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STEFANO ARIENTI
THE FLIP SIDE OF LIFE
By Giorgio Verzotti

THE RETURN TO ORDER signaled by the Transavantgarde, and Neo-Expressionism in general, was evident not so much in the utilization of traditional techniques, but rather in the desire to reclaim individual expression as the fulcrum of the creative act. After years of experimentation and meta-linguistic analysis, art once again became evocative and spoke of the subject and its interior world: a world full of pathos, romantic in some ways, and manifesting, at least on a formal level, a definite will to power. What subsequent generations developed in opposition to this, to use Germano Celant's happy phrase, was an *un-expressionism*, whose theoretical ideology leans more in the direction of Gianni Vattimo's *pensiero debole* ("weak thought").

Stefano Arienti is one of the most important Italian artists to emerge on the international scene since the Transavantgarde, and yet remain wholly opposed to it. Arienti first caught the art world's attention precisely because he took the pathos out of art: using comics, books, or telephone directories, he folded their pages according to set patterns, thus creating paper sculptures. Through this anonymous and repetitive act, he formally reorganized already existing materials, following a method or spirit to be found in Warhol or Alighiero e Boetti, something that not only has absolutely nothing to do with Neo-Expressionism as an art movement, but nothing to do with true expressiveness in general.

For Arienti (as for Boetti before him), renouncing expressiveness - that is, the distinctive trait that establishes a work's paternity - means bringing into question the authority of the artist as Demiurge, and desacralizing the artistic gesture along with the various self-legitimizing criteria that the modern tradition invariably assigns it.

First exhibiting in the mid-1980s, Arienti replaced pathos with a sense of humor, and a uniquely poetic way of recycling found images. Allegedly "high" art got irretrievably jumbled up with its "low" counterpart; needless to say, the visual repertoire handed down by tradition was reexamined here with a derisive, almost adolescent aggression. After the paper sculptures came a series of works consisting of reproductions of Impressionist paintings, or ones by van Gogh. The artist treated these artifacts from the heroic period of

modern art by sticking bits of plasticine over every detail; taking special care to match them with the original colors. The result was extreme sensuality bordering on contempt, as well as a manual dexterity evoking traditional artistic techniques at the same time as parodying them.

Another series of works involved those large poster reproductions of famous artists used to plaster walls (Monet's *Ponts japonais*, for example). In this instance, Arienti faithfully traced the outlines of the subjects with a series of pinpricks and exhibited the backs of the posters, so that the images could be read in reverse, as negatives. Arienti went on to create what critic Marco Senaldi has termed "the arsenal of a serial image-killer," where visualization only ever occurs through a process of putting it to death.

White polystyrene boards etched with acid; burnt and punctured photocopies; color slides cut and scratched with a scalpel: all this manifests what the artist himself describes as a form of infantile eroticism, which more likely than not is that widespread impulse, induced by the society of the spectacle, to substitute an image for an object of desire, that is, to make it a fetish. The artist's libidinal investment of the image is charged with sadism arising from that state of extreme duplicity or ambiguity in which the image is inherently suspended and where it becomes the object of an anxious desire.

The only possible course of action is to accept this duplicity. Arienti declares himself at once an iconoclast and an iconophile: "On the one hand, I am an iconoclast because one has to 'defend' oneself from images. Images condition our lives in the sense of often being held up as models to which we must adapt our existential behavior. So, what I do might be to provide a perfect 'example,' a practical way for everyone to defend their identity and their imaginary." The strategy begins with considering images as so many objects, and thus, as Marco Senaldi again explains, as material supports for conveying and rendering them visible: "the image is above all corporeal, and it is from the midst of such bodies that a feeling of love or consciousness arises." In Arienti, this appeal to the body, or insistence on its "objectness," is contrasted with the immateriality of technological imagery (film and video), which is treated equally as an instrument of social ventilation.

The death of the image is thus born at the same time as it is uncoupled from its connotations, as it surpasses a sense of the familiar and expels it in favor of a new sense, whose aggression - according to Arienti, recalling Leonardo who dissected corpses - is a form of autopsy," which literally means 'to go and investigate on your town. The aggressive act has a double meaning: it is both destructive and constructive. Arienti intensifies his iconoclasm by directing it against the old masters of art history, as when he makes photocopies of reproductions of such works and burns their outlines, or when he

riddles them with small holes over bricks of raw clay, its he did with all the pages of a book featuring Michelangelo's drawings.

Yet accompanying this irreverent posture is a genuine investigation into form, which is no less effective for the fact that it is obtained in the negative. It is the same for images etched onto polystyrene, which still muster a semblance (of realism; or books printed on coated paper so that all the words, titles, and captions are blanked out. And it is the same for the erased compositions (of landscape prints bathed in white light, or the rubbed-out portraits of famous people (from Einstein to the impressive series dedicated to Marilyn) which deform their artists' bodily features with grotesque and often disturbing effects.

The scratches amid cuts made on slides with pins and scalpels not only alter the original images but reveal the unexpected colors of the chromatic layers of the film's emulsion, which only come to life when the slides are projected or photographically enlarged. Even the simple duplication of an image, as a photocopy or a large print, reveals textures which, when traced, offer various graphical solutions. This technique allows for a freedom and inventiveness not unlike those techniques traditionally taught in the studio. And as if to take repetition (and ironic self-promotion) to the apotheosis of virtuosity, this cornucopia of alterations is rendered in the form of a book, wherein the artist compiles a visual anthology of all his works, reproduced as drawings. Even this does not exhaust the artist's manipulations, for more than anything else, Arienti is a maniacal collector of images. He keeps these in a personal archive consisting of thousands of postcards or photographs taken by the artist or his friends, filed according to theme," and used as reference material in his work or as a work in itself.

The subjects that most concern the artist are taken from everyday life in a mass-consumerist society, yet Arienti's attention is directed toward the more unexpected aspects of this easily discounted sphere. Not only are rock or movie stars erased in his posters or photo-copied books, but also dead animals photographed by the artist during his periodic trips into the countryside, or rotten fruit and vegetables thrown on the ground after marker - strange epiphanies of consumption and death, captured in their banal proximity with life.

By contrast, the mere fact of exhibiting pictures of exotic realms from India to the forests of Africa and South America (for example, in a book written and illustrated with the artist Amedo Martegani) absolves them of the altogether common experience of the tourist, who each year confronts the Other armed with a camera. The only alternative to the omnipotence of consumerism is for everyone to construct a workable and totally enjoyable lifestyle for themselves.

This seems to be at the core of Arienti's message. This he demonstrated in his last show in Milan by exhibiting photographic enlargements of a series of images taken from magazines dedicated to nudism or sexy "teddy bears," large hairy men seen as objects of desire. Similarly, along the banks of the Po in Turin, he installed a series of structures to encourage the public to exercise a sense of play: a notice board for missing pets; a dumping ground for things with mirrors; three council bins for depositing objects of different colors; and finally a series of iron enclosures for raking cold showers in. Other works were also planned, such as a floating dock for nudists on the river, and an area set aside for intimate encounters un the public gardens, but in the end the city authorities did not allow it. We know that utopia and power are rarely compatible.

Translated by Judith Blackall

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