

Bruno Corà, “Melani e Nuvolo: un linguaggio integrale” in  
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## Preamble

A proverbial difficulty accompanies the enterprise of mounting an exhibition in which the works of more than one artist are placed side by side; and although in this case the adventure concerns only a few works by Fernando Melani and a particular selection of those by Nuvolo (Giorgio Ascani) – thus not exactly what one would call a ‘collective’ – the episode is no less arduous. Encouragement, however, on this occasion comes from a number of non-secondary aspects that induced the writer to take the step.

Despite the fact that Melani and Nuvolo belong to different generations and cultural backgrounds – one grew up in Tuscany, the other in Umbria, and the other about 20 years apart – what brings them closer is much more than their birthdays or geography. First of all, a shared and innate aptitude they both have for ‘experimentation’, implemented through art, places them *tout court* in that family of artists who eschew an interest in the attainment of a ‘style’, in favour instead of a freedom of experience that leads to continuous, different elaborations, at times so atypical as to suggest that they belong to different artists. To this first common denominator is added a second, even more stringent one, which concerns the conspicuous interest present in the aesthetic self-interrogations, both in Melani and in Nuvolo, for everything that modern physics and, in a broader sense, 20th century science has brought to the forefront of the contemporary, before the eyes of the two artists and the entire world. A third aspect, which cannot be underestimated, places them in the same behavioural sphere: both Melani and Nuvolo – I affirm this on the basis of direct and personal observations, having fortunately known and frequented them both – were dedicated to the assiduous daily commitment of the workshop, understood as an uninterrupted ‘prayer’ directed at the artistic ‘creed’ and, moreover, in a natural attitude of evident reserve. In different ways, both could therefore still be compared – stubbornness, irony, existential simplicity, ideological convictions and more – which, however, are beyond the scope of what more strictly distinguishes this exhibition ‘conference’ at the basis of which is the pairing of art and science.

It must also be said that the two artists’ inclination to scientific interest was closely cultivated and developed for personal cultural needs, but also and above all to fertilise the artistic work, its content and its mode of operation.

A final point, perhaps less relevant but nonetheless not unrelated to those listed above, brings the two artistic experiences together: in the mid-1950s, in fact, both Melani’s and Nuvolo’s works were the subject of strong interest on the part of gallery owner Fiamma Vigo, who was active in Venice, Florence and Rome and invited them to hold solo and group exhibitions in her own space and exhibition programmes.

In light of these assumptions, it was deemed critically possible to formulate the proposal of this comparison of some of their works.

[...]

## Nuvolo: the equivalence of chaos and order

Not unlike Melani, Nuvolo too had faith in art and work rather than in «too much commerce with people» (Kavafis). His was, in fact, the behaviour of a celebrant of initiatory rites and liturgies, demanding authentic vocation, courage, assiduity, conviction, concentration, visionary spirit, spirit of adventure, thirst for knowledge and discovery.

In that post-war period, which lasted particularly long in Italy, Nuvolo's artistic experience began. From his native Città di Castello he decided, at the invitation of Alberto Burri, to go to Rome where the elder had already moved and had begun to exhibit since 1947. A guest first in Burri's studio and then in Edgardo Mannucci's, the young Nuvolo put into practice those qualities and technical skills that everyone already recognised in his town.

Rome's artistic life in those years was as stimulating as it could have been for a young person entering the world of art. Rome, together with Milan and Turin, was among the most advanced fronts of a cultural revival and a ferment of initiatives by artists who, after the fall of Fascism, felt they had to reduce the cultural distance dividing the country from the rest of Europe. From 1946 to 1950, it was a succession of proposals aimed at reformulating a fabric of exchanges of experiences and debates.

These were the years in which, within the vast 'informal' linguistic articulation, certain artists such as Burri and Fontana left a strongly indelible mark on the image due to the radical nature of their breakthroughs and their power to disrupt previous structures and conceptions of the practice of painting itself: «It must be said at once that the most obvious manifestation of this change in artistic experience lies in the abandonment of the techniques and materials that bear the traditional codes to which the realists and most of the abstractionists were equally and rigorously faithful, in favour of other techniques, other materials, other processes...».<sup>4</sup>

It is in this context and orientation that Nuvolo matures the conviction to work with silkscreen printing to realise his painting.

