

Bruno Corà, Maria Ausilia Binda, *Nuvolo Alfa 39 e Diagrammi*,
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Nuvolo: The 'Alfa 39' and the 'Nuovi Diagrammi'; the medium is not the only message

It may be because of an 'input' inoculated early on in Nuvolo's metabolism - perhaps that of Pierfrancesco's forest of rods and spears rising into the sky of the defeat of Massenzio frescoed in S. Francesco in Arezzo, or the more ordered and horizontal one, suited to perspective depth, designed by Raffaello for the paving and steps of the temple of *Lo Sposalizio della Vergine* - the fact remains that he has, over time, a recurring interest for these vertical band shapes, for this collage of black 'bars' on a white background. That the appearance of the 'Alfa 39' code used for these latest works is not a foreign element to Nuvolo's lexicon, but something innate to his painting and even - without too much acrobatics - demonstrable. Thin bands, spatially located on the surface of the canvas like 'septa' that enclose the field of the parallelograms in serigraphy, aggregated by chromatic consonance and weight in the narration that the imprints on paper bore, the bands or bars had made their appearance early on since the first collages of serigraphed paper and painting (1961), of which *Scaccomatto* (1955) remains a more calibrated antecedent map. These vertical elements making up the collages were placed on the surfaces of his canvases, defining a notational space whose tonal scale was to be deduced on a sort of invisible pentagram invisible, depending on their relative distance and the height of their traces. Rhythmics and the resulting spatial polyphony were a matter of free extension and connected to the listening of colour, experienced in the inextricable drafting made up of the lacks and fullnesses of the screen-printed bands and also of their form. Nuvolo's visual phrase in those canvases, whose horizontal development was arranged to the gothic narrative of the silk-screen-printed prints, seemed to live on the wavelength of bursting jazz tunes, such as those with which Miles Davis' trumpet is often charged, but also on the primary scanning of the sounds of Bach's organ music. Empty, high, low, high, dull, clear, dark, empty clear, empty... on the edge. Within this rule of visualisation of an image that manifests itself to the painter, in an absolutely arbitrary norm whose compositional process is the anarchic arrangement of forms and colour that only accepts the invisible domain of the senses 'harmonised' in unfounded harmony, that is, with an exchange of functions - sight hears, hearing sees, smell palpates, touch smells, taste suspends all immediate satisfaction - the feeling of time, as rhythmic, appears in his painting with true musical tunes. But those first 'measurements' of the space of the entire pictorial surface made with the strips of paper that in the collage adhere perfectly and ideally to the canvas, lying inside the painting, soon distance themselves from it just enough to reveal themselves as its tensions, almost like nerves or 'strings' with which to make the same spatiality vibrate in a completely different way. The *Velluto, pelle e pittura* (1962) or *I daini e tela greggia su tela bianca preparata* (1965), and *Pelli su tela bianca* (1965) thus constitute the following but almost contemporary passage to the collages of '61-64, with the evident intention of giving the spatial scansion induced by verticality very different and articulated values of presence: the strips of canvas still adhere to the backgrounds prepared in white, while the strips of leather stretched vertically to the limits of a possible break, in the middle part they twist in on themselves revealing the forces of the material brought into play. But these tensions are also a declaration of the reduction of the material to the minimum terms of signifying elementarity, an essay of its extreme organoleptic faculties in an iconographic function with their minimum quantitative use, in an outcome of verticality

active on the register of the 'forces' within the image. Of this quality without aestheticism in the use of extra-pictorial matter, shared with few other artists due to the proximity in those years to the discoveries of Burri and Colla, we now also know the effective developments freed from the 'poverist' instance. And for those stresses present in doses as 'units' of measurement of the spatial tension of these 'Skins' by Nuvolo, it is now possible to approach works such as *Torsione* (1968) by Anselmo, whose tension, energy and force, on a larger scale and with more pronounced plasticity, nevertheless macroscopically exert correlated spatial principles. The compositional interval of the juxtapositions between the stretched skins and the bands of canvas collaged on the background of those paintings by Nuvolo is musically conceived in proportion to the extent of the areas occupied. In the same way and with a different sensibility from the 'poverist' one, a work such as *Tommaso Albinoni* (1962) by Tano Festa, whose sonority is explicit in its image and title and in many ways formally comparable even to these new *Alfa 39* works by Nuvolo, whose code, however, is more ambiguously active in its verbal translatability, is responsible for the subsequent formalisation of the problem of banded spatiality pronounced by Nuvolo.

