

From Paintings to Superpaintings: in expressive abstinence

Interview with Sergio Lombardo by Francesca Pola, June 2021

F.P. - *I would like to talk about the title of this exhibition: “Dai Quadri ai Superquadri. 1961–1966”. Over a very short period of time, when you were very young, you plowed through a highly articulated research process, proposing works that were very different from one another, ranging from the reconsideration of the contemporary media image, with the *Gesti Tipici* and the *Uomini Politici Colorati*, through to works of a more distinctly geometric and minimalist character, such as the various declinations of *Superquadri*. What aspects of continuity and difference do you see in your work between these various cycles?*

S.L. - At the end of the 1950s, I came up with my first *Monocromi*: works without form, without color, without composition and without representation, which denied any authorial content in order to shift the attention to the public, to their own existential reality, to their complex “reactions” in the face of the non-being of the work. From 1961, I tried to reinforce this aesthetic relationship by placing the audience before gigantic shadows that loomed menacingly over them, directly stimulating their latent, unconscious, and involuntary perception. The *Gesti Tipici*, just like the *Monocromi*, were also devoid of content. Shortly thereafter, in June 1963, I exhibited the *Uomini Politici Colorati*, also oversized and also deprived of poetic content, being simple maps of familiar faces painted in three or four colors. The impact of these visual stimuli without content provoked irreversible reactions in the Roman artistic milieu. As Cesare Vivaldi wrote: “Sergio Lombardo appeared two or three years ago in an exhibition at La Tartaruga in Rome... His black silhouettes against a white background had a remarkable shock effect on the young Roman painting scene” (Vivaldi C. 1965 *La Giovane Scuola di Roma*. Collage, No. 5, September, Denaro Editore, Palermo). Unfortunately, in the Roman artistic environment, this shock was perceived as a dismissal of the ban to traditional figurative art, which was content-oriented, poetic, romantic, expressionistic and ultimately “passatist.” Between 1964 and 1966, the artists of Piazza del Popolo were divided into two factions: the first oriented towards Anachronism, which re-proposed “Passatism” and figurative art in an anti-American key, drawing on “our millenary tradition”, which the Americans lacked. This line of thought, initially headed by Plinio de Martiis and Maurizio Calvesi, later evolved further and more successfully into the Transavanguardia promoted by Achille Bonito Oliva. The second faction, oriented towards an evolution of Futurism, was more experimental and avant-garde, and was led by me together with Kounellis and Pascali.

In that difficult climate, continuing on the path of provocation directed at the public and maintaining my expressive abstinence and lack of “content”, I invented the *Superquadri* (“Superpaintings”). These were geometric entities such as points, lines and curves, appropriately enlarged and therefore made SUPER or EXTRA. These geometric entities were constructed using a material as perfect as it is artificial, such as the laminated wood, and were devoid of meaning so that it would be someone else and not me to provide them with aesthetic content.

F.P. - *Why and how did this change of scale in the size of your works take place, “from Paintings to Superpaintings”?*

S.L. - Just as in *Gesti Tipici*, the leap from the human scale to a super-human scale served to stimulate unconscious and uncontrollable reactions of attack-defense on the part of the public, so in the *Superquadri* and then in the *Supercomponibili*, the considerable size attributed to simple lines, points and curves was intended to highlight the inexistence of a priori meaning, conveying the idea that the small gesture of arranging such objects would be an aesthetic gesture, an event worthy of classification in an almost metaphysical dimension.

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F.P. - *Which types may be seen in the exhibition, and what characterizes each one of them?*

S. L. - The exhibition at 1/9unosunove focuses precisely on the very difficult period from 1961 to 1966 in which, in the wake of the display of the *Gesti Tipici*, I gradually moved away from the Tartaruga gallery of Plinio de Martiis and the artists of Piazza del Popolo. The exhibition features a series of samples starting with the *Gesti Tipici* and the *Uomini Politici Colorati*; it explores some of the intermediate research shown at exhibitions at La Tartaruga until February 1966, and goes up to the *Superquadri* of 1966, precursors of the *Supercomponibili*. These works were exhibited in solo shows at the beginning of 1968 at Gian Tomaso Liverani's gallery La Salita, in Bari, in Milan and in several group shows at international museums organized by Palma Bucarelli and Giorgio de Marchis from the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome. A major group exhibition, organized by Fabio Sargentini and presented by Alberto Boatto in 1968 at the museum of Wiesbaden, took its name from my *Strisce Extra*: it was titled *EXTRA: Bignardi, Kounellis, Lombardo, Mattiacci, Pascali*. At 1/9unosunove, some works will also be exhibited starting from the executive projects from 1965-66: a composition of tiles (*Tiling*), all in Formica, with black-and-white diagonal stripes and some works placed in unusual points, such as in corners and along edges. The exhibition also includes 50 *Punti Extra* from 1966 in a classically random composition.