On closer inspection, those first results called *Serotipie* between '52 and '53, beyond the apparent similarity of the sinuous, filiform and relative clotting of the colour, already distinguish themselves from Burri's *Muffe*, where a different amount of matter, sometimes real lumps with appreciable thicknesses, declare the intention to present colour-matter, while Nuvolo seems more intrigued by the emergence of a spatial exponents, the result of an interpenetration between chromatic imprints in the foreground and the backgrounds.

What qualifies and distinguishes Nuvolo's painting is therefore a different aesthetic motivation that had already become evident to Emilio Villa from his first encounter with his painting: an interest in the effects of chance that the automatism of the draining of colour left to fall fluidly and thinly at large on the papers and then shaved off, dried and rendered static by the imprimatura of the squeegee on the silk-screen frame, had highlighted. «The work of this painter is justly conducted... where form is indistinguishable from indistinctness... where the weave, the sign, the neuma seems as carefree as air and is instead as calculated as breath, as necessity where the atmospheric monstrous is electrified, as if inside a nervous or anatomical apparatus. And fancy provokes chance, and chance solicits fancy, and together they elaborate delicacies and colourful shifts that are among the most emotive to be seen today»<sup>5</sup> writes Villa at the time with enlightened synchronism.

The linguistic mode of *serotipie* proves to be a constant aptitude in Nuvolo's oeuvre, so much so that it appears without interruption from the beginning of his work to the end. And yet,

within a time span of around fifty years, it is possible to distinguish the different moments of conception and execution of his pictorial and spatial conception.

For Nuvolo's solo exhibition at the Galleria Numero in Florence (1955), Cagli writes in the presentation: «The weft, the one from before, changes meaning as the new warp takes over and the transition from transparent to opaque, from empty to full, from concave to convex, from mutual solitude to human dialogue takes place».

A few years later and with several critical reflections Nello Ponente writes «It is clear that in Nuvolo's experience (...) the choice of certain materials and procedures, different from and substituting for the traditional ones, was not a game of academic updating, but a necessity consequent to the development of a poetics that still today, in the progress and transformation of linguistic structures, does not renounce the principles established over time».<sup>6</sup>

It therefore becomes clear that Nuvolo's position is that of an anticipator of the very crisis of Informal Art and subsequent pronouncements (even of Pop Art, whose appropriations and homologation of the real often derived from the simple use of pre-packaged found images) he avoids. His being 'against the tide' nevertheless responds to the need for greater complexity in the central question active in his work: measuring a quantity of harmony in entropic disorder and highlighting in apparent equilibrium the figure of chaos that reveals the unattainability of absolute harmony.

It is interesting at this point to recall a statement by the artist that appeared in the catalogue of the group exhibition held at the Minneapolis Institute of Art in the autumn of '63: «Today I seek perfect balance, absolute equilibrium... however I live in a world consisting of a continuous series of points and I have lines and colours as means of expression, not the infinite indefinite and atonal dimensions, not dimensionlessness. If I had presented an entirely white painting I would have a figure, not a balance. Then I must put something on the blank canvas that, if possible, is the best and most exact. Perhaps one day I will make such a painting. On that day all painters might, together with me, stop painting. Until then, however, I look at each of my works as a relative equation with an unresolved unknown.»<sup>7</sup>

The fluidity of research allows Nuvolo to stoke more fires and more cookers for the transmutation of his stones into gold. Proof of this is provided by the *Serotipie* that, from '52 to '92, highlight new relationships and results of a 'randomness' provoked and kept under observation under the silk-screen printing frames with ever-changing devices.

