

Opening oneself to the world

Gabriele

Simongini

It is clear that my work originates from an aware and free interaction between myself and the outside world.

Vasco Bendini

The visible can thus fill me and occupy me only because I, who see it, do not see it from the bottom of nowhere, but from the heart of the visible itself: I, the viewer, am also visible.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

I do not know, I cannot know what I wanted to say, what I know is that I wanted to act.

Paul Valery

X Quadrennial Exhibition in Rome, 1973, exactly forty years ago: Vasco Bendini watches amused a smiling little girl who is sitting down on the chair of *Come e* (1966) and recording her own voice in the microphone placed on the empty frame opposite to her. This photograph explains the many reasons behind the ascetic, desperate, but also ironic revolt which, in the mid 60s, led Bendini to abandon his pictorial works “then considered an inadequate act of responsible social awareness” as the artist himself wrote. “Painting was of no use - Bendini says - it was necessary to listen to what the others had to say but nobody listened any more. There seemed to be no possibility of intervening directly on an oppressing world. I wanted to leave behind all my past private life bringing the objects that were part of it into a public neutral space, in search of a direct relationship with people. I was also anguished by the upsetting threat of the Cold War which could destroy the world in a second”. In the mid 60s, taking by surprise the art world, used to considering him totally and exclusively dedicated to painting, Bendini claims his need for freedom and, at the same time, the freedom of his interior need, liberating himself from any classification, market needs and above all from the obligation of being a painter as in the critics’ codified conceptions. Growing tired of the solipsistic closure implied in informal art – of which he was a pioneer but which many followers had transformed into a repetitive “style” – Bendini feels the need to share his unrelenting obsessive analysis on himself, on his identity and his relationship with the world, which represent the excruciating raw nerve of all his brave, interior, solitary path. He moves from the concept of painting as an intimate issue to a process made public. He somehow attempts to know himself better through the eyes of the others. That

little girl who comes into a playful relationship with the first of his ascetic devices is, in cognitive terms, the striking image of a however problematic opening to the world, to participation, to direct intervention, for which Bendini felt the unavoidable need in those years. The simple and austere objects of the works of 1966-67 are material correlatives of his daily memories which are externalized, displayed in order to establish a relationship with the others, outside of the ivory tower in which painting took refuge. They are devices through which a form of communication between the artist and the spectator is possible. Bendini gives up the reassuring, but solitary, almost egoistic, private dimension implied in those objects and shares them with the public. It is not by chance that throughout 1966, votive urns and bowls appear in the works of this artist from Bologna: he is secretly and intimately celebrating the ritual sacrifice of himself. In the works of this period it is possible to find recurring words in Bendini's research: asceticism, sharing, fragmentary, internal-external, memory, perception, poverty, daily life. His objects and devices invite us to look at the world and art from different points of view, overcoming standard appearances: *La scatola U* (1966) represents the zero point of this ascetic revelation of himself through daily objects emblematically represented by that plain, ordinary box with the word *UNIOM* written over it referring to a type of kerosene stove; *Come e* (1966) and *Cabina solare* (1967) come into life only when a person becomes an active part of them, begins a direct relation with them. *Quadro per Momi* (1967) opens itself like a book although it still bears memory of the traces of a painting and represents the aspiration to a dialogue between the artist's hands and the critic's: a clear reference to the intellectual bond between Bendini and Francesco Arcangeli, affectionately called Momi; *La mano di Vasco* (1967) seems to close the cycle of this incitation to sharing, with its crowd of hands in search of one another though with difficulty. It is a stimulating experience to verify whether these works are still able today to activate the same reactions in the public which Francesco Arcangeli described in 1967: "Bendini's exhibition is not, in short, an environment: it is a place where a group of works can occupy, through the energy of every single element, an appropriate or necessary spatial collocation; but it represents above all a difficult itinerary, an intense field of action and reaction. It is, furthermore, a place of meditation rather than of action and this seems to me, at present, its greatest intrinsic value. The public is not involved in a 'happening', in an event, but it is submitted to a shock, to the reaction of a clash, of repulsion and of seizure and eventually of a judgement. So, an expressive and individual (and together social) value

of these works is still possible”.