F.P. - *In addition to their large size, what do you think are the main aspects that define the new Superquadri?*

S.L. - The technological perfection of the material that highlights the absence of subjective content. The anonymous simplicity and banality of the geometry that would not justify the enormity of the work if we did not consider the importance of the compositional choices, which are aesthetic choices, events. The end of classical compositional centrality. The devaluation of the very position of the painting, no longer in the middle of the wall, but in the corners. The abolition of the completeness of the painting, the design of which could continue indefinitely. The introduction of pattern in place of harmony and compositional balance. The use of industrial primary colors instead of artisanal shades. The interdependence between environmental space and the space of the work.

F.P. - *In these works of yours, what importance do the choice of material and the means of production have?*

S.L. - The immaculate perfection of Formica, the artificial quintessence produced by industrial machinery and not by the sweaty craftsman were elements essential to conveying an awareness that the world had changed, man had lost his centrality and had entered a statistical dimension made up of infinite frequencies, without a center and without an outline.

F.P. - *The modular nature of these works is in my opinion one of their most innovative aspects: it activates their dynamic identity, not so much with respect to the object-work itself, but with respect to the behavior of the user. What was your intent in triggering certain dynamics, and what did you expect from the visitor?*

S.L. - Of course, the infinite and serial modularity of these works is not hierarchical. The art of the past placed the artist at the center; it idealized the artist, making him isolated and immune from the passing of time, to all effects stopping history. The work of art was either eternal or it was not art. The universe was centralized and hierarchical; there was no evolution but only concentric repetition. Distance from the center implied devaluation, a loss of prestige. In the statistical world of infinite modularity, on the other hand, the spectator can interfere with the work, transform it, let it evolve, establish a constructive and research-based relationship with the work, become its co-creator.

F.P. - *In the '60s, the art scene in Rome was one of the great creative crucibles and the crossroads of international art: what was your perception at the time of the relationship between your work and what was seen prevailing in the major international exhibitions? I'm thinking, for example, of the prize awarded to Robert Rauschenberg at the Venice Biennale in 1964, generally considered an emblematic watershed of the success—by that time widely established and accepted—of American art on the European scene. How did you experience this situation, and how do you reread it today retrospectively in relation to the works you are exhibiting in this show?*

S.L. - American art landing in Venice in 1964 was no surprise to us, the Piazza del Popolo artists. We already knew the Americans' work and they already knew ours. The real surprise was that we had not been invited, that the Italian critics presented a sweetened and traditionalist view of Italian art. The Italian state was not competitive; it was convinced that art was that of bygone centuries and that that was enough to dominate the international scene. Critics and historians made judgments according to personal taste, believing the artist was a craftsman seized by the creative impetus without any awareness, like a shaman. Faced with these beliefs, it was easy for the Americans, who already had a precise political project of global leadership, to demonstrate that American art, designated as "international" art, was more advanced than all the "national" arts. This was by virtue of democratic freedom, which by funding advanced research would attract all the artists of the world and become their cultural guide. If research like mine had been financed by the Italian state sixty years ago, Rome today would perhaps have a cultural and political prestige equal to, if not greater than, that of New York.

F.P. - *What was the perception of your work, which was distinctly international in those years, in which there was an attempt to affirm a specificity of Italian artistic identity? What was the reception of these works in the early exhibitions where they were presented in the 1960s? How did their perception change, if at all, over the course of the following decades, also with regard to acknowledgement of their topical aspects?*

S.L. - At the time, my work was supported by a few intellectuals, by Palma Bucarelli and, until 1964, by Plinio de Martiis. After 1964, Plinio reacted very badly to the surpassing of our American friends, Leo Castelli and Ileana Sonnabend, with whom he had refused to enter into partnership, and almost out of spite he began to think about Anachronism.

My relationship with Plinio was difficult and thorny. Plinio liked my *Uomini Politici Colorati*, but not because they were mechanically painted maps of light and shade, but because he interpreted them as neo-figurative and therefore compatible with a "passatist" form of Anachronism based on the millenary Italian traditions in an anti-American key. This was the cause of my estrangement from the Tartaruga group together with Kounellis and Pascali, who shortly afterwards joined the Arte Povera movement, while I transformed my studio into the experimental research center Jartrakor; I also approached the academic field and founded the *Rivista di Psicologia dell'Arte*. Over the following decades, for another fifty years, the Italian artistic environment continued to follow the paths of Anachronism, Transavantguardia and Arte Povera, sometimes with excellent results, but never comparable to the international authoritativeness that the artists of Piazza del Popolo had achieved in the 1960s.

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