When Andy Warhol began to use silkscreen printing for the first *Seven Cadillacs* (1962) reproduced on canvas and in *Printed Two Dollar* (1962) beginning the serial cycle of banknotes, Nuvolo had more than ten years of experience gained in the silkscreen technique applied to his painting. Beyond the respective implications that Nuvolo's and Warhol's serigraphic works had in the undoubted effectiveness of Warhol's linguistic and mass-media use of serigraphy (which nevertheless remains at an elementary level) the fact remains that when Nuvolo creates the *Oigroig* (1967) or the *Modulari* (1969) his elaboration expresses a skill and depth of sensitivity exercised on such a solid tradition that one can recognise him as the natural heir of all painting from Flemish or Sieneese Gothic to the 16th century in Europe! And that this assertion is not exaggerated can be deduced from the internal evolution of linguistic solutions with increasingly sophisticated technical degrees that can be observed in both the *Oigroig* and the *Modulari* as well as in the very landing to the computerised fractals of the *Aftermandelbrot* (1989).

His is therefore a dynamic magisterium because it is historically founded and rooted. The *Oigroig*, whose title anagrams the name Nuvolo (Giorgio read backwards), are the first works to methodically emphasise symmetrical qualities as a corrective rule introduced to verify the assumption that in chaos there is order and vice versa.

The videos that Nuvolo made in a later examination of that phantasmagorical and fabulistic world brought to light by the *Oigroig* were to form the matrix of numerous graphic works entitled *Videogrammi* (1976), advanced psychological textualities to the world of Rorschach!

With these works, and above all with the *Modulari*, a discourse unfolds that does not seem to be able to have surrounding references as was the case with some cycles of his earlier pictorial production. In the *Modulari*, a new and almost boundless latitude of repetitions emerges on the subtle ridge that divides chaos from harmony, and the matching is possible in the very organism of the images.

The opposite of Cartesian vectoriality and Euclidean geometry, but no less harmonious for that, indeed proud examples of a generation of forms that considers the particle and the 'quanta' of information to be the new origins of their epochal belonging, the *Modulari* – if one were to conjugate them to any of the images of the previous two centuries – invoke as their antecedents the photograph of Jules Marey's *Salto in lungo con slancio* (1888) or the famous *Dinamismo di un cane al guinzaglio* (1912) or the *Studio di linee andamentali* (1913) both by Giacomo Balla.

What prevails in these images is a law of repetition and progression of chromatic intensity. The repetition that these *Modulari* celebrate is that of a «diversity that escapes (...) indefinite fibrillation; time is what repeats itself...» (Foucault). The *Modulari*, as morphologies of the indeterminate infinite, claim an originality of foundation. «The fact is – writes Deleuze – that to found is to determine the indeterminate»<sup>8</sup>. But this is but one of the issues that can be traced back to the starting hypothesis of the whole poetics of chance-chaos and cosmic harmony within Nuvolo's work.

If the cultural climate of the 1960s had been characterised by the extinction of Informal poetics, with the consequent resetting of the languages brought to Italy by the generation of Castellani, Manzoni, Agnetti, Kounellis, Paolini, Uncini, Schifano and Lo Savio and of the kinetic and programmed art groups, finally concluding with the exploit of the poverist movement by Pistoletto, the Merz, Fabro, Anselmo, Boetti, Prini, Pascali, Calzolari, Penone and Kounellis himself, the decade of the 1970s, apart from a few emerging personalities (De Dominicis, Pisanì, Ranaldi, Spalletti, who would only bring their work to fullness by the 1980s) turned out to be, all in all, a period of consumption of what had already been conceived and realised, offering the flank to an art of reflux and citationism that spread throughout the 1980s. Meanwhile, in '87 Nuvolo came up with a cycle of works based on silk-screen printing with nitrocellulose on ennobled chipboard, called *Nuovi Diagrammi*, almost all of them large in size. In these *Nuovi Diagrammi*, the monochrome, replacing the wire, actually mimics its outline and absolute lack of function, exercising equal freedom and visionary wandering. But in that same period of time, Nuvolo had also ventured into the unprecedented exercise of the Alfa 39 sign code commonly used in commodity classification. He was assisted in this computer operation by his second son Paolo. The entry of electronic processing into the artist's oeuvre therefore occurs with this first experience, which is a prelude to the more complex investigation for the realisation of fractal images and *Aftermandelbrot*.

