known that Pinelli's work and, more generally, all analytical painting - including that of the French Supports-Surfaces movement and all the other monochromatic groups, such as the one featured in the exhibition 'Monochrome Malerei' curated by Udo Kultermann in Leverkusen in 1960 - can be traced back to Malevich's Suprematism. This is certainly not the right place for an in-depth analysis of its most important relationships; in any case, some recent studies have already explored this area, which, far from being uninvestigated, has now been examined a number of times. However, what needs to be given further consideration here is Pinelli's approach to painting; in addition an attempt should be made to identify movements that have influenced his artistic language, other than the already ascertained one of "pittura-pittura" - also known as "pittura analitica" - to which he certainly belongs.

THE SYNTHETIC POWER OF FORM, SIGN AND COLOUR

Thus we will try to discover - with the necessary differences that distinguish the very varied experiences of the artists of the twentieth century - exactly what it is that Pinelli's painting draws its legitimation from.

While the most important source of inspiration for a large number of monochrome painters - including Yves Klein, Ad Reinhardt, Lucio Fontana, Piero Manzoni, Robert Ryman and Francesco Lo Savio - was Malevich and his "Black Square", it is equally evident that, even before the great Suprematist's "tabula rasa", painting had already undergone the variegated analytic process of Cézanne, Seurat, Gaetano Previati and Divisionism up to Giacomo Balla, without forgetting the original contribution of Van Gogh's unique brushstroke. In short, painting had already clearly demonstrated what it materially consisted of before Malevich decreed that his forms and colours were sufficient to exist in complete ontological independence, but the Russian artist was certainly responsible for taking a more radical and extreme step in the conception and practice of painting than anyone

before him. Thus in the Suprematist compositions from 1914 to 1920 the geometric forms, the shadowless colours and their orientation within the picture characterize a way of occupying the pictorial surface that seems to aggregate and direct different values that contribute to the perception of painting as such, without any other content than itself. Nevertheless, the fluctuation of the forms and their colours on monochrome grounds and their disposition on the surface returned about thirty years later in Fontana's "Concetti Spaziali" (Spatial Concepts). The "buchi" (holes) (1949) and "tagli" (slashes) (1958) pierced the supports with the same hesitant and fluctuating pattern because in Fontana's works, as in those of Malevich, the reference-points of pictorial practice had changed, in both cases going beyond the referential horizons precedent to them in a mental and spatial odyssey as unknown as it was laden with expectations.

And it is directly to Fontana that Pinelli's work must be linked right at the outset of his career - in particular to the "Concetti Spaziali - Attese" (Spatial Concepts - Expectations, 1958), his "Quanta series (1959-60) and the "Nature" series (1959-60). With a consideration that - I must admit - has the limits of a judgement a posteriori, one could maintain that while the "tagli" may have aroused Pinelli's interest due to their regular sequence and their intervals of spatial juxtaposition in the canvas, and the "Quanta" because of their differently-shaped polygonal canvases placed freely on the wall, the terracotta "Nature" series possessed for him both the plastic quality and the freedom of independent bodies occupying a spatiality that could be obtained wherever they were placed.

It appears, therefore, plausible that it was these examples that inspired the young Pinelli, who came to Milan in the mid-1960s, when Fontana dominated the painting and sculpture scene in that city and elsewhere.

While, for Pinelli, as he himself stated subsequently, painting was a search for 'the perceptive aspect of the work, almost an anxious state of the surface', it is not surprising that he drew inspiration from Fontana's "Attese" in the quest for an identity that would only be revealed with the lasting and constant practice of the elaboration of

colour and the form of the supports, the evaluation of the synthetic power of the sign and the orientation of the pictorial structure in the environment, thus allowing the creation of a spatiality that was different on each occasion.

By applying himself to the definition of his elementary fragment-painting, Pinelli gradually formulated, through very precise stages, the qualification of the chromatic body that was notably distant from any other process taking place in the early years of his career. Then, in the 1980s-90s, he managed to add the environmental aspect to his artistic language, thus making the painting self-substantial as well as independent, so that the wall was, in fact, transformed into the primary spatial support.

