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*The path of Vasco Bendini*

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The almost thirty years of Vasco Bendini's activity documented by this exhibition represent the exemplary career of an artist whom I would define as profoundly dedicated to the cause of informality. I have deliberately used this unusual term because I wish it to indicate three quite different phases of evolution, of which only one, the first, is identified with the Informal in the strict sense, that is the historic Informal. This is a phase, moreover, of which we are rediscovering all the significance as an authentic centre of gravity of the events of this second half of the century, already far advanced, while also reconfirming all the weight which the personal involvement of Bendini had within it.

But informality is something more far-reaching, it is an "open" thrust, a tension which goes beyond the precise and delimited structure of the historic Informal, to the extent that it re-emerged - albeit in a fairly altered garb - towards '66-'67 within the complex of experiences which are by now conventionally earmarked with the label of "cold" Informal. This was an explosion which overflowed the old banks of the painting to reach the shores of the quite distinctly vast continent of aesthetic and behavioural animation. Bendini was one of the front-line protagonists of this breakthrough, and thus managed to stitch together in an exemplary manner the two successive phases of informality, what we might call the intracutaneous phase of pictorial editing, and the following phase of spatial invasion. However, he himself did not fail to foresee the limitations of this same phase of physical expansion, and after the climax of the 70s, he gave himself to tracing out - always in an exemplary manner - a parabola of an opposite value, of

implosion, clustering and densification of the materials previously used, almost analogous to the cosmic phenomenon in which the galaxies are victims of a collapse and converge towards the centre, giving rise to those “black holes” that are so evocative to us non-initiates.

The importance of the historic Informal was that it took a definitive leave from the climate of the search for closed and rigid essences characteristic of the first half of the century. Exemplary in this regard was the way in which, at the start of the 50s, Bendini latched onto the models typical of two domestic masters, Morandi and Guidi: still lifes for the former and seascapes and above all faces for the latter. Treated by the young artist, not yet thirty, these themes open up, in the sense that they dislodge and unhinge their joints; and above all they are read on the keynote of leanness, abandoning all claims to plasticity, being instead translated into stenographic signs, deliberately provisional, blatantly gestural. This process of transcription in an accelerated phenomenal key was implemented contemporarily by many other artists, in Italy and beyond, on one and other side of the Atlantic. As regards Italy, we can consider the accelerations and retractions of sign generated by Capogrossi (another former pupil of the Morandi school) or Vedova, without overlooking the Spatialists and the Nuclears. As regards North America, we can even go back to the early Pollock, or Tobey's "white writings" and the entire chapter related to the retrieval of the ideograms, with all the mystical magic that these characters represent for our western sensibility. In fact, of Bendini too, we can say that in the very early '50s he “wrote” the theme of the face or the seascapes: a few disarticulated and oscillating signs, which in addition leave disclosed and evident the hand that traces them, marked by the characters of what is almost potential calligraphy, with uprights that are thicker or thinner depending on whether they are upstrokes or downstrokes. The figurative motif becomes an airy and porous cage, ready to magnetically draw into it the most varied and prismatic phenomena. This launches what I have defined as a dialectic

between “structure” and “texture”. The masters of the twentieth century comprise only the first of the two terms: everything is structure, which directly guides the dimensions and paths of its manifestation. In the informal, texture instead comes to prevail, that is the warp of the phenomena. But on the other hand, so as not to lose their way in their sea, they still need to have a guide, a criterion that can select them and share them out, or even earlier stimulate them and drive them out. The theme of the face was to have a similar function for many long years in Bendini’s art: the function of a light structure, almost invisible or rather visible only through the phenomena that it succeeds in coagulating along its trajectory. In the same way as the lines of force in an electromagnetic field can be visualized only through the depositing of the iron filings, or the passage of a jet high in the sky is revealed by the trails of ionized vapour.

In fact what distinguishes Bendini’s phenomenism from the very start, and hence also his participation in informality, is the desire to set himself very close to the limit, in the area where our senses have to be refined and become almost medianic, telepathic: from the solid state to that of gas, ever more rarefied. From the visible to the band of radiation, so fine as to be almost no longer perceptible to the senses. And the still ingenuous and naturalistic reference to the face may then expand to more general proportions, become the tension between a screen and the apparitions that it partially succeeds in framing, but that partially escape it. A “structure” that pursues fleeting exhalations, that engages in a fierce struggle with them, always running the risk of being overleapt. In the same way that the screen of an x-ray holds the radiation but the rays also pass through it. In the same way that the crystal ball and all the other transparent surfaces used by the devotees of the arts of magic are suddenly animated by mysterious presences, which are equally prone to suddenly vanish again. Nothing like the obvious and banal relation established between the thing and the reflecting image, when the illusion is linear and direct.

