

Francesco Arcangeli,

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A fifteen-year relationship ties me to the artist I am going to write about once more and, although I dislike quoting myself, I cannot avoid mentioning the authentic exchange with Bendini. From this therefore, whether right or wrong, I will start.

“An existential ‘eagerness’, which coincides also with the highest peak of solitude, even when passionately taking part in the events around us, which are part of us and which we inevitably contribute to shape, is perhaps the most permanent and lasting feature of Bendini’s life and works. I am not certain whether this fundamental aspect will, in future years, meet with success [...]. Marxism, phenomenology, sociology are weaving around us an increasingly unbreathable web of schemes and ideas. There will come a day when we might not even be able to take a single step without it being catalogued, conjectured and eventually devolved to the moloch of human history, self-consciousness, self-prediction; a sheer rationalism seems to be awaiting us. Umberto Eco, a brilliant young man of culture, comes to say with goodwill: ‘I believe a Chinese way to literary criticism is still possible’. And, as it is not simply a matter of literary criticism, but of life, it appears, not without some fear, that, although he does not have dogmatic views, he seems to see things in a present-future dimension and to disregard tradition. An anarchic-religious-experimental hypothesis, for instance, seems to be excluded from the number of things ‘that are still considered feasible’. Well, my dear friend Vasco, we will never stop believing that things ‘that are no longer feasible’ are still valuable. [...] Your struggle will apparently continue to be a struggle against yourself, but in the sense of a rediscovery, of a quest for our common human roots that we want to believe will not die. Now that someone suggests (it must be a case of individual folly, surely encouraged by the claims of the present) the suppression, *sic et simpliciter*, of that disease called consciousness, I cannot imagine anything more precious than your struggle against yourself and your painting: polarities that have almost always co-existed in you”.

Five years have gone by. Bendini’s answer to me was his silence, his inner conflicts, his new works. He has given evidence that for those who have the nerve to swim against the waves, it is always possible to land on a new island. At that time I could not foresee his evolution, I simply wanted to trace a sense of continuity for him; I certainly did not intend to, as they say, “label” him. My fears were vain. Bendini has gone a long way but, and this affirms my authentic relationship with him, according to a dialectic I thought I was already well aware of: “a tension of revolt, but implicit, silent, yet intense”.

By hanging a cardboard box with the letter U on it on the empty, upper right-hand side panel of a rigid, square wooden framework, he is simply introducing into an existential space — which is dead yet living, of the past and of the present — an element which fifty years ago would have been called “suprematist” by the avant-garde. At the same time, that severe and desolate isolation of the “found object” — without which that extreme tension already obstinately and poetically created by Malevichč could not be renewed — colors distinctly the world of Duchamp and of the Dada artists.

If I am not mistaken, the modern roots of Bendini's present works can be found here. It could be said that an "absolute" and a "zero" action co-exists in them (we will see how successfully in some cases) or, to better say, an oscillation between a deep eagerness to reaffirm oneself together with the desperate wish to efface oneself. This might appear as an absurd, unsteady, precarious balance, nevertheless it ultimately results firm right because of its hazardous origin. His achievements seem to me more and more original in the real meaning of the word, as related to the many cultural solicitations that flow into various streams, and yet autonomous, isolated in his primary and inaccessible silence. He can be placed in the modern tradition of Suprematism and Dada while "Nouveau réalisme" and most of all New Dada are his present relations. But, again, he is simply Bendini.

Compared with Rauschenberg's unconventional, decadent and ironic experimentalisms, his interplay of photographic images and paintings and his appropriation of the space with his objects in "assemblage", Bendini likewise reverses the concept of the surface to be painted suggesting an open, multiple conception of life. After an almost overflowing period which seemed to be departure and arrival at the same time, Bendini has taken up his reins again and has come back to haunt us with his intense presence. Bendini's objects are uncontaminated by the degrading action of time, so evident from Schwitters to Rauschenberg and, even more, they avoid the firm, domineering, shocking presence of the "popists". It is more and more evident that Bendini's objects and their relationships, which spring from deep meditation, turn into real acts of consciousness, the result of a firm moral tone. Nothing to share with the spirit, inventions and style that were brilliantly shaping in Rome where Schifano's early moves reminded me of the "playboy" attitude, and where the luxuriant nature immediately recalls sophisticated holidays, and the glimpse of the sea brings to mind the swimming pool of the famous star. This, not to lessen the latter's worth, but only to qualify, by comparison, the nakedness of Bendini's combinations and his different rhythm of mental elaboration for every single presentation.