CONSTRUCTION AND FORMAL ORGANIZATION OF THE PAINTING

If we were to list the procedures that Pinelli has, in the course of time, ascribed to his monochrome pictorial and plastic conception, it would not be possible to underestimate the succession of some of the choices he has made. In "Pittura GR" (1976) the colour covers a support, the flannel surface of which absorbs the paint, concentrating the perception of itself in the form composed of fragments that are only slightly separated, still evoking the element from which they have been derived. The rectangle that the parts of the form outline, albeit interrupted on the sides, both includes and excludes all the surface of the wall on which it is placed. After this parergon, the next step was the arrangement of the fragments in a modular fashion, so they would articulate the forms according to patterns and trajectories along the wall. A rhythmic value appeared in the alternation between pictorial modules and spatial intervals, contributing to the sensitive perception of the work. Meanwhile the latter started to become a construction of pictorial elements that were the result of an impasto of cellulose on which the colour, applied with an airbrush, penetrated every irregularity of the surface, transforming it into chromatic bodies with a strong luminous intensity; it was, furthermore, given a flock-like finish, resulting in a velvety surface.

In the works of the 1980s, the chromatic bodies that Pinelli produced reveal both their manual creation and the artist's desire to characterize the painting as an element that could do without the traditional support of the canvas, but also without any other structure, so that he then had the freedom to arrange it as he wished.

It is clear from these observations how the problems that Pinelli's work raises are different from those of art having a structuralist framework, where the sensitivity of the application of the brushstrokes, the seriality of the colour forms or the repetition of a gesture identify the exercise of a methodology. Works based on the elementarity of the intervention of traces of colour, like those of Niele Toroni or Claude Viallat, seem at times to exalt the primary nature of the repeated gesture, at other times the capacity to assail and structure the surface of the canvas through the organization of the forms. The repeated fragmentariness of Pinelli's modular painting seems to have more in common with some of Daniel Dezeuze's "Plaquettes de terre cuite" (1972) or even with works like Richard Tuttle's "Pink Oval Landscape" (1964), because in both cases the work assumes the characteristics of the 'body-fragment' rather than with Viallat's and Toroni's works or with Allan McCollum's "Plaster Surrogates" (1982-83).

During the 1990s, Pinelli used a 'combing' effect in his paintings and this became a feature allowing the light to underline the treatment of the surface. The canonical ways of applying paint with horizontal, vertical and diagonal brushstrokes were used by Pinelli for stylistic emphasis and were stressed in works that, in their orientation on the wall surfaces, now proclaimed the integration of the painting with its setting. In other words, the work appeared to have been conceived and designed with regard to the space where it was to be displayed. Especially in his works of the late 1990s, the fragmentariness revealed a quest for formal organization that was increasingly indicative of the lost unity and the continuous yearning for this.

Year after year, decade after decade, the work has been burst open, softened and furrowed, signifying a protean tendency that accentuates 'the anxious state of the surface' towards unequivocal plasticity. An attempt at containment and mimesis of the work within

the wall has manifested itself in a number of Pinelli's exhibition installations in recent years; in these, the artist prepares the walls with monochrome having the same chromatic value as his paintings. The environmental colour saturation attenuates the light value of each painting and the wall becomes a support, playing a leading role in the new relationship with the sign-painting.

THE EXHIBITION: THE NEW TENSION OF UNITY

As I mentioned earlier, for this new exhibition at A arte Studio Invernizzi, Pinelli has created a double paradigm: on the left side of the exhibition space, the pictorial fragments placed close to each other create a series of rectangular forms recalling the usual parergon of the 'frame'. The five works include a trilogy of adjacent forms on the middle wall and two works facing each other on the two opposite walls. On the right wall of this space, the fragmentary surfaces of the works tend to recompose themselves in one unit that, in effect, seems to be the "plenum" of the void I have just referred to on the left wall of the exhibition space. Also in this case - as in the exhibition devoted to the artist held in 2003 in this gallery - the single unit and the multiplicity of the modules distinguish themselves and face each other, as do also the geometric shapes of the square and the rectangle, and the vertical and horizontal structure of the forms, while the diagonal dividing line is present in all the works. In both rooms, with their respective paintings, it is evident that Pinelli is suggesting that the systemacy of his work - indicative of the degree of complexity that they have now reached - has, in fact, much in common with his early output: in "Pittura GR" (1976) with its rectangle made to fit the exhibition space and the "Pittura" of the 1980s, which the artist ironically described as 'Neo-geo'. And it is worth noting that the syntactic relationship within Pinelli's work could indicate a close association between the artist's latest works and his very early "Pittura GR" (1973), which appears to link up and renew the whole of his artistic career to date.

However, as in every journey, even though the place of departure and return are often the same, the former is not the same as the lat-

ter. Between these two points, in fact, lies the whole of the above-mentioned experience - which I have described in a veiled manner as 'dramatic' - of Pinelli's monochrome painting, even if, I have to confess, it may not appear to be such in the eyes of many people, especially as regards the role played by colour. But in this respect, I have, on principle, preferred to hold my peace because I am convinced that it is impossible use words to talk about colour: it is a matter for the eyes alone.