But today these works by Nuvolo for their yearning for an absolute and radical spatial quality must also be placed in a rhythmic relationship and compositional gravity with works such as *Adam* (1951-52) by Barnett Newman, or even with those of Mario Ballocco's *Indagine sul modo in apparenza del colore* (1958), in which the verticality (or horizontality) of bands of different extents determines a different chromatic consistency.

Nuvolo's work, however, did not have then, and I do not believe he wants to have now, any gestalt-like ambitions; and although he knew very well the value of the perceptive incidence of those compositions, he nevertheless entrusted every most imponderable action existing in the work to the integral auratic power of painting.

Now, even these *Alfa 39*, which can be literally 'read' in order to reach their signifying foundation, in the same way that we could 'read', evoking their qualities, the Fibonacci numerical series realised in neon by Merz, manifest themselves on the elementary side of the sign and code to invest, however, with their organic image structure and aesthetic potential, a more complex reception that concerns the continuous vision of a black-white quantum rhythm whose standard is the vertical bar. What is the origin of this interest in the 'Alfa 39' code?¹ With it, Nuvolo once again makes, as with the use of the photographic-based process in silk-screen printing or the use of videotape, an act of faith in his own era, with whose technological spirit he identifies himself, albeit critically, i.e. by taking those signals that are effective for communication and subjecting them to the humanistic 'detournement' of art's intentions. The appropriation, however, is never that of the Dada matrix; he does not elect new 'ready-mades', but if anything, once he has assumed a visual code (the bar or the photogram) in his own grammar, he conjugates its lexical and visual faculty within an organism of new conception.

Therefore, mind you, the image and message that these paintings structured with the 'Alfa 39' code bear, will not be found on any similar product of everyday consumption, since they are the fruit of an authentic new verbo-visual elaboration belonging to art. One will also decode that they do not even share pop aesthetics, but rather esoteric glossy moods.

Yet Nuvolo, at least for this first public sortie, has given these works a secular ductility that is equally worthy of reflection. Of these works on melamine-faced chipboard and with the superimposed black adhesive cardboard bars, the compilation is as far removed from pictorial 'pleasure' as it is from the aesthetics of cybernetic communication.

Of *Alfa 39* – to remain with their provisionality – one must also appreciate the element that distinguishes their articulation of codification, namely the 'iteration' of the 'bars' that is a char-

acteristic feature of some other cycles in Nuvolo's oeuvre. Suffice it to think of that incredible page of sealed and iconoclastic silence that is *Cartone ondulato, chiodi e carta serigrafata su legno* (1956), where both the undulating fabric and the intervals according to which the nails are confined in the cardboard determine a subtle schism in our gaze; our gaze is in fact absorbed and attracted on the one hand by the painting, largely concealed but at one end of the painting still flagrantly visible, and on the other by the pure and almost mute spatiality of the large cardboard barrier that for the most part overhangs it. But with more implications for the iterative principle of these *Alfa 39* one must recall the serigraphic trends of the *Modulari* (1969), a spatiality investigated by Nuvolo not only on the side of repetition but also on that of symmetrical specularity and the progression of a chromatic value from its lowest to its highest degree of intensity.

A further aspect of *Alfa 39*, presented here for the first time, must be pointed out for their correct reading. The ten plates, in fact, with their apparent similarity for the uneducated eye to the codex, actually belong to two different sets of works. The first, in order of conception, consists of seven parts in the invention reminiscent of the painting *Positivamente e non negativamente* (1954), so called in the understanding with Villa's alchemy of the word, to which this *Alfa 39* is ideally dedicated. The second work is a triptych in which the image implies yet another exercise of esoteric freedom for a cryptic message and the need for a 'key' for its cryptography, in order to achieve the playful 'divertissement' it conceals. And so much is enough. Because for the truth or falsehood of visual language, silence counts more than words. The legibility and rationality of the visual code with which Nuvolo created his *Alfa 39* is counterbalanced here by the threadlike and methodologically seamless landscape of the *Nuovi Diagrammi* (1988). They, too, can be called upon to bear witness to the weave pursued over time by the artist, first of all the colour-draining burr-like patterns of the *serotipie* (1952) and later those cycles of *Cucito a macchina* (1959) as well as *Diagrammi* (1960) that constitute the distinctive elements of Nuvolo's visual self-featuredness.

And if in *Cucito a macchina*, the declared lack of function of the thread weaving on the canvas accentuated the dreamy arbitrariness of the pathways and emphasised the freedom of impulse as well as the grace of the very subtle quilted sign, in *Diagrammi*, the mimesis of the traced code concealed, in reality, an absolute lack of signification, while exercising equal freedom and visionary wandering.