It is also noteworthy that, after moving away from his initial phase, Bendini showed some existentially similar contacts with New Dada. Since 1962, his old "informal" painting (a deep dialectical progress from slow accumulation to the thinning out of matter, typically European) had turned into a sort of "gestural painting" of which *Strage di innocenti* (dated 1962) was an important expression due to its dimensions and energy. However, even when he turned his fundamental introversion into a violent self-declaration, almost a clash or a challenge against the outside world, he did not succeed in opening himself totally to the world. Apart from the fact that others such as Pollock had already followed that track, the real challenge was not to come violently into the limelight, but to forget oneself and nothing can assure this as much as annulling oneself among objects. The crisis of New Dada is however perpetual, an all-absorbing aim in itself. Rauschenberg states: "If you ask me if I want to please or displease, provoke or persuade or a dozen other alternatives I would feel obliged to say that I exactly mean all these things together. Half of my reasons would be negative, the other half positive. But the effort to concentrate all my energy on a single message would limit myself and I prefer the unknown".

I think instead that Bendini understood crisis as a place to pass through, and not as a model. The

reaction to his long life as an independent, “informal” artist was accomplished by means of a new geometry and by using new techniques and materials and, finally, new objects. However, whether he is conscious of it or not, whether he wants it or not, he is moving towards the discovery of a new message. During the crisis, his geometry was violent and harsh, but had a total uncertainty as to its essential meaning; in his new materials we can find a constant search, attractions, inordinate impulses. Eventually, the objects were, I would not say random, but they certainly suddenly overwhelmed consciousness and were therefore interchangeable. It was a real crisis (which affected me as well as depriving me of the landmarks of my life and among which “in some way” Bendini was) within the greatest crisis of all of us. It was almost a contained folly, a “deregulation of the senses”, but not as “rational” as in Rimbaud. It was more “a liberation from the old concepts” that were more easily rooted in the mind of one who in the past had nourished himself with the spirit of the time (through the cultural magazines such as *La Voce* and *Lacerba*) and which was remarkably open-minded, witty, enterprising. Time will tell whether I am right or wrong about the meaning of this crisis. In any case, now that the critical phase (psychologically similar but instrumentally very far) is over, in the works of the last two years, Bendini fortunately appears fundamentally different from the American artist Jim Dine who is, from some points of view, Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns’ spiritual heir. By saying “fortunately”, I must face the fact that I am probably betraying my devotion to the conception of the artist as an expressive personality. I cannot deny that I can accept everything but not the standardisation of the artist’s original act; even when it is found in great talents and gifted and challenging artists such as Andy Warhol, I can admire them but I do not accept it. Bendini is well away from all this.

With the exception of the two variations of the *Parallelo e Pipedo* that, even in the title, almost ironically dangles unsteadily and proposes an improbable geometry for gestural exploits still connected to New Dada, in the works dated 1966 such as *La scatola U*, *Tavolozza* and, above all, *A Johnson*, Bendini reaches the peak of a real “Pop” artist, although following different paths and perhaps with opposite outcomes. Bendini’s *Tavolozza* is far more elegant and has nothing to share with Jim Dine’s *Palettes*: whereas the American artist finds and brings into his work “some” palettes, Bendini turns it into a universal theme: the only possible palette today.

The fragment of the canvas, coloured with a few strokes of painting, a real informal work of some years ago, dangles pathetically on the wooden framework, over the shiny and curved metal plate over the surface; at the top, the large sheet of *cannetée* paper resembles a wing on the point of taking off. An unstable equilibrium is thus reached between an authority of visual space worthy of Burri and a mobile, faintly “*fumiste*” attitude almost recalling Jasper Johns. The work is open, enormous, lightly ambiguous, liable to many different interpretations. However, in *A Johnson* everything is austere, severe: I am really not sure whether such a relentless work has ever stemmed out of the “*Nouveau Réalisme*”. Ever since Morandi’s *Cassette inutile* painted in Bologna in 1918 and perhaps Romiti’s severe succession of *Piccole macellerie*, dating back to 1948, such superb premeditation had never been seen. Considering instead the personal experience of the artist, it is again the case of a process of revolt, more evident now but always charged with the intensity of silence. As well as a revolt, it is a self-portrait. Perhaps again a transposed “face” of Bendini’s.

With his hair completely shaved off, with his skinny, skeleton figure, his white, subtly staring eyes, a flaring and intense gaze, nourished with silence, anguish, like a lurking flame irrepressibly burning throughout the years: this is how an individual who has suffered, meditated, silently accused, still protests. I call it "the Guillotine". Next to it we might as well place a "Face", haunted, almost hallucinated, "presented not represented" (as they say nowadays), dated 1953. But the revolution experts will object how can an individual turn himself into a protest? I reply that a protest cannot but be also and first of all an individual. The authority of a new epic is present in this work without any standardisation of meaning. Here lies its strength.