From 1966, after creating the works belonging to the cycles *Sentimento come storia* and *Senso operante*, Bendini tries to express his existential experience exceeding the limits of the canvas and of the frame in an attempt to renovate, in a new personal way, the ancient relationship between the sentient and thinking self and the acting self. Once again he calls into question and stakes all the results he has so far acquired. As Edoardo Piersensini pointed out, “he displays his memories, making reference to the more familiar ones: on the one hand the common objects around him such as the chair (a very recurring object in this period), on the other hand, the memories of a past pictorial experience”. The elements of his new works are all directly drawn from life, with striking vicinity to his forthcoming poetics of *Arte povera* although they are also characterized by a significant conceptual and analytical component. They are *Oggetti e processi* [Objects and processes], title of a text by Maurizio Calvesi which accompanied, together with a contribution by Giulio Carlo Argan, Bendini’s exhibition held in 1968 in Rome at IN/ARCH in Palazzo Taverna and, for the pictorial section, at the Galleria Senior. By making his inner life and personal experience – emerged so far only through his paintings – public, “social”, Bendini feels the need to tie a closer link with the spectator and adopts, as he himself says, “actions and methods of body and behaviour art”. His constant and coherent process of self reflection is transposed on the observer, thus turning him into an actor. However, as Giulio Carlo Argan pointed out in 1968, Bendini does not offer him “the model for a work of art in conformity with the old mimetic praxis tradition according to which the observer imitated the artist who imitated nature. He prefers to offer him instead a device, together with instructions, in order to make the device work, the direct and personal intervention is necessary”. According to Maurizio Calvesi, this device “suspends our perceptive activities and the flux of our experience directing it towards the only end which is always ignored: ourselves”.

Bendini however always deeply remains a painter, but his intention is now to re-establish painting itself starting from the objectivised analysis of its main instruments (canvas, frame, cellophane gloves and so on) which are carried bare into his world as traces and memories of a pictorial conception he considers outdated. In short, a reflection on painting without painting. Bendini himself clearly expressed the aims of that period in the text *Cerchio supremo*: “From ‘the relentless extroversion of a persistent and obsessing introversion’ I then moved on to the perception of the others considered objectively. I began to

investigate neutral and public spaces; I analyzed how the world affected me and the others and how the others affected the world. The problem was to seize this very moment and to manage to visualize the field of harmony existing between myself and the others. I then decided to provide anybody who came in contact with my works with the supports and instructions which could directly be followed through personal participation. Some reflections by Merleau-Ponty accompanied my endeavors: 'I gaze upon a living being on the point of acting, suddenly all the surrounding objects acquire a new layer of meaning. They are no longer things that I might use, but things that will be transformed by my behaviour'. It is indeed another person who is making use of my objects and treating the objects I experimented with in a different way, though similar to mine. So my own body finds a sort of extension of itself and its intentions in a different body. We become like two minds which have found a common, though indirect, way of communicating. Two behaviours start interweaving. Solitude and communication thus become aspects of a single phenomenon".

In the works of those years, among which the fundamental and pioneer ones displayed at MACRO, what strikes us is their ephemeral, provisional aspect, almost typical of a removal, as if to say that we are all fragile, transient in this world. It is a metaphorical removal from painting to life, from colours to objects, from the internal to the external. With a sense of abandonment which is the starting point to make us think of ourselves in our relation to the world and to others. "It was then – Bendini wrote in *Lettera con accordi* – that I emptied my studio in Bologna, in Palazzo Bentivoglio, of all the remaining paintings, leaving only boards and packaging material together with some cardboard boxes. In that desolate and disquieting space, in the squalor of those objects I saw the reflection of my desolation". Painting moves elsewhere, abandons the field, leaving few fragments and memories of its past behind. It is a shadow separated from the world, waiting for a rebirth. So, although in that context of post-removal barrenness and desolation, Bendini sets up some devices, providing also instructions, in which the observer-actor is invited to reflect on himself, to make discoveries about himself in a sort of rebirth and regeneration processes. Calvesi, already in 1966, was right again in underlining the marked difference between this kind of research and that of the American New Dada, European Nouveau Realisme or international Fluxus: "in this philosophy of objects and appearances, that complex but synthetic mechanism of thought which distinguishes him from any circulating objectualism and which is the ontological flower of Bendini's poetic garden, consumes itself with

the same ineffable concentration”.