The *Nuovi Diagrammi* are thus the opposite of a code; they are properly a 'song' whose sound wavelengths are commensurate with the potential and whim of the 'Singer' (the singer indeed, as well as the name of the sewing machine!). And what song do they still transcribe the sonority of? In many cases the repertoire of notation is the swinging one that was immediately revealed with the first diagrams, in others the typical shivering linearity of 'sewing' becomes intrigues, thickens, and the dimensions of opposing spires, systole and diastole of the drawing, reach the emblematic sign-like noisiness of 'interferences'.

This cycle of *Nuovi Diagrammi* has two further preceding episodes that should be mentioned here: one, of large dimensions, the *Trionfo della morte* (1972), is the tracing of a dramatic rhythm that from Petrarca and Brueghel plunges into Nuvolo's electrocardiogram at a very critical but by now outdated moment of his life; the other is a serigraphic exo-edition that collects some diagrams, in a few small format examples, realised by Nuvolo during the 1970s for a private client. As then and as for the *Alfa 39*, these silkscreen tracings exalt the continuously segmented sign in the essential chromatic antithesis of black-white, constituting in Nuvolo's differently articulated work the polarity of drawing (but not of design!).

Finally, if my system for recognising these latest visual codes used by Nuvolo is not that of the more appropriate 'optical pen' but still the archaic one of direct observation and translation

through the proliferation of words traced by the 'biro', I hope that the intrusiveness of these works alone will visit the observer and engage him to the right degree.

It is now easier to understand, as new phases of Nuvolo's work unfold, how remaining 'concealed' of this 'nuntius' is an attitude that safeguards the authenticity of each message to be conveyed; and how, between one announcement and the next, silence (which can sometimes last even a few years) has for him the role of a pause that is just as significant and capable of giving the event the extraordinary nature of invention each time. But at the concert of the new repertoires of this prince of serigraphy, the user who approaches «must be prepared to operate according to this polyphony, otherwise any object will remain indifferent to him» (Ceccato)². So let us prepare ourselves for 'good listening'.

NOTES

¹ The 'Alpha 39' barcode "...is an alphanumeric code comprising the ten digits (0 to 9), the 26 letters of the alphabet, 7 special characters (-, +, /, \$, %, ., -space-) and a start/stop code, 44 characters in all. Each character is encoded with a set of 9 elements: 5 bars and 4 spaces (between the bars), which can be of two types: wide and narrow (symbolising '1' and '0'). The 9 elements that make up the character must consist of: 2 wide bars, 3 narrow bars, 1 wide space, 3 narrow spaces, there are 4 characters, however, that are composed of 5 narrow bars, 3 wide spaces and one narrow space... The size ratio between wide and narrow elements is nominally 2.24, i.e. a wide element must be larger than a narrow element by 2.24 times". (S. Gervasini).

² S. Ceccato, *Arte e scienza*, in *Gli occhi di Argo*, 1984.

MARIA AUSILIA BINDA

Nuvolo: An Artist's Itinerary

Nuvolo's work, full of hidden implications and issues, is mysterious, without haughtiness, but rather in its essentiality. Its subtle non-conformism is intriguing, despite a continuous focus on the dynamics of current reality.

Anticonformism that derives from the independence of a character and an artistic behaviour that has been consciously recognised since the first signs of art, when he began his artistic work in Rome around 1950. It was precisely in that city that the debate on non-figuration that led to the figure of Prampolini was in the background at its beginnings, while in the rest of the country, on a more general aesthetic-critical level, the opposition between abstractionists and realists was becoming evident.

On the other hand, the transition to the abstract, for a post-war painter, is almost a moral imperative in this phase of hooking into the most modern European culture (neo-Cubist and neo-expressionist) not yet open to the influence of the United States. Decisive in this context was the establishment in 1949 of the group Origine (Balocco, Burri, Capogrossi and Colla), later the Foundation for Abstract Art, within a Roman area in which sculptors such as Mannucci, Mirko, Lorenzo Guerrini and painters such as Dorazio, Perilli, Accardi, Sanfilippo, already the lively animators of Forma Uno (1949), Cagli and Nuvolo himself could be found.