The fact that this frame/flag is almost like an architectural façade of well balanced wooden elements, a sort of brilliant spatial operation; that it can be read from many points of view and never lose intensity, with its precise, articulated, pungent, caustic power; the fact that it even set against white walls, and projects shadows that multiply the space, not less efficiently and lively; all of this does not mean that it would not be wrong to interpret the work and this exhibition according to the standards of "environment" art, which started in America in about 1960. The question is now being debated also in Italy, above all in the beautiful exhibition in Foligno, partly owing to some mainly Roman artists and partly to the decisions of the critics. Without any second aims, I must however underline that we are, as usual, six or seven years late (Camera nera by Fontana is important, but it represents a single case). To be informed is not enough: choices need to be made and here in Italy they are delayed or made when it is too late because, when information comes, there are no propellants behind the artists and the critics. We have the missiles, but not the propellants which are found instead in a favourable environment (in this case the USA); and a missile at a standstill is no longer a missile, but in the traditional sense, a work of art.

What I believe to be important is that, in an inevitably poor country like Italy, without primary structures (I believe from the age of Galileo onwards) there should be a real "revival" because, as I wrote nearly ten years ago, we can only consider Boccioni and, at least for some time, Burri really worthy of the Italian past world. Fontana, avantgarde, is altogether another case.

What we need is a strong, determined, original, self-confident, clear-minded pressing, obsessive revival, but not interested, since the very beginning, in the "environment". Bendini's exhibition has nothing to do with the environment. It is a place where a collection of works can find a necessary or appropriate spatial collocation thanks to every single element. It is above all a difficult itinerary, a field of intense action and reaction. It is also a place of meditation rather than of action and this seems to me its highest value.

The visitor is not involved in a "happening", in an event, but undergoes a shock, he is engaged in an ecstatic confrontation, in a contention of repulsion leading eventually to judgement.

Therefore it is still possible for these works to have an expressive, personal (as well as social) value in a way that seems to be in contradiction with what has just been stated: "Environment. An environmental space which rejects the spectator (the satellite of the planet art) and welcomes the actor in him. A field connected to the "structures in the space" with the difference that the centrifugal force is alternated with a centripetal movement. A space between art and life in a magic knot with the spectators, almost a playful game, the last gleams of a (still possible) "social"

conception of art". But, instead, vain prophets still want us to believe that they are in control, but we would like to see them if the rules of this social or not social game of art changed... Bendini keeps on resisting on another barricade with his hallucinated dreams of revolt. If there is no space for the "happenings" of a real revolt, what remains is silence, commitment and a dedication.

In 1967 his important achievements make him more openly communicative, liberated from the occasional contradictory motivations or alienating actions and reactions between 1965 and 1966. The communication is more accessible in *Calza gialla*, an elegant diversion, and becomes even more manifest in *Quadro per Momi* where on the spotless two canvases an animated succession of cuts and counter-cuts creates a structure of questions and answers on which hands stretch out and fall like gaping mouths on the point of uttering a word. The "word" comes before the "language", the circumstance before the structure. This is once again a return to his existential root, geographical not spatial, historical not temporal, of his real life: the problems Bendini had come across day after day in his books and meditations are here solved in a firm, modern, independent language.

This language is vigorously expressed in the long sequence *La mano di Vasco*: the "presentation" of these hands comes with the energy of new techniques (which recall Arp, Léger, Stuart Davis) in a large, but powerfully simple image, which contrasts at first the idea we had of Vasco so far. The sequence can be read from right to left, from the almost empty space to the parts in turmoil, from left to right, from its fury to its silence. But the need (I believe it is a need) to give it a temporal interpretation leads us back to the deepest aspect of the artist: these large hands, as if gloved, open wide, stretch out, obstruct, plead, sag, stand out in different colours, look as if amputated or inert; they are Bendini's utmost visual extroversion, actually expressing his interior resistance. *La mano di Vasco* has performed violent amputations to make a new and different life possible and to give a new language to his "deepest corners", but then it is gradually brought back to a jealous temperament which remains intact even when daringly receptive. Amputated hands, slaughter of the innocent, faces, red drapes: an itinerary of recurring figures, absorbed in thought, burning, intact. Through this journey, by "doing", Vasco's hand has revived the act of "executing". I am with Harold Rosenberg: "When more importance is given to 'doing' rather than to 'performing', the pictorial values can depend on the public, which is what happens in "night-club" entertainment. There still exists an aspect of art that resists the verdict of the plause. I am referring to the artist's activity which in the act of creation has an independent value from the final object. In such acts it is possible to attain dimensions of experience that are never completely accessible to the spectators, including the artist himself when he has the role of the spectator. To reach the work, the artist must go through a creative act which attains only to him."

*La mano di Vasco*, both the work and the exhibition, follow this "creative act" because it does not move, it does not live without Vasco's eyes, his heart; he is, above all, painfully and obstinately the artist.

(Translation by M.C. Lapetina)