But returning to the strand of the actual evolution, this dialectic of appearance/disappearance is attenuated for a time (from '54 to '56) under the pressure of Arcangeli's "last naturalism", that is when the critic and the artist believed for some time that the promised land of the Informal could be the sphere of vegetable phenomena, the enigma of the chlorophyllic function. For a brief period, nature appears the appropriate term of reference in the march towards informality. But it was, as I said, only a brief moment, because after the Ultimi naturalisti (Last Naturalists) Arcangeli wrote *Una situazione non improbabile* (A not improbable situation), where he acknowledges that it is necessary to take into consideration a broad international front. Behind nature gapes the chasm of matter and its correlate, the gestualism of the artist who wants to tune in on it. Thus Bendini too sees that he has to come to terms with the great European Informals, and first and foremost with Wols. The last years of the '50s find him refining with extreme subtlety the dialectic between structure and texture, screen and apparition, the face and its magnetic function. No-one is better equipped than he to summon the resources of a varied and inexhaustible instrumentation, here dense with paste, here liquid and skin deep: curdlings, corrosions, erosions, broad flakes of veneer, rough and grazing flows. The face re-emerges, always the same and always different, in the same way as an electromagnetic field can cluster the iron filings in an infinity of patterns. But the great season of the historic Informal, around the turning-point of 1960, hints at a growing weariness, or suggests that, having probed all the interior possibilities, it is now obliged to restrict itself to a sterile exercise of variants. Moreover, there is the forceful thrust of a new generation which, as always happens, brings in new demands. Bendini initially appears to want to play the card of heroic defence: that is affirm with greater emphasis his faith in informal phenomenism, with the extremism of a fierce warrior loathe to lay down his weapons. This act of faith, moreover, has its *raison d'être*: we must not forget that the

'60s was a time of instances that were not infrequently divergent and ambiguous; by now we know that we have to distinguish between the first and the second half of this decade. Bendini, for example, can no longer adhere to the "new course" if this means returning to a need for geometrical and rational order (as more or less took place in the strand of the "programmed" and gestaltic optical researches); and nor can he accept it if this means placing the accent on the Pop side, the retrieval of icons and personalities. No-one is more congenitally adverse to the personality than Bendini, given that, on the contrary he believes that things and bodies are ready to exhale into energy, that they tend, so to speak, to a volatile state. This is why up to '65 it is reasonable to nurse the impression that he is one of those not rare artists who, victims of generational limitations, persisted in an obstinate, albeit heroic and valid, exercise of the Informal. The turning-point occurred when, in that same year, Bendini intuited that he could turn the new instances to account, applying not to those of the popoptical species which were unapproachable for him, but to the others of the New-Dada, apparently more retrograde but actually latent with a yeasty future. Rauschenberg and Johns had in fact taught to acknowledge the presence of things "in flesh and blood", of the plastic matter "as it is", in its artificiality. At the same time they did not passively surrender to it, or renounce investing it with a charge of psychism, which then, translated into visual terms, corresponds to an impetuous chromatic and gestural aggression, again of an informal stamp. Moreover, theirs was also a middle way between remaining inside the surface and going beyond it. Bendini mastered the lesson with a certain delay (although who, in Italy, had learnt and followed it with more alacrity?), but he made up for this rapidly with the passion which he invested in pursuing the new path. In 1965, in fact, he made two Triptychs and a Polyptych of no less than nine pieces, all of large dimensions, where once again we have the motif of disarticulation. As we mentioned above, fifteen years earlier he had disarticulated the closed

schema of twentieth-century painting. Now through the tangibility of a system of slices that do not connect, are not clasped in their respective joints, he explodes the cage of the painting, even though - for the moment - it is only a symbolic explosion, or simply a first step towards "reality", since definitively the format of the frame still remains. But evidently his habitual phenomenic and medianic presences have swollen, pressing with such force as to unhinge, at least with a symbolic gesture, an initial containing enclosure.

Time marches rapidly: very soon he liberates himself from every remnant of illusory virtuality and places his objects in a real space, making that leap that the New-Dada, Rauschenberg and Johns, hardly ever achieved. And even for Italy the '66-'67 of these plastic aggregates is very precocious, given that it would not be just to place them at the same level as the plastic forms generated by the meditations of kinetic, serial or neoconstructivist art. Here the objects are ordinary and banal. Come e (As it is) is effectively an indicative title, and even more so when accompanied by the related factsheet which, in conventional terms, ought to feature the label of "mixed technique", which appears ludicrous in view of the vast divergence from the standard "mixed techniques". As accurately detailed in the factsheet, the group in fact consists of a "mat, two wooden chairs with cellophane, oilskin, sellotape, tape recorder". And clearly there is a very important element missing from the list, namely the human presence-absence that is called upon to animate these materials, to invest them with a psychic wave, to drag them towards a "behaviour". For these various reasons, the comparison which I have suggested on more than one occasion, with Joseph Beuys appears both fitting and inevitable. A contemporary of Bendini and a survivor like himself of the informal experience, evolving into behaviourism Beuys was destined to achieve a decisive resonance. Or, to return to the Italian situation, there could be an eloquent comparison with a third informalist survivor, Mario Merz, he too destined to become a star of the