All the five works displayed at macro had origin in Bendini's studio in Palazzo Bentivoglio in Bologna, in via Belle Arti. In the years 1966-1969 his life is connected under certain aspects to the short, but not irrelevant experience of the Studio Bentivoglio, located inside the building bearing the same name, close to his own atelier, and which gathered a group of artists, younger than Bendini, open to experimentation, to debate and dialogue: Pier Paolo Calzolari, Maurizio Mazzoli, Nino Ovan, Bruno Pasqualini, whose works were grouped together with Bendini's from September 7th-16th 1966 in the exhibition at Ca' Giustinian, in Venice. Among the young artists who attended Studio Bentivoglio there was also Luigi Ontani. So, if we think of the works Bendini produced in those years which, in spite of all their different articulations, could be called at the same time behaviouristic, poverist, objectual, conceptual or performative, we realize how important it is to underline the pioneering power of works which undoubtedly and strongly influenced the development of the works of Calzolari, Ontani and many others. The absolutely revolutionary quality of these works leads the way to various experiences, as Renato Barilli and Maurizio Calvesi, among others, have well underlined. The former writes in 1978 that in that period Bendini “soon liberates himself of every remnant of illusory virtuality and places his objects in a real space, making that leap forward New Dadaists, Rauschenberg and Johns, hardly ever achieved. Even for Italy, Bendini's plastic aggregates of the years '6667 are very precocious, given that it would not be fair to place them at the same level as the plastic forms generated by the meditations of kinetic, serial or neo-constructivist art. Here the objects are ordinary and banal”; in these works, Barilli also underlines, “a human presence-absence” is involved “with the aim of animating such materials and sending a psychic wave through them, dragging them in a ‘behaviour’ circle”. Calvesi points out in a text written in 1989: “In the mid 60s Bendini was a forerunner, he never became part of that group of artists whose researches were to flow into poverist art owing both to his solitary and withdrawn nature and to the barrier of a certain generational ‘racism’: theirs were emerging names whereas Bendini, who was of an earlier generation, already had a history behind him”. Referring to Come e, Calvesi adds: “From Neo Dada culture Bendini managed to acquire the instruments of an operation which could be manifestly linked to his informal season. That meditative power which his painting was imbued with would become a meditation ‘in progress’ on the condition of the artist and, more generally, of mankind, with a

'non aesthetic' approach to the work of art which for that period was absolutely original".

Come e (1966)

The first work of Bendini's "new" course, caused sensation since its first display (Ca' Giustinian, Venice, 1966). It is a device, an apparatus, an instrument made of poor items which were listed by Bendini in 1968, in the catalogue of the exhibition held in Rome, at Galleria Senior and IN/ARCH, in Palazzo Taverna: "A mat, two wooden kitchen chairs, wooden frame, mirror, cardboard box, plastic sheet, cellotape, amplifier. Self-objectification through the mirror. Objectification of uttered words, of their tone, rhythm, of their connection with thought through recorder placed within the simulacrum's heart-cardboard box. Things and facts waiting for a meaning".

The meaning will be provided by the direct intervention of each user: two solitudes, the artist's and the spectator's, communicate through the same objects, deprived of any aesthetic aim. The chair is a recurring object in Bendini's works of the mid 60s. In his 1965 works, belonging to the series *Senso operante* - discussed by Giulio Carlo Argan in the catalogue of the exhibition at L'Attico Gallery, n. 78, 1966 - the image of the chair, marked by red and yellow traces and by black stripes of cellotape which suggest an ambiguous perspective and spatial collocation, is present as a "scrap of memory", a wrecked/survival which is however still vital, and has the power "to increase and develop the activity of our imagination". In 1966 there is a shift from virtual spatiality to a real and object-oriented one. After sitting down, the user can see a part of his/her face reflected in the mirror placed on the ground on the left, and the user's self takes a concrete form, as Bendini wrote, through an object taken from a daily and ordinary dimension. The artist covers one of the two chairs, joined by means of a straw mat, with a red plastic sheet, to indicate the presence of another possible interlocutor. This simulacrum is placed on the opposite side of an empty frame, on which a microphone is positioned. The painting thus dematerialized into a mere frame still bearing however some traces of the canvas formerly painted and then destroyed, becomes an open window on to the world in a literal and not illusory sense. The "heart" of the simulacrum contains an amplifier which reproduces the voice or sounds uttered by the user. A splitting effect is obtained: the person sitting and looking at his/her reflection in the mirror is not simply revealing him/herself to the others but there is rather a self revelation. If