That the appearance of the Alfa 39 code used to design these works with the computer is not a foreign element to Nuvolo's lexicon can be demonstrated without too much acrobatics. Thin bands spatially located on the surface of the canvas like 'septa' reserving the field of the parallelograms in serigraphy, aggregated by chromatic consonance and weight in the narration that the impressions on paper bore, the bands or bars had already made their appearance early on since the first *Bianchi-collages* of silkscreened paper and painting (1958).

Even these Alfa 39, which can be literally 'read', in order to arrive at their signifying foundation, in the same way as we could read, evoking their qualities, the Fibonacci number 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 Alfa Code 39? With it, Nuvolo renews, as with the use of the photographic-based process in silk-screen printing or the use of videotape, the act of faith in his own era, with whose technological spirit he identifies himself, albeit critically, i.e. taking on those signals that are effective for communication and subjecting them to the humanistic *detournement* of art's intentions.

Of the image and message that these paintings structured with the Alfa 39 code bear, if one decodes them one will find that they conceal esoteric playful moods. A further aspect of the *Alfa 39* bear, presented for the first time in Trieste at the Sala Franco (1989) must be indicated for their correct reading. A first group in panels is divided into seven parts and in its invention evokes the painting *Positivamente e non negativamente* (1954), named after Nuvolo's understanding of Villa's alchemy of the verb, to which this *Alfa 39* is explicitly dedicated. The second work on show here in Cassino is a triptych in which the image subtends yet another exercise of esoteric freedom for a cryptic message and the need for a decryptographic 'key' in order to reach the playful *divertissement* it conceals.

Before concluding this review of Nuvolo's work, it is necessary to clarify how the most recent group of works called *Aftermandelbrot* is a highly original invention of his tension and research, as well as of his closest collaborator, his son Paolo.

The works are unique original serigraphic elaborations, whose chromatic complexities evoke previous cycles of Nuvolo's painting such as the *Oigroig*, but whose execution reveals and announces, from the latitude of the cybernetic limpidities, the same degree of astonishment and bewilderment one feels when confronted with micro or macro textures of space. *Aftermandelbrot* actually highlights one of the recurring aspects in the artist's entire oeuvre: his uninhibited familiarity with even the most advanced technology, a familiarity with questions at the frontiers of science and aesthetics.

Shortly before the end of the century, therefore, Nuvolo seems to keep alive in *Diagrammi*, *Modulari* and *Alfa 39* a link with that 'futurist' attitude, which had celebrated at the beginning of the century and first in Europe, the machine, its promises of freedom and its effectual extensions inherent in the potentiality of the space-time dimension.

The topicality of *Aftermandelbrot*'s creation lies not only in the use of the electronic processor, a Unibit PC, in the attainment of an indeed peculiar fractal image, as much as in directing this instrument like any pencil capable of the subtlest and most 'informed' trace, to configure a visual dimension already otherwise reached by Nuvolo himself freehand or almost! And also to gain a new vision in a domain that seems to be impassable to poetry.

These *Aftermandelbrot* are the *angelus novus* of painting on the threshold of the 21st century.

Nuvolo has always thought and wanted to demonstrate with his work that an incessant exchange between chaos and order governs nature, that the conquest of precision occurs through approximation and, finally, that there is no solution of continuity between the finite and the infinite.

## Note

<sup>4</sup> Giorgio De Marchis, *L'Arte in Italia dopo la seconda guerra mondiale*, in *Storia dell'arte italiana*, Volume III, 'Il novecento', Einaudi, Torino, 1982, p.576.

<sup>5</sup> Emilio Villa, *Indicazioni*, in 'Arti Visive' n.1, 1 November 1954 (second series), p.s.n., republished later in catalogue-invitation for Nuvolo's solo exhibition at the Galleria delle Carrozze in Rome, 6 May 1955.

<sup>6</sup> Nello Ponente, *Nuvolo*, Delta Editori, Roma, pp. 41-44.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. Nuvolo, in "Eight contemporary Artists from Rome", The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 11 September - 20 October 1963.

<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Differenza e ripetizione*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1971.