new "cold" informality. Without counting the fact that, in that two year period of '66-'67, Bendini fused his energies, experience and research with those of a group of youngsters of the latest generation, gathered together by the ephemeral but significant episode of the "Studio Bentivoglio" in Bologna, one of the most certain precursors of the "new course". In particular, between Bendini and the most talented and forceful member of this group, Pier Paolo Calzolari, there was a handing-down, a passage of the relay baton that was fairly significant and fairly instructive as regards the relations between different generations, the give and take that they reciprocally impose.

Having drawn on this ambit of "real" experiences in a three-dimensional space, Bendini appears to evolve two separate series, or rather let's say that it could help us in our exposition to make such a distinction. On the one hand, he gives us a whole series of isolated and minute objects. The titles are tautological, that is they say the same things in which the work resolves itself: Basket, Bowl, Spoon, etc. but they do not indicate the layer of sensible effects which is condensed on these objects, the coupling of psychism that invests them. As usual, like every other structural element, like the faces and the screens in Bendini's previous works, these operate as a magnetic pole to attract, gather and curdle sensitive charges that would otherwise be impalpable. Or even ultrasensitive, metapsychical: in particular, for example, *A memoria di gesso* (In memory of plaster), with that hand print like that of an ectoplasm which has deigned to leave a direct trace of its own passage. Effectively, these little objects have been, so to speak, creamed by immersion in a "soft" and viscous substance - wax or glue - in this way too creating a link with the work of Beuys, or entering into harmony with the only ante litteram phenomenon of "povera" art already existent at the time, that is Californian Funk Art.

The other series could, in a certain sense, be the opposite of this first one. If here, as we have seen,

the concrete and structural element is inside, and represents a sort of kernel that is exposed to an external treatment, an electroplating of sensibility, in the other it tends to act as a container, or a structural element in the more strict sense of the term. Clearly however, it can't do it, does not manage to contain or hold in the diffused energy. This aspect resuscitates the link with New-Dada, considering that many works consist precisely in the disputing, demolition of the traditional framework (typical A Johnson): empty frames breathlessly pursuing the space in an attempt to delimit it, to constrain it, but only managing to reveal their failure. Like trying to hold a phantasm within the four walls of a room, which then amuses itself by striking unexpectedly printing in cut-out (like with a clicker press) the gigantic imprint of its own hand (La mano di Vasco - Vasco's Hand). Or the structure is adapted to a more subtle function, which does not consist in openly displaying the failure, the dismantling of its own joints, but rather that of providing an apparently sterile and neutral container. This is the most courageous apex of de-artification that Bendini achieves, entirely renouncing the plastic values of the object. A renunciation that, as mentioned above, the New-Dada and even Nouveaux-Realistes never achieve; at the outmost, we could refer to those two very sui generis New-Dadaists, much stricter than anyone else in their adherence to the lesson of Duchamp, that is Klein and Manzoni. The former inevitably comes to mind in the presence of a work from '67 such as Cabina solare (Solar Cabin), clearly erected to pick up an energy by now forced to the last degree of rarefaction, beyond the limits of the visible. The latter instead can be evoked with reference to another of these sterile and anaesthetic containers, proposed this time Per una essudazione totale (For a total exudation), and hence as a act of homage to bodily secretions as physical and concrete as can be. Nevertheless, it is not incidental that, even when Bendini enters into such a mind frame of corporeal ransom, he still aims at the physiological manifestations most ready to take the path of