Experimenting with the material, the artist implemented an essential turning point through the use of the serigraphic medium adopted first in the printing process and then in painting. In fact, his first interventions in serigraphy are: some posters realised through photographic reproduction; the covers (n. 5, 7, 10 of 1954) and inserts, designed and conceived by Colla and realised by Nuvolo, for *Arti Visive*, the magazine of the Fondazione Origine in which he directly participated. in terms of an authentic, mutual and balanced collaboration of artists' (Pinto); later (1968-69) and similarly he began the silkscreen transcription of numerous works by his friend Corrado Cagli. Nuvolo's innovation lies in reversing the function of the silkscreen technique: the medium that allows the mechanical reproduction of countless copies is 'recovered' by the artist and 'used' as a conscious instrument in his possession for the creation, each time, of a single work. The result is a new and different 'uniqueness' of the artistic work and an intuition that anticipates (from a technical point of view) the silk-screen uses of British and American pop artists of the 1960s.

We owe the name of *serotipie* coined for these works to Emilio Villa - from this point on a decisive figure and sensitive interpreter of Nuvolo's work - as well as the name *nuntius celatus* given by the artist. His experimentation continues from this point, 'symbiotically' investing the dimension of his non-figurative painting. This is only the beginning of an evolutionary line that, with incredible consistency, continues to the present day. His first works, his first 'subdued elegies' are called *Coriandoli*, a set of small works accompanied by an inscription by the poet Emilio Villa: joyful, festive colour fields on which, liquefying, are spies or trails of colour. Moments, rather than temporal statements, of a work in the making.

Colour warnings that later 'leaven' into real silkscreen paintings. The *Scacchi* series is already a key to this. Here, the dimensional field dilates, the material gently stands out in the indefinite of the screen-printed colour and the veils of the collage, seeking a balance within itself (by means of the weaves of the silk frame) and externally, becoming a surface marked by geometric allusions. The new technical means, the method (collage), the material (fabric, nitrocellulose, vinavil), the sign as a total final result: this is Nuvolo's own synthesis in the first half of the 1950s; a sphere that placed the artist as unique and recognisable, as protagonist, master and investigator of reality.

A painting that appeared in *Arti Visive* (no. 1, 1954) entitled *Positivamente e non Negativamente* refers to the manipulative possibilities of silk-screen printing: a joke-phrase created with Villa becomes an assertion of a double artistic creation through the contact of two different surfaces. Continuing his artistic research Nuvolo, in the years 1959-1962 experimented with the technique of *Cucito a Macchina* developed with different materials. As 'fabrics joined in the manner of patchwork' (Corà) they suggest inventive textures, directions that lead to zones, oases of colour but of fabric. Sight and touch are called upon to perceive the ultimate sense as in *Daini* (1960); more or less consistent skins, enveloping the form itself. In the irregular scansion of the rhythms created on the canvas by the stitching, in the suede puffs abandoned to their colour, to their being of the material (and of the implied gesture) with spontaneity close to other materials, the will to seduce the material is not lacking; or the need for a 'push' or a forcing restrained by the very limit of the painting in *Tensioni* (1962). A more 'physically and tactilely material' parenthesis before the definitive approach to the more mature developments of silk-screen printing.

The series of *Bianchi* (serigraphy and painting -1958) and that of the *Collages* (collage, serigraphy and painting -1959-63) are a further meditation on the theme: fragments above fragments, evocations above other vocations, white above, below chess. Collage as a kaleidoscope, as part of an imaginative 'assemblage', offering endless possibilities of formal intersections.

Nuvolo recreates equilibriums, 'geometric-sensorial' forms always with a different breath; never tired of lingering, but ready to accept the risks of chance, the anomalous juxtapositions: in fact, even art can express the contradictions of the real, of being (of matter) and of being (of the gesture, not evident, in its formal evolution). At times the stitching goes beyond any material context to abandon itself to a sort of automatic writing: these are the *Diagrammi* (1960); without beginning or end "the ink of the spool of thread traces out itineraries that have nothing to do with quantities, figures and values except those of a thought of freedom" (Corà), almost monologues or, like Ariadne's threads that, like paths of the mind, seek directions, seek the threads of life (see further on the *Trionfo della Morte*).