the person speaks or utters a sound or an exclamation, he/she hears them amplified by the recorder, which makes his/her voice objective. The alter ego is in front of the user, but a dialogue is in fact impossible: in this maze-like mirroring of images and sounds the user is only self-soliloquizing. As Bendini wrote, "the need indeed to understand and analyse one's self from the outside in an objective way, to project oneself out of the self, into the other". It is not by chance that *Come e* is defined by Calvesi "a reflection on human reflection and on the experiential conditions which prompt it", while Giovanni Scardovi, in 1966, defines it "A toilette of the self": "here we have a selfservice work in which the spectator is no longer an observer but becomes the immediate consumer of a work characterised by multiple connected components. I sit on the chair and immediately get, with an assumption of responsibility, a toilette of the self. As Bendini says, "It is a conceptual work where everything is deliberately anonymous. There is a situation of reflection on the fact that we actually know neither ourselves nor the others". The artist puts us in the condition to finally come to terms with ourselves. Again Calvesi, in a text dated 1973, remembers the sensation caused by this work: "I am thinking of the famous 'chair' exhibited in Ca' Giustinian in '66: I say famous because it was quite a case, Bendini was not recognized the right to move away from 'the painting' in such a radical way, it was all branded as a concession to the latest trends, that is, to Rauschenberg, instead [...] it was actually starting a new chapter of research, he was moving away not just from the painting but from the notion itself of a more or less 'open' work, to suggest, foster, indicate what? A connection, precisely". At his first impact with *Come e*, the individual tends to be reduced to an object among objects as if in a consumeristic dimension: Bendini placed the mirror in such a specific way that our reflection in it, all our body is reduced to a fragment exactly like all the others around us. And then that "human object" is invited to reflect on himself, on his own image, on his identity, on his connection to the others and the outside world.

La Scatola U (1966)

In his studio in via Belle Arti in Bologna, near the famous Studio Bentivoglio in via Moline 1b, Bendini gathers everyday objects and endows them with memories of his experience, hour by hour, day by day. It is a sort of diary made of objects carried into a public dimension. The cellophane gloves, the skew bare frames, the cardboard boxes, the straw chairs with white stains, the tins, the mere palette: everything

becomes a concrete fragment of memory, to be assembled in a different, unusual way in order to remember and give new life to the simple ordinary things we use, deprived of their usual utilitarian function. This is how *La scatola U* was created. It is made of a bare frame leaning against a bar. From its upper right section hangs a cardboard box with the word *UNIOM* written over it, referring to a type of kerosene stove. "The choice of this box- Bendini claims - was on the whole accidental although I was particularly struck by the letter U. A critic eventually pointed out to me that the letter seemed to evoke words such as union and universality connected to my research of those years". Its whole composition is rigorous and essential, based on very few and poor objects which create a *tabula rasa* effect and, at the same time, suggest the possibility of creating a new communicative language. The work was commented almost in real time and in an illuminating manner by Francesco Arcangeli, on the occasion of Bendini's one-man exhibition at Studio Bentivoglio, from 23rd to 30th September 1967: "When a person takes a wooden frame, rigid and square, with its simple support, and a cardboard box, with a red U letter on it, hanging from the empty, right, upper section of it, then this person is introducing in the existential space, dead and living, past and present, an element which the avant-garde of half a century ago would probably have defined 'suprematist'. At the same time, this rigorous, desolate isolation of the 'found object' – without which it would not be possible to renew that tension limit which had already been obstinately and poetically explored by Malevitch – manages to throw light in a very singular way on the poetics first expressed by Duchamp and the Dada movement. This is, if I am not mistaken, the modern legacy which converges in Bendini's present works. Therefore, it is possible to say that the 'absolute operation' and the 'zero operation' are both present – and in some cases we will see they happily coexist. More clearly, there is a definite polarity between the reaffirmed anxiety of being and the desperate will to efface oneself. The balance may in fact seem absurd and problematic, precarious owing to the choice of its means; yet, it eventually turns out to be steady, in spite of its difficult, hazardous origin. The result is progressively clear to my mind: it is original in its most tested meaning, that is, connected to many cultural stimuli which are now overflowing in many different directions, yet it then appears autonomous, isolated in its primary and inaccessible silence. Suprematism and Dada, as modern tradition, 'Nouveau Realisme' and 'New Dada' as present connection. Above all 'New Dada'. As Edoardo Piersensini underlined, in these years Bendini needs "a kind of work which contains the representation