liquification, or still better of aerial exhalation. Moreover the neutral and instrumental character of these devices, devoid of aesthetic value in or for themselves, implies the intervention of the behavioural dimension, that is demands that the artist-operator, or other person delegated by the same, or a volunteer from the public, offers his services in the capacity of actor, or to express it with the untranslatable English expression, generates a "performance". 1967-69 were the years in which Bendini proposed these performances of his, a "genre" that was not common in Italian artistic practice, nor even actually greatly cultivated at world level. Once again, perhaps, Beuys comes to mind... Overcoming his natural shyness, the artist presents himself in first person, in a garb that immediately plunges him back into anonymity - an irreprehensible black mime costume (*Il mio spazio* (My space)-, *Io. E io ora* (Me. And me now)). But the performance of the human operator is not always present; in other cases what is set up, so to speak, is a performance by inanimate elements: a kinetic art then, we might literally say, were it not that this label is linked to the use of complicated, rigid and segmented "gadgets" which could not be further from Bendini's intentions. If anything, the kinetics that could interest him is, as usual, the subtle breath of certain invisible gases and fluids, in relation to which the solid bodies play the subordinate role of docile detectors. In *La memoria* (Memory), for example, the whirling polychrome fragments indicate otherwise imperceptible ascensional currents. At heart, even the pictorial elements used by Bendini throughout his previous career were none other than detectors, indicators of the passage of forces set beyond the threshold of the sensible. But, having reached the turning-point of 1970, Bendini takes stock of himself and his entire previous history, and is struck by a potent generational summons. We must be full of respect for this mysterious generational logic, almost an equivalent of genetic law extended to the ambit of cultural production. Each generation has its own destiny, or in more neutral terms, its own centre of gravity; it is reasonable for some

particularly dynamic and intolerant member to push himself somewhat beyond the permitted range of action, to strain the equilibrium, but not beyond a certain point, after which there is a movement of compensation or sucking back towards the centre. Bendini's generation, or that of the historic Informal, was born and bred accepting the advantages and limitations of virtuality, of the illusory nature of the surface. It mapped out the possibility of breaking down that barrier, and in some cases made decisive contributions to this. As well as the case of Bendini, we can think of Dubuffet and all the spatial researches of the Hourloupe, pushed as far as the mastodontic proportions of the building and the monument; or we can also recall the much less well-known episode of Moreni's gigantic plastic watermelons; but in more recent years, these artists too perceived the call of the surface and its tricky fascination. Bendini was no exception: after the outward explosion, the inward implosion, the redensification of the fragments. Moreover, these diastolic and systolic phases are almost an organic woof underlying the entire cultural production, and hence have on their side a sort of inevitability and necessity. It is not, however, a mechanical doing and undoing, or a pure and simple return to the point of departure: the pendular oscillation "inwards", the retrieval of the surface, brings with it the awareness of the use of new materials acquired in the meantime, and is bolstered by a boldness unknown in the stages of the classic Informal. We feel that the work now offered to us, despite being reduced to the plane, is still swollen with a quantity of action, only provisionally flattened, but ready to re-explode, to again emanate its depth. We could speak of a performative quality miniaturized and packed into a box, or traced out like a cartographic procedure. Attesting to this, in fact, are the "poor" materials aggregated to Bendini's canvases "after 1970", inevitably set in fine equilibrium with those of traditional pictorial origin; the Funk taste for waste, which had marked the years '66-'67 evolving in an intense series of little objects "invested" with the most intense affectivity, is maintained and

possibly even strengthened. Thus we find the cellophanes, the precious dribblings of wax, the coffee beans and tea leaves, the “found objects” of the egg box type, along with strips of cloth, crumpled and twisted almost as if the layer of pictorial paste was wriggling and twisting. It would be futile and mistaken to invoke the name of Burri here, because there what predominates over all is the severe sense of the page, of the composition, that is, a spirit of closure. Here, instead, we are dealing with the highly provisional fixing of a moment of action, of a probing, almost a survey conducted on the (physical, psychic and metapsychic) currents that circulate and give expression to the plastic materials at their will. All the works of this cycle continue in those adjacent, rather than closing themselves in detached magnificence. The pendulum continues its progress towards the terminus of the implosion, that is, towards an increasingly more radical virtuality and immateriality on the return. In other words, if between '70 and '74 we have the works that I have attempted to describe above, where protruding “concrete” elements coexist with other superficial elements, afterwards Bendini goes back to exploring, as at the beginning, the paths of an exclusively intracutaneous, skin deep, art - or rather, if possible, even more liquid and rarefied than that of the 50s. However, the trained eye continues to discern the signs of passage through the three-dimensional phase. In fact the surface, although not broken at a material level, is nevertheless contradicted at internal level. In the recent works there inevitably appears a fracture, a barrier, a fault cleaving the space, cracking it, bringing about the coexistence of distinct universes, and in short fracturing the notion of a continuous surface. This is a novel retrieval of the New-Dada motif of the rod, of the chip, of which now all that remains is the trace after its removal: a flaying or abrasion, almost the shadow, the x-ray of the structural element. Possibly it was laid on the painting for a moment, but was then immediately worn and corroded by the pressure of the gases, the dissolving liquids. Yet, even if at the price of its own sacrifice, it has

succeeded in fulfilling the structural function, distributing, guiding and containing the exuberant flood of the fluids; or even just, for the umpteenth time, in revealing their tensions. The structure, as always, at grips with the texture: maybe more often overcome than dominating, but in this case too still capable of “revealing”, of witnessing the invisible forces unleashed by Bendini’s art.

Translation by Lexis, Florence