With the second phase of the *Serotipie* (up to 1969), the conversation with the origin of the work resumes, but with a profoundly different meaning. The artist knows the material and provokes it: a hidden life emerges: the colour transports the sign, the non-sign absorbs the colour and is altered, composing itself in a chaos, in chasms that 'weave' lacerations and existential evocations. The elegy of the first *Serotipie* is here dissolved and released to its destiny. As if in a "subtle limbo... an incessant shroud of intentional and unintentional appearances, Nuvolo performs an act of abolition, of robbery and escape from all hatching" (Villa) to emerge, a little later, in the territories of symmetry. Symmetries that, moreover, were in 'gestation' in these unilateral works and that, through a conversation/conversation made in 1967 with his sculptor friend Mirko on the possibilities of employment of the screen-printing medium, appear in the *Oigroigs* (or Totems) mirror-image reading of the artist's name. Their formal structure is explicit: proportional, double, opposition as bilateral symmetry. Their symbolism is hermetic: infinite constructions like towers of Babel in which to find the imaginary past and future, be it the 'mosaic of Monreale', the 'regular dodecahedron of Theaetetetus' (Weyl) or the vision of a 'Kafkaesque-technological metamorphosis' where to lose orientation (but recognise other senses, as many chromatic variations of matter). One penetrates into these Totems, arriving at the inner voluptuousness that emanates from those forms, those colour timbres, those chords: vertigoes of falling or rising, of all possible oppositions but without interpenetrations. Fascinating, in the end, is their internal dynamic. The quality of matter overwhelms and raises the totemic form above the mechanical-serigraphic event. The symmetrical canon is not a limitation to artistic action since, by accepting the silkscreen challenge, the artist succeeds in creating infinite formal

possibilities with a single stroke. Coloured echoes and rhythms can even materialise in precious jewellery (*Oigroig Ori*).

A mirror reference, a shift in space that is also time, is found in *Modulari* (1969-71). Here the opposition is between black and white; the conversation is between the monochromaticity (black) of the modular development and the (now white) sheet. The form in the iteration is articulated in opposing polarities, now towards evidence, now towards invidence; it seems to vibrate, to return upon itself, within its rhythm of rarefaction and concentration. A touch, like that of a magic wand, creates visual maladies, games of perversion of the sign, of unhinging of the image: it is the phagocytosis of form, it is a vocal echo that seems to stretch out into space inside and outside us.

On the other hand, this is the intimate fascination of the *Modulari*, of their formal embroideries that seem to conceal, within them, the secret of a dynamic force that goes from the finite to the infinite, from the minimum value to the maximum, to the limit; to the infinite he gives a limit, just as in *Tensioni* Nuvolo measured its force by holding it in the canvas. A dynamism in which, among other things, distant references can be found with Muybridge's study of the movements of photography and Balla's Futurist painting. What becomes increasingly manifest is the unique evolutionary path; Nuvolo's style is, in its unmistakable being, the story of the possibilities of silk-screen printing. Even where painting was concerned, the search always returned to the usual shores, to the shores that pressed the artist most. Thus, proceeding in his work, following an ideal harmony and finiteness, if not actually ethics, characteristic of his person as well as of his activity, Nuvolo, as if in an archaeological dig, comes to penetrate inside his own screen-printing system.

In this sense, the particular and unusual use of the video-tape should be noted, which is used by him to further probe (along transverse and vertical axes) these modern icons. Inside them, magmas of colour emerge, chasms are found, at first only intuited on the surface: with the same procedure as the probes inside the human body, Nuvolo explores the fantastic, the surreal, the formless of the Totems.

The secret, once again, lies in their innumerable existence in a single form: infinite are the imaginative possibilities of representation or personal translation. The work of art, playing on the image has its own reference, different in each of us, in which the unconscious 'swims'. As Villa writes: "every thing, every manifestation, every semblance is a signal: and every signal is an enigma...with the need for absolute freedom in deciphering the enigma". From Video-tapes we move on to Video-grams, "infinitesimal units of an unlimited series of images" (Corà), three folders with texts by E.Villa, M.Diacono and B.Corà.

An antelitteram 'exo-publishing' production that has its origins in real artist's books made in 1958 with Emilio Villa (*Imprimatur*) with Vinci Grossi (*Racconto di cinque stagioni*) and again in 1971 with Emilio Villa (*Exercitations de tire...*).

In 1972, the *Trionfo della Morte* appeared, a 10-metre-long silkscreen diagram of his own electrocardiogram in a state of cardiac arrest. The 'stitched diagram' of 1960 is now symbolically transformed into a signifier, becoming an apotropaic object. Today, these diagrams return enlarged and perhaps, for the artist, represent a liberation from death; a personal triumph, a song: the diagram refers back to the pentagram and the notes, to the free scores of contemporary music, the descending functions of the flat electrocardiogram, return to rise with an ascending rhythm. But the meditations on the communication of the language of images and signs do not end there. In his screen printing workshop (in Città di Castello), Nuvolo continues to work. His latest work *Alfa 39* renews messages and new alphabets to decode.