and the object that gives origin to it, both the perception and the thing, so that the spectator can understand the uncertain ways of art, which concern the representation of the world, no matter if internal or external, because everything happens in our mind”.

Cabina solare (1967)

As Bendini said in a 1984 interview published in the catalogue of the exhibition *Sette stanze, un giardino, Casa del Mantegna, Mantua*, “when I designed Cabina solar I aimed at building a usable environment. It had to produce thermal, tactile, auditory, olfactory sensations. It had to be a place for self-reflection, selfrediscovery, regeneration, imaginative provocation. Facing these works - and I take again for example *Come e, La Ruota, Pad* - the visitors are invited to undergo a psychological-aesthetic experience which provides them with sensations, emotions, unexpected impressions, pleasure, which implies a shift from the traditional kind of fruition-contemplation to a new one of fruition-action”. In this context, however, it is necessary to underline that the term aesthetic is considered by Bendini in its original meaning of sensation, of “perceiving through sensorial mediation”.

With the help of the technicians of the Istituto d'Arte in Bologna where he taught Pictorial decoration, the artist sets up the Cabina solar in Pino Pascali's former studio in Rome. The following year it was exhibited at *in/arch* in Rome, at Palazzo Taverna. Cabina solare once again experiments with the dialogue between interior and exterior which is one of the points of reference in Bendini's research. With an alienating effect, the artist brings an artificial sun into a cabin, a place which normally has the function to protect from sunlight. The intuition of placing the sun in a closed space recalls, *mutatis mutandis*, the electrical suns in a room painted by de Chirico in his successful metaphysical period, which started in 1968, and above all the giant artificial sun made by Olafur Eliasson for the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern with *The Weather Project* (2003). Unlike the latter, however, Bendini had given up any surprising, spectacular and standardized effect, to privilege an intimate, philosophical dimension on a human scale. Natural effects of light, heat, scents are artificially recreated as if Bendini could foresee the forthcoming replacement of nature with our artificial and technological civilization. What should be experienced naturally and open air is confined into a cabin. As Calvesi underlined in 1968, “It is a closed space and may recall the open air, the beach, nature to be enjoyed on one's skin. But it's also a closed space, of growth, where

time has a purely organic rhythm; or it might recall the cranium where thoughts originate and sensations flow giving life to perceptions". Inviting the user to stay in the cabin alone, Bendini focuses on the fact that our "perceptive space is personal", as he himself will write in the catalogue of the exhibition at IN/ARCH; therefore, it always has an exclusively internal, impenetrable dimension. Actually, in the words of Bertrand Russell - whose *An Outline of Philosophy* Bendini carefully studied in 1966 - "according to physics, everything you see must be considered inside your body". With *Cabina solare* Bendini objectively brings the exterior into the interior through an experience that the user makes in total loneliness. It must also be said that in the 1968 IN/ARCH catalogue the full title of the work as indicated by the artist is: *Something that occupies a small finite quantity of space-time. Cabina solare*. This title evidently recalls a scientific, experimental, neutrally-cognitive terminology which also characterizes the relative "instructions" supplied by the artist.

As Bendini explained, "I think by doing and, as for *Cabina solare*, I started from a generic sketch. I also meditated on the fact that only by living is it possible to discover one's senses fully. In this work what matters is time and light, in reciprocal relation like in the morning after sunrise. The screen is illuminated in clockwise sectors. The time interval between sectors (twelve in total) is of a few seconds, and it is regulated by a metronome. The gradual increase in the amount of light corresponds to a gradual increase in temperature, since the source of light of quartz lamps is very powerful. Moreover, the surrounding environment emanates its smell and on the ground there is the 'tautological' effect of neon light words on wax and resins. The written words I included, which name the materials used, placed on the sandy platform, also suggest the fact that things, too, are unveiled by light. Stepping inside a dark and silent environment alone is like going back to the origins. Then, as time goes by, light appears". In some way, in the passage from darkness to light and heat, there is almost a rebirth. Finally, when referring to "poverism", attention must also be drawn to the coexistence of natural materials (wood, wax, resin, washed sand) and technological materials (quartz and neon lights).

Quadro per Momi (La Mano) (1967)

This work is dedicated to Francesco Arcangeli, affectionately called Momi, to whom Bendini was tied in a close intellectual relationship. Somehow *Painting for Momi* is an invitation to a dialogue between the artist and the critic, in a period of radical change and of almost total linguistic reset for Bendini, who radically surprised Arcangeli himself.

This book-painting open in half, leaning against the wall and lying on the ground, populated by cut-out hands, almost implies a common space of dialogue and sharing between Bendini and the critic. As the artist recalls, "In those years I clearly told Arcangeli that painting wasn't enough, because it was necessary to penetrate life and reality powerfully". The critic's answer can be found in his essay for the exhibition at Studio Bentivoglio, from 23rd to 30th September 1967, in which he also underlines that his communicative power "reaches its peak in Painting for Momi, where on the white pages of the two canvases a quick and lively animation of cuts and counter cuts supports a structure of questions and answers, on which hands open and hang like mouths on the point of speaking. The 'word' before the 'language', the circumstance before the structure; here we still find the reaffirmation of the existential root – geographical rather than spatial, historical rather than temporal, – of a lived condition. Hence, problems that Bendini tackled day by day in books and in his meditations are translated into a powerful, modern, free language".

La mano di Vasco (1967)

The hand is another recurring subject in Bendini's works, quoted almost literally in the works by Mario Ceroli - a prominent figure of the suspended milieu between pop and poverist movements. A foam-rubber hand, secured to the canvas with tempera, resin and glue, had been created in 1966, *Dita divaricat*: an alert signal, a static yet disturbing presence of vigilant conscience. In 1966 he created also *La piccola mano*, made of soft cotton wool, *Polvere e plastica*, with the gloves of *Parallelo e Pipedo* fixed on the canvas and *A memoria di gesso*, a plaster cast showing the print of hands. In 1966 *Tagli e controtagli* is created. It is a polyptych made of four canvases (each one measures 90 x 70 cm) with cuts in the canvas in the shape of fingers and hands, with shadows that accompany the volume of the cuts. In 1967 a dialogue between hands and identity takes place in *Quadro per Momi*. In September of the same year *La mano di Vasco* is created. It is a triptych composed of three wooden frames measuring 190 x 190 cm each, whose canvas is cut in the shape of fingers, and with foam-rubber hands coming into and out of the cellophane, the canvas and the frame, in a rhythmic and pressing dialogue which is inviting, playful and warning. As Arcangeli stated in his 1967 text, *La mano di Vasco* clearly represents "Bendini's highest visual extroversion peak. [...] Cut off hands, slaughter of the innocents, faces, red drapes: an itinerary of unremitting, absorbed, burning, intact

presences". Yet, this dramatic feature seems to be far from the artist's intentions. On the contrary, it is possible to see in the work an almost playful liveliness based on a display of hands stretching towards one another. As Bendini says, "With this work I have translated into images my enthusiasm for having discovered something, a different way of expressing myself. The hand belongs to the painter who encourages a dialogue". A couple of years later, his hand will go back to painting, and his renewed painting will bear the fruits of the experience of *Oggetti e processi*. In Bendini's words, "in order to extend the actions and the methods of art, of the body and of behaviour to the same space of the painting. A sort of energy that was fostered by the need to renew communication with the spectator